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PALM BEACH: President Donald Trump said Tuesday that the U.S. and North Korea are holding direct talks at â€œextremely high levelsâ€• in preparation for a potential summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

But White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Trump and Kim have not spoken directly.

Trump appeared to answer in the affirmative to that question when asked about the talks at his private Mar-a-Lago club, where he is hosting Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

â€œLetâ€™s leave it a little bit short of that,â€• he said later, adding, â€œWe have had talks at the highest level.â€•

Trump also confirmed that North and South Korea are working to negotiate an end to hostilities before next weekâ€™s meeting between Kim and South Korean President Moon Jae-in. The meeting will be the third inter-Korean summit since the Koreasâ€™ 1945 division.

â€œThey do have my blessing to discuss the end of the war,â€• said Trump, who welcomed Abe to his Florida resort on Tuesday.

Trump is looking to hold his own summit with Kim in the next two months and said five locations are under consideration. The president would not disclose the sites but said the U.S. was not among them.

The proposed summit follows months of increasingly heated rhetoric over the Northâ€™s nuclear weapons program.

â€œWe have had direct talks at very high levels â€” extremely high levels â€” with North Korea,â€• Trump said.

â€œWeâ€™ll either have a very good meeting or we wonâ€™t have a good meeting,â€• he added. â€œAnd maybe we wonâ€™t even have a meeting at all, depending on whatâ€™s going in. But I think that thereâ€™s a great chance to solve a world problem.â€•

The president did not answer shouted questions about whether he has spoken with Kim.

Kimâ€™s offer for a summit was initially conveyed to Trump by South Korea last month, and the president shocked many when it was announced that he had accepted. U.S. officials have indicated over the past two weeks that North Koreaâ€™s government has communicated directly with Washington that it is ready to discuss its nuclear weapons program.

Abe, who has voiced fears that short- and medium-range missiles that pose a threat to Japan might not be part of the U.S. negotiations, praised Trump on Tuesday for his bravery in agreeing to meet with the North Korean dictator.

â€œIâ€™d like to commend Donaldâ€™s courage in his decision to have the upcoming summit meeting with the North

Korean leader,â€• Abe said.

Trump took credit for the inter-Korean talks, saying, â€œWithout us and without me, in particular, I guess you would have to say, they wouldnâ€™t be discussing anything.â€•

North Korea has long sought a peace treaty with the U.S. to formally end the 1950-53 Korean War. But it is unusual for the North to seek to broach the issue directly with South Korea rather than with Washington. The armistice that ended the fighting was signed by the United Nations Command â€" the U.S.-led forces in the conflict â€" North Korea and China. South Korea was a member of the U.N. Command but was not a direct signatory.

The U.S. has traditionally sought to resolve the dispute over North Koreaâ€™s nuclear weapons program before addressing the Northâ€™s demands for a peace treaty, which the isolated, authoritarian nation views as a means to ensuring its security. The U.S. retains nearly 30,000 troops in South Korea to deter North Korean aggression. The leaders of the two Koreas are due to meet April 27 on the southern side of the tense, demilitarized zone that separates them.

The Abe summit will serve as a test of whether the fond personal relationship the two leaders have forged on the golf course and over meetings and phone calls has chilled following Trumpâ€™s recent moves, including his decision not to exempt Japan from new steel and aluminum tariffs.

The official visit began Tuesday afternoon as an honor cordon of uniformed service members lined the palm-fringed drive to the club. Trump greeted Abe at the red-carpeted door of the mansion as the pair posed for photos ahead of a one-on-one meeting and a group discussion with national security officials about the Kim summit. The president and first lady Melania Trump later hosted Abe and his wife for an al fresco dinner on the Mar-a-Lago patio.

On Wednesday, the agenda will broaden to include other issues affecting the Indo-Pacific region, including trade and energy, and Trump said he and Abe would â€œsneak outâ€• to play a round of golf. Trump and Abe will also hold a news conference before the president and first lady host the Japanese delegations for dinner.

The first time Trump hosted Abe at Mar-a-Lago, North Korea conducted its first missile test of Trumpâ€™s administration, and the two delivered a joint statement denouncing the launch.

This time, Abe is seeking reassurance from Trump that security threats to Japan wonâ€™t be overlooked in the U.S.-North Korea summit.

Both sides insist that Trump and Abe remain close. U.S. officials stressed that Trump has met with Abe more than any other world leader and say theyâ€™ve been in â€œconstant contactâ€• since Trump accepted Kimâ€™s invitation.

Abe also said he had secured a commitment from Trump to raise with Kim the issue of Japanese abductees, one of his top policy priorities. He told Trump he was grateful for the commitment.

Pyongyang has acknowledging abducting 13 Japanese, while Tokyo maintains North Korea abducted 17. Five have been returned to Japan. North Korea says eight others died and denies the remaining four entered its territory. Japan has demanded further investigation.

The U.S. itself is pushing for the release of three Americans.

After five years in office, Abe is one of Japanâ€™s longest-serving, post-World War II prime ministers but has suffered plummeting poll ratings over allegations that a school linked to his wife received preferential government treatment in a

land sale.

- AP