

North Korea

US softens approach

Pompeo off for North Korea 'nuclear' talks

WASHINGTON, July 5, (Agencies): US Secretary of State **Mike Pompeo** left Washington on Thursday bound for Pyongyang and his latest round of talks with Kim Jong Un on North Korea's nuclear arsenal.

Washington's top diplomat and senior aides took off shortly after 2:00am and were due in the North Korean capital on Friday, where Pompeo is to stay overnight for the first time.

President Donald Trump met Kim at a historic summit in Singapore last month and the US leader has been bullish about hopes for peace, boasting that the threat of nuclear war is over.



Pompeo

But the statement the leaders signed was short on detailed commitments and Pompeo has been tasked with negotiating a plan to achieve the "complete denuclearization" of the Korean peninsula.

This would involve Kim making a detailed declaration of the extent of his nuclear arsenal and enrichment program, and agreeing a timetable for it to be dismantled and placed under inspection.

Washington hopes that the process can be underway within a year, but many expert observers and Trump critics warn that Kim's summit promise meant little and the process could take years.

In the meantime, Pompeo and Trump have vowed to keep in the place the international economic sanctions that they believe forced the North to the negotiating table in the first place.

After talks late Friday and early Saturday in Pyongyang, Pompeo is due to fly on to Tokyo to brief his Japanese and South Korean counterparts.

Summit

His round-the-world diplomatic voyage will then take him on to Vietnam and then Abu Dhabi before he arrives in the Belgian capital Brussels to rejoin Trump for next week's NATO summit.

In related news, the United States appears to have shelved an "all or nothing" approach to North Korea denuclearization as US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo prepares to head back to North Korea this week hoping to agree a roadmap for its nuclear disarmament.

At the Singapore summit, Kim made a broad commitment to "work toward denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," but has made no mention of how or when Pyongyang might give up a nuclear weapons program that threatens the United States and its allies.

US officials have since been trying to flesh out an agreement that critics say is short on substance and map a route to a deal that might live up to Trump's enthusiastic portrayal of the summit outcome.

But US officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said there had been no sign of a breakthrough and little progress towards even defining the keys terms of any agreement.

What has been seen instead is an apparent softening in the Trump administration's approach, in spite of what US officials say are intelligence assessments saying that North Korea is continuing to deceive Washington about its weapons programs.

The US administration has previously demanded that North Korea agree to abandon its entire nuclear program before it could expect any relief from tough international sanctions. Ahead of the Singapore summit, Pompeo said Trump would reject anything short of "complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization."

But following talks on Sunday between US envoy Sung Kim and North Korea counterparts to set up Pompeo's latest Pyongyang visit, this "CVID" mantra appears suddenly to have disappeared from the US State Department lexicon.

Goal

It says pressure will remain until North Korea denuclearizes, but in statements this week, has redefined the US goal as "the final, fully verified denuclearization of (North Korea) as agreed to by Chairman Kim."

Meanwhile, despite no signs of North Korea abandoning its nuclear weapons any time soon, South Korea is literally bouncing ahead this week with peace efforts with its rival, which was threatening war just months ago.

Two days of friendly basketball games winding up Thursday in Pyongyang were the latest in a slew of goodwill gestures between the Koreans in recent months.

The women's and men's matches came just ahead of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's arrival in North Korea on Friday for two days of talks over the future of the North's nuclear program.

A capacity crowd of 12,000 applauded as the teams — dressed in white jerseys that read "Peace" and green jerseys that read "Prosperity" — marched onto the court holding hands. Players from the North and South were mixed into teams for Wednesday's games.

The South Koreans play the North Korean teams Thursday before returning home Friday.

It remains to be seen how much further the rival Koreans can push their conciliatory steps. The fate of these efforts is ultimately tied to progress in nuclear negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang. If the nuclear talks bog down, it could mean curtains for inter-Korean detente.

"Goodwill gestures between the Koreans can be compared to rocking back and forth in a rocking chair — it feels good, but you aren't really moving forward," said Bong Young-shik, a North Korea expert at Yonsei University in Seoul. "These gestures alone don't ensure progress in denuclearizing the North and stabilizing peace."

The basketball diplomacy follows agreements to send combined teams to the Asian Games in August and hold temporary reunions of now-aging relatives separated by the 1950-53 Korean War.



A demonstrator wearing a mask painted with the colours of the flag of East Turkestan attends a protest of supporters of the mostly Muslim Uighur minority and Turkish nationalists to denounce China's treatment of ethnic Uighur Muslims during a deadly riot in Urumqi, in front of the Chinese consulate in

Istanbul, on July 5. Nearly 200 people died during a series of violent riots that broke out on July 5, 2009 over several days in Urumqi, the capital city of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, in northwestern China, between Uyghurs and Han people. (AFP)



Austrian Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl (right), welcomes Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono (left), for talks at the foreign ministry in Vienna, Austria on July 5. (AP)

Malaysia

Beijing-backed project links with 1MDB probed

Mahathir to visit China; \$20b projects on ice

KUALA LUMPUR, July 5, (RTRS): Malaysian and Chinese officials are in talks for Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad to visit Beijing soon, two sources with knowledge of the discussions told Reuters, after Kuala Lumpur suspended China-backed projects worth more than \$20 billion.

Mahathir, who came to power in May following a stunning election defeat for then prime minister Najib Razak, is reviewing major projects signed by the former government, saying many of them do not make financial sense for Malaysia.

His trip to Beijing has been provisionally agreed for mid-August, according to one source involved in planning it.

A Malaysian foreign ministry source said both sides had yet to finalise dates, but Mahathir was "looking forward to visiting China".

The sources spoke on condition of anonymity as they were not authorised to talk to the media on the subject.

A spokesman for Mahathir did not comment.

China's Foreign Ministry did not immediately respond to a faxed request for comment.

Najib courted billions of dollars of

Chinese investment and was one of Southeast Asia's most enthusiastic supporters of President Xi Jinping's signature Belt and Road Initiative.

Arrested this week on charges of corruption, Najib pleaded not guilty and was freed on bail on Wednesday.

Reuters on Thursday reported authorities were investigating whether his administration made use of Chinese funds for two pipeline projects to pay the dues of scandal-ridden state fund 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB).

Mahathir has been highly critical of the benefits of certain Chinese projects in Malaysia. Since taking office, he has vowed to renegotiate terms even as construction work continued.

But in a surprise move this week, the finance ministry, under Mahathir's orders, called a halt to work on three projects: the \$20-billion East Coast Railway Link (ECRL) and two pipeline projects worth \$2.3 billion.

The 688-km (428-mile) ECRL will connect the South China Sea off the east coast of peninsular Malaysia with the strategic shipping routes of the Straits of Malacca to the west.

The other two projects are a petroleum pipeline stretching 600 km (373 miles) along the west coast of peninsu-

lar Malaysia and a 662-km (411-mile) gas pipeline in Sabah, the Malaysian state on the island of Borneo.

Chinese state-owned firms are involved in all three projects.

"The decisions are solely directed towards the related contractors, relating to the provisions mentioned in the agreements, and not at any particular country," the finance ministry said in a statement on Thursday.

Calling the halt was part of a negotiation strategy ahead of high-level government talks, said two other sources familiar with the government's thinking, since the Belt and Road status of the ECRL makes a successful outcome critical for the Chinese.

"It's sending a message to the Chinese," said one of the sources, a senior finance ministry official. "They don't want a failure to taint their name."

Malaysia's Finance Minister Lim Guan Eng has said Najib's government understated the true cost of the ECRL, which was 50 percent higher, at \$20 billion, than the earlier estimate.

Organised before his election victory, Mahathir's first overseas visit as prime minister, to Japan last month, was nonetheless seen as a signal he would look beyond China for key foreign investment.

Asia

Japan's emperor resumes duties:

Japan's ageing Emperor Akihito resumed his official duties on Thursday after three days of treatment for insufficient blood supply to the brain, a palace spokesman told AFP.

The 84-year-old had cancelled engagements from Monday after suffering dizziness and nausea caused by the condition, known as cerebral anemia.

A palace spokesman said the monarch on Thursday was "doing his official duties as usual," declining to comment further.

On Wednesday the palace had reported Akihito's health was improving.

The monarch has previously had surgery for prostate cancer and heart problems, and the state of his health is carefully watched in Japan. (AFP)

China invites Abe to visit:

China has invited Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to visit the country at a time convenient for both sides, its foreign ministry said on Thursday, as the neighbours step up efforts to improve frayed relations.

The two countries have sparred frequently about their painful history, with China often accusing Japan of not properly atoning for invading its neighbour before and during World War Two.

Ties between the world's second and third-largest economies have also been clouded by a long-running territorial dispute over a cluster of East China Sea islets and suspicion in China about Abe's efforts to

amend Japan's pacifist constitution.

More recently, however, the two have sought to improve ties, with Abe and Chinese President Xi Jinping meeting last November on the sidelines of a regional summit in Vietnam, while Japan's foreign minister visited China in January. (RTRS)

**Graft fight not over — Xi:** Chinese President Xi Jinping has warned again that

the country's fight against deeply ingrained corruption is not yet over, and that the ruling Communist Party faces enormous challenges going forward, state media reported.

Since coming to power more than six years ago, Xi has overseen a sweeping campaign to root out graft, with dozens of senior officials jailed, including the much feared former domestic security chief Zhou Yongkang.

Xi has warned, like others before him, that the party's very survival is at stake, and the party has said the anti-corruption battle will "always be on the road".

Speaking to senior party officials, Xi said that since the party's 18th congress, where Xi was appointed party boss in late 2012, the all out efforts to enforce strict party discipline had achieved "notable results". (RTRS)