

## **North Korea unlikely to return to talks with South over drills**

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The North previously vowed to continue nuclear development unless the United States pulls its 28,500 troops out of South Korea and withdraws its so-called "nuclear umbrella" security guarantee for South Korea and Japan.

**The South urged the North to faithfully abide by the agreements reached between Kim and South Korean President Moon Jae-in in their summit last month, where they issued a vague vow on the "complete denuclearization" of the peninsula and pledged permanent peace. (Reuters photo)**

**Seoul:** North Korea strongly criticised South Korea over ongoing US-South Korean military exercises on Thursday and said it will not return to talks with its rival until Seoul resolves its grievances.

The comments came a day after North Korea canceled a high-level meeting with the South because of the drills and threatened to scrap next month's historic meeting between its leader, Kim Jong Un, and President Donald Trump, saying it has no interest in a "one-sided" affair meant to pressure it to abandon its nuclear weapons.

The North's threat cooled what had been an unusual flurry of diplomatic moves from a country that last year conducted a provocative series of weapons tests that had many fearing the region was on the edge of war. It also underscored South Korea's delicate role as an intermediary between the US and North Korea and raised questions over Seoul's claim that Kim has a genuine interest in dealing away his nukes.

Analysts said it's unlikely that North Korea intends to scuttle all diplomacy. More likely, they said, is that it wants to gain leverage ahead of the talks between Kim and Trump, scheduled for June 12 in Singapore.

In quotes published by the North's official Korean Central News Agency, Ri Son Gwon, chairman of a North Korean agency that deals with inter-Korean affairs, accused South Korea's government of being "an ignorant and incompetent group devoid of the elementary sense of the present situation, of any concrete picture of their dialogue partner and of the ability to discern the present trend of the times."

Ri said the "extremely adventurous" U.S.-South Korean military drills were practicing strikes on strategic targets in North Korea, and accused the South of allowing "human scum to hurt the dignity" of the North's supreme leadership.

Ri was apparently referring to a news conference held at South Korea's National Assembly on Monday by Thae Yong Ho, a former senior North Korean diplomat who defected to the South in 2016. Thae said it's highly unlikely that Kim would ever fully relinquish his nuclear weapons or agree to a robust verification regime.

Ri said it will be difficult to resume talks with South Korea "unless the serious situation which led to the suspension of the North-South high-level talks is settled."

Hours earlier, South Korea said it was pushing to reset the high-level talks with North Korea and planning to communicate closely with the US and North Korea to increase the chances of a successful summit between Trump and Kim on resolving the nuclear standoff.

The South urged the North to faithfully abide by the agreements reached between Kim and South Korean President Moon Jae-in in their summit last month, where they issued a vague vow on the "complete denuclearization" of the

peninsula and pledged permanent peace.

Senior officials from the two Koreas were to sit down at a border village on Wednesday to discuss how to implement their leaders' agreements to reduce military tensions along their heavily fortified border and improve overall ties, but the North canceled the meeting.

In Washington, Trump said Thursday that nothing has changed with respect to North Korea after the warning from Pyongyang. He said North Korean officials are discussing logistical details about the meeting with the U.S. "as if nothing happened."

Trying to address the North Korean concerns, Trump said if Kim were to agree to denuclearize, "we'll get protections that would be very strong."

But Trump warned that failure to make a deal could have grave consequences for Kim. Mentioning what happened in Libya, Trump said, "That model would take place if we don't make a deal."

"The Libyan model isn't the model we have at all. In Libya, we decimated that country," Trump added. "There was no deal to keep Gadhafi."

Trump said he is "willing to do a lot" to provide security guarantees to Kim. "The best thing he could do is make a deal."

Annual military drills between Washington and Seoul have long been a major source of contention between the Koreas, and analysts have wondered whether their continuation would hurt the detente that, since an outreach by Kim in January, has replaced the insults and threats of war. Much larger springtime drills took place last month without the North's typically fiery condemnation or accompanying weapons tests, though Washington and Seoul toned down those exercises.

The North's news agency said the US aircraft mobilized for the current drills include nuclear-capable B-52 bombers and stealth F-22 fighter jets, two of the US military assets it has previously said are aimed at launching nuclear strikes on the North. The allies say the drills are defensive in nature.

Seoul's Defense Ministry said F-22s are involved in the drills, but not B-52s. Ministry spokesman Lee Jin-woo said B-52s had never been part of plans for this year's drills, focused on pilot training, denying media speculation that Washington and Seoul withdrew the bombers in reaction to North Korea's allegation.

Kim told visiting South Korean officials in March that he "understands" the drills would take place and expressed hope that they'll be modified once the situation on the peninsula stabilizes, according to the South Korean government.

Despite Kim's outreach, some experts have been skeptical that he would completely give up a nuclear program that he has pushed so hard to build. The North previously vowed to continue nuclear development unless the United States pulls its 28,500 troops out of South Korea and withdraws its so-called "nuclear umbrella" security guarantee for South Korea and Japan.

- AP