

Kim, Moon meet at start of historic inter-Korean summit

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SEOUL: The leaders of North and South Korea met on Friday (Apr 27) at the Demilitarised Zone that divides their countries for a historic summit, the highest-level encounter yet in a recent whirlwind of nuclear diplomacy.

The meeting on the southern side of the truce village of Panmunjom - only the third of its kind since the end of the 1950-53 Korean War - is intended to pave the way for a much-anticipated encounter between the North's leader Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in greeted Kim at the concrete blocks that mark the border between the two Koreas in the Demilitarised Zone to begin the rare occasion laden with symbolism. Kim also became the first North Korean leader to set foot in the South since the Korean War ended 65 years ago.

"I am happy to meet you," said Moon to Kim. Moon also briefly stepped into the North before walking back.

"A new history begins now - at the starting point of history and the era of peace," read the message Kim wrote in a guestbook at the Peace House summit venue.

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At Kim's impromptu invitation the two men briefly crossed hand-in-hand into the North before walking to the Peace House building on the southern side of the truce village of Panmunjom for the summit - only the third of its kind since hostilities ceased in 1953.

Kim was "flooded with emotion", he told Moon as the meeting began.

"I came here determined to send a starting signal at the threshold of a new history," he said, promising a "frank, serious and honest mindset".

With the North's atomic arsenal high on the agenda, Moon responded that he hoped they would reach "a bold agreement so that we may give a big gift to the whole Korean people and the people who want peace".

Kim was flanked by his sister and close adviser Kim Yo Jong and the North's head of inter-Korean relations, while Moon was accompanied by his spy chief and chief of staff.

With helicopters buzzing overhead, President Moon left his Blue House office in a convoy of more than a dozen vehicles along a road lined with well-wishers waving Korean flags.

Before his departure, a smiling Moon stopped to greet supporters and thank police officers.

The North's nuclear arsenal will be high on the agenda at the talks.

Last year, Pyongyang carried out its sixth nuclear blast, by far its most powerful to date, and launched missiles capable of reaching the US mainland.

Its actions sent tensions soaring as Kim and Trump traded personal insults and threats of war.

Moon seized on the South's Winter Olympics as an opportunity to broker dialogue between them, and has said his meeting with Kim will serve to set up the summit between Pyongyang and Washington.

Trump has demanded the North give up its weapons, and Washington is pressing for it to do so in a complete, verifiable and irreversible way.

But Seoul played down expectations on Thursday, saying the North's technological advances with its nuclear and missile programmes meant any deal would be "fundamentally different in nature from denuclearisation agreements in 1990s and early 2000s".

"That's what makes this summit all the more difficult," the chief of the South's

presidential secretariat Im Jong-seok told reporters.

PEACE AND DENUCLEARISATION

Pyongyang is demanding as yet unspecified security guarantees to discuss its arsenal.

When Kim visited the North's key backer Beijing last month in only his first foreign trip as leader, China's official Xinhua news agency cited him saying that the issue could be resolved, as long as Seoul and Washington take "progressive and synchronous measures for the realisation of peace".

In the past, North Korean support for "denuclearisation" of the Korean peninsula has been code for the removal of US troops from the South and the end of its nuclear umbrella over its security ally - prospects unthinkable in Washington.

"The big issues we know are peace and denuclearisation," Yonsei University professor John Delury told AFP.

The two Koreas "can do a lot more on peace than on denuclearisation", he said, but the post-summit statement will give "a lot of chance to analyse every word, reading between the lines, look for things that are there and not there".

Pyongyang announced last week a moratorium on nuclear tests and intercontinental ballistic missiles, adding it would dismantle its Punggye-ri nuclear test site.

But it also said it had completed the development of its weapons and had no need for further tests.

Seoul has also promoted the idea of opening talks towards a peace treaty to formally end the 1950-53 Korean War, when hostilities stopped with a ceasefire, leaving the neighbours technically in a state of conflict.

Reunions of families left divided by the war could also be discussed at the summit, and Moon has told Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe he will raise the emotive subject of Japanese citizens kidnapped by the North.
