

International

N Korea agrees to inter-Korean summit talks next week: Seoul

A diplomatic thaw on the peninsula gathers pace

SEOUL: North Korea yesterday agreed to hold high-level talks with Seoul next week to discuss logistics for a rare inter-Korean summit, the South's Unification Ministry said, as a diplomatic thaw on the peninsula gathers pace. The two sides will each send a three-member delegation to the border truce village of Panmunjom on Thursday for talks aimed at paving the way for a summit due in late April, it said.

South Korea on Wednesday had proposed holding high-level talks with the North to discuss details including the summit's dates and agenda. The talks will take place at the Unification Pavilion building on the northern side of Panmunjom, which sits on the border, with Seoul's delegation led by Unification Minister Cho Myoung-gyon and his counterpart Ri Son Gwon heading Pyongyang's.

The decision by President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to meet came amid a rapid rapprochement kicked off with the recent Winter Olympics in the South. The United States and South Korea announced Tuesday that their annual joint military drills would go ahead next month, but the main exercise will be shortened by a month. The exercises have caused tensions for years, with Pyongyang condemning them as preparations for an invasion of the North. The inter-Korean summit is due to be followed by a face-to-face meeting between US President Donald Trump and Kim by the end of May.

'Humiliation and defeat'

Following a period of heightened tensions stoked by the North's nuclear and missile tests last year, a rapid rapprochement has been underway on the Korean peninsula. The North on Wednesday broke its silence on the diplomatic thaw with

Washington and Seoul, with its official KCNA news agency saying Pyongyang was driving the peace initiative and rejecting suggestions that sanctions forced it to dialogue table.

As diplomats scurry to arrange the North-South talks as well as the proposed Trump-Kim meeting, the North's silence has raised concerns over its intentions. North Korean state media have not yet directly mentioned the summits. Analysts say the North is carefully watching to see how events-including the US-South Korea military drills-play out before making them public to its people.

State media in the North have not reported any public activities by Kim since March 6, when they said he held talks with South Korean envoys and made a "satisfactory agreement" on the proposed inter-Korean summit. On Friday, Rodong Sinmun, the official daily of the North's ruling Workers Party, attacked the US for continued sanctions and pressure on Pyongyang despite diplomatic progress.

"The good atmosphere appearing on the Korean peninsula has been created by our aggressive efforts and initiatives. It has not been brought about by sanctions by the US and its sycophants," the newspaper said "The United States has miscalculated. The stronger the US pressure, the stronger the DPRK (North Korea)... If the US fails to draw a lesson and continues acting recklessly, it would surely be in for a greater humiliation and defeat."

The commentary came as President Trump named John Bolton, a foreign policy hawk, as his new national security adviser. Bolton, a former US ambassador to the United Nations, has championed pre-emptive strikes against North Korea and regime change in Iran-making him an outlier even among Republicans. —AFP



NEW YORK CITY: The United Nations Security Council meets concerning North Korea. —AFP

Malaysia arrests 7 men with IS links

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysian police have arrested seven men with links to the Islamic State militant group who were planning attacks on non-Muslim places of worship and other targets, authorities said yesterday. The Muslim-majority country has been on high alert since gunmen allied with Islamic State (IS) carried out a series of attacks in Jakarta, the capital of neighboring Indonesia, in January 2016.

Six Malaysians were arrested in Johor state, north of Singapore, while a seventh, a Filipino member of the IS-linked Abu Sayyaf group, was detained in the eastern state of Sabah, in multiple operations between Feb. 27 and Mar. 15, Inspector-General of Police Mohamad Fuzi Harun said in a statement. He said the six detained in Johor were members of an IS cell and included a 37-year-old technician who recruited new militants and was believed to be the mastermind of planned attacks on non-Muslim places of worship in the state's capital.

A second suspect was a security guard who served as the cell's advisor and ensured members kept their activities secret. A third man was tasked with buying firearms from a neighboring country and identifying targets for attacks, he said. "All of them planned to escape to a neighboring country and seek shelter from members of a militant group there after successfully carrying out the plan," Muhamad Fuzi said, without naming the country.

Authorities arrested three other members of the same cell in follow-up operations, including a 25-year-old restaurant worker who had been ordered to kidnap and kill police personnel. Police also detained a 31-year-old Philippine national in Sabah, on Borneo Island, who was said to be a trusted lieutenant to Abu Sayyaf group leader Furuji Indama and has links to Malaysian militant Mahmud Ahmad, Muhamad Fuzi said. —Reuters

Chinese feminist group to sue over censorship

BEIJING: Feminist activists are preparing to sue China's biggest social media platforms for deleting their organization's account, the group's founder said yesterday. On March 8, International Women's Day, staffers operating the prolific Feminist Voices account on China's Twitter-like Weibo platform found it had been deleted. Weibo customer service representatives told them by phone that the account could not be reactivated due to the posting of "sensitive and illegal information", the group's founder Lu Pin told AFP.

The next day, the group's WeChat public account had also disappeared. The group has run into trouble before on social media, with their accounts being temporarily suspended and individual posts deleted, but "this time they say it's a permanent deletion", Lu said. Feminist Voices has "already begun legal procedures and is preparing to sue Weibo and Wechat", she said, adding that they have sent letters of complaint to both the government department in charge of the internet and the All-China Women's Federation.

Neither Sina Weibo nor internet giant Tencent, which runs WeChat, responded to requests for comment. The black-out prompted Lu to pen an open letter to British actress Emma Watson—"one of the feminist idols held in highest esteem by young Chinese women," she said—to solicit the celebrity's support. "We are struggling to reactivate our accounts so that we can continue our work and are asking you to demonstrate your open support for Feminist Voices on Twitter," she wrote in the English-language missive, posted to Twitter Friday.

China's ruling Communist Party runs one of the world's most restrictive online censorship regimes. Feminist Voices, which established an account on Weibo in 2010, was temporarily blocked by authorities last year after it translated and posted parts of an article by American academics calling for a "general women's strike". The article in question spoke of the need for "a new wave of militant feminist struggle" against US President Donald Trump's "aggressively misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic and racist policies". —AFP

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