

International

'Pandemonium' in Panmunjom: Kim and Trump hasty DMZ date

'Would you like me to come across?'

PANMUNJOM: Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un's first two summits were highly choreographed affairs but their third date was an unscripted event seemingly arranged on a social media whim - and threatened at times to descend into chaos. Trump admitted he did not know whether Kim would spurn his advances, delivered via Twitter.

"When I put out the social media notification, if he didn't show up, the press was going to make me look very bad," the US president said. "So you made us both look good," he told Kim. The optics of their DMZ dalliance stood in sharp contrast to the made-for-TV blockbusters in Singapore and Hanoi, where everything was precisely arranged down to the last detail.

At their first encounter in Singapore, they emerged from two wings of a stage at precisely the same moment, meeting exactly in the middle for the historic handshake in front of equal numbers of North Korean and US flags. But Trump insisted he thought of getting together with Kim only on Saturday, when his online invitation for the Panmunjom powwow electrified the G20 summit in Japan. For his part, Kim admitted he was "surprised" by the tweet and a subsequent more formal invitation.

Slow walk to history

In the event, no one seemed sure when the two leaders should start their walks to the border. Someone peeked out from Freedom House on the southern side, appearing to raise their hand to the north and hastily retreating. A few seconds later Trump emerged from the glass doors while Kim, in his trademark Mao suit,

advanced from the steps of Panmungak, an imposing building on the northern side.

But despite Trump's visible efforts to walk as slowly as possible he arrived on the line several seconds before Kim. Another historic handshake, then some gesticulation from the US president, apparently pointing to North Korean soil before he took his leap into history, becoming the first occupant of the White House to set foot in the North. Under a travel ban imposed by his own administration, ordinary US citizens are not allowed to journey to the isolated country without special dispensation.

They clasped hands again on the Pyongyang side, as five North Korean photographers and cameramen buzzed around them frantically - frequently spoiling the view for snappers on the southern side, much to their frustration. "Move! Clear! Hey! Get the photographers out the way," journalists screamed, throwing in a few expletives as the North Korean media stepped into their shot at history.

Even that high point was up in the air until the last moment, according to the US President. "I said: 'Would you like me to come across?'" Trump said. "He said: 'I would be honoured'. I did not really know what he was going to say." On the southern side, Trump whispered into Kim's ear - making the North Korean leader burst out laughing - before they met South Korean President Moon Jae-in, arguably the matchmaker in their unlikely bromance, as reporters jostled and hollered questions.

Trump had initially said it would be a brief handshake to "say hello" and had said it could be as short as "two minutes." But the pair remained locked behind



PANMUNJOM: US President Donald Trump steps into the northern side of the Military Demarcation Line that divides North and South Korea, as North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un looks on, in the Joint Security Area (JSA) of Panmunjom in the Demilitarized zone (DMZ) yesterday. —AFP

closed doors for nearly an hour, emerging with an agreement to direct their officials to push ahead with negotiations over Pyongyang's nuclear programme. In the end, it was anything but a brief encounter. —AFP

DMZ: World's last Cold War frontier

SEOUL: Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un shook hands at the Demilitarized Zone yesterday, with the US leader becoming the first sitting president to enter the North when he stepped over the thin concrete line that divides the Korean peninsula. Trump's visit to the DMZ came just a day after he extended a Twitter invite to Kim to come and meet him at a place widely referred to as the world's last Cold War frontier. Here are some questions and answers about the Demilitarized Zone, which is based on the positions held at the end of the 1950-53 Korean War, where South Korean forces backed by a US-led UN coalition fought to a standstill with North Korean and Chinese troops.

Where is it?

The four-kilometre-wide DMZ runs for 250 kilometres across the Korean peninsula, around 50 kilometres north of Seoul and 200 kilometres south of Pyongyang. At its centre is the Military Demarcation Line (MDL), where the front line lay when the ceasefire stopping Korean War hostilities was signed in 1953. Under the agreement both sides agreed to pull back their forces 2,000 metres. To the south, Seoul has established a further buffer zone of varying width where civilian access is restricted.

Tensions high as Albanians vote in disputed local poll

TIRANA: Albanians cast ballots yesterday in tense municipal elections that have become the flashpoint of a democratic crisis, with the opposition boycotting the vote and refusing to recognise its results. The Balkan state has been roiled by political turmoil since February, when opposition politicians resigned from parliament to launch street protests against Socialist Prime Minister Edi Rama.

They accuse him of crime links and manipulating elections, which he denies. Citing the unrest, Albania's President Ilir Meta announced a postponement of the municipal poll earlier this month. But Prime Minister Rama and election authorities have decided to forge ahead with the voting regardless.

Yesterday, groups of several dozen opposition supporters protested outside some polling stations in the capital of Tirana, shouting "Don't vote!" and "Rama, go!". "No one can stop me from voting," Arjan Celi, a 45-year-old engineer, told AFP after passing the protesters to mark his ballot, saying it was his democratic duty.

exploitation", including making them commit crimes, most commonly through forced begging. Homeless people were involved in 276 cases of modern slavery reported to the Modern Slavery Helpline since the dedicated hotline was set up in October 2016 by Unseen, the charity found.

Labour abuse was the main form of exploitation, accounting for 54 percent of cases and three-quarters of victims recorded by the hotline, which receives calls from the public, police, activists, healthcare professionals and modern slaves directly.

What is it?

A barrier separating North and South, heavy weaponry is banned within the DMZ. Patrols are allowed but cannot cross the MDL and no more than 1,000 people from each side are permitted inside the zone at any one time. It is also littered with minefields. The areas immediately outside it are some of the most highly fortified places on earth, bristling with artillery, military camps, and more minefields.

What does it look like?

With the DMZ a "no man's land" that has seen minimal human presence for more than half a century, much of the zone itself is lush forest, renowned as an ecological refuge for rare species of flora and fauna whose habitat elsewhere has been destroyed by development. An Asiatic black bear was photographed there last October, according to Seoul's environmental ministry. Within the zone, watchtowers poke up from hilltops, and barbed-wire fences line its edges.

Who has been there?

The US and South Korea have been in a security alliance for decades and a trip to the DMZ is something of a ritual for visiting US leaders. Then president George W. Bush went in February 2002, a month after he named North Korea as part of his "axis of evil". The last to go was Barack Obama in 2012, and US Vice President Mike Pence went to the border in April 2017 amid heightened tensions with the reclusive state. President Donald Trump tried to visit

But Entela Mushi, an economist among the crowd of protesters, vowed: "These elections will not be recognised and our resistance will be strong."

On the eve of the polls, right-wing opposition leader Luzlim Basha urged his supporters to boycott the election and hold "non-violent demonstrations everywhere." They are under heavy pressure from Western powers to remain peaceful, with the European countries and the US issuing stern warnings against violence or obstruction of voting. The Organization for Security and Co-operating in Europe (OSCE), whose observers are monitoring the poll, also urged the "utmost restraint".

"Any attempt to derail the democratic process through violent action stalls the progress of Albania and stains the country's international reputation," it said in a statement. In the past two weeks, opposition supporters have attacked polling stations in several parts of the country in an effort to destroy election materials, setting fire to two schools in the process. Their weekly anti-Rama protests have also at times boiled over into violent clashes with police.

'Democratic test'

The political turbulence is brewing at a sensitive moment for Albania, which is waiting for EU member states to decide on its application to open accession talks. The



OSAN AIR BASE: US President Donald Trump speaks as he meets US troops and their families stationed in South Korea following his meeting with North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un at the Joint Security Area (JSA) in Panmunjom in the Demilitarized zone (DMZ). —AFP

seven months later but his helicopter was forced to turn back due to heavy fog. Most notably, South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korea's Kim held two of their three summits last year at Panmunjom, a "truce village" within the DMZ.

What is Panmunjom?

Also known as the Joint Security Area (JSA), Panmunjom is a series of buildings centred on several blue UN meeting huts right on the MDL, which have become emblematic of the division of the peninsula.

The 1953 armistice was signed in a building on the northern side, and the JSA was the site of the 1976 "Axe Murder Incident", when two US military officials seeking to cut down a tree that obscured visibility were hacked to death by North Korean soldiers. It is the only place in the DMZ where soldiers from South and North Korea stand face to face, although under the terms of an inter-Korean agreement Moon and Kim signed at their third summit last year in Pyongyang, they no longer carry arms. —AFP



SURREL: Opposition supporters holding slogans reminiscing Albania's communist past protest in front of a polling station in Tirana yesterday. —AFP

bloc was initially supposed to make a decision in June, but has now postponed it until October. Yesterday's vote was a "test of Albania's democratic maturity," said political analyst Aleksander Cipa. "Any act of violence would be harmful to Albania's image, its democracy and its political class," he added.

The aftermath of the election is likely to be messy, with the opposition refusing to

accept the results. Lutfi Dervishi, a media expert at the Media Institute in Tirana, believes "the political crisis has not yet reached its peak". To further complicate matters, the country's top arbiter — the Constitutional Court — is currently out of commission due to a judicial reform process that has seen all but one judge resign or removed from the bench amid a corruption probe. —AFP

Traffickers targeting UK homeless people

LONDON: Homeless people are among the victims in 7% of all reported modern slavery cases in Britain, according to research by the anti-slavery charity Unseen released recently. Unseen said traffickers were "purposefully targeting homeless people for

various vulnerabilities such as poverty, substance dependencies and language barriers.

The study also showed a high number of people escape from modern slavery only to find themselves homeless. More than 350 of the potential victims in cases reported to the hotline between October 2016 and April 2019 were homeless either before, during or after they escaped captivity, it found. Unseen runs safe houses for survivors and works with businesses, police, government and others to end slavery. —Reuters

"Traffickers often gain people's trust at soup kitchens and drop ins and trick them into slavery through false stories of success and money," said Andrew Smith, chief executive of the charity Hull Homelessness.

Britain is home to at least 136,000 modern slaves, according to the Global Slavery Index by rights group Walk Free Foundation - a figure 10 times higher than a government estimate from 2013. The manager of the Modern Slavery Helpline Rachel Harper said common recruitment tactics included targeting