

North Korea 'in talks to free US detainees'

Discussions follow agreement of Trump to meet Kim

Seoul
North Korea is in talks with the US and Sweden to release three Americans held in the North, reports said, as diplomatic activities gathered pace ahead of Pyongyang's planned summits with Washington and Seoul.

The release of the three Korean-Americans — all held in the North after being separately charged with unspecified "hostile acts" against the regime — is under discussion through multiple channels almost two weeks after President Donald Trump agreed to meet the North's Kim Jong Un, reports said.

While Pyongyang has yet to confirm it even made the summit offer — relayed by Seoul envoys who had met Kim in Pyongyang — the stunning announcement has triggered a race to set a credible agenda for what would be historic talks between the two leaders.

Seoul-based *MBC TV* station reported Sunday that Pyongyang and Washington had "practically reached" a

final agreement on the release of Kim Hak-song, Kim Sang-duk and Kim Dong-chul.

"They are hammering out details over the timing of the release," it quoted an unnamed South Korean diplomatic source as saying.

The negotiation was held through the North's mission to the United Nations and the US State Department — an unofficial avenue of communication dubbed the "New York channel," the source said.

CNN said the prisoners' release was also discussed at three-day talks in Stockholm between the North's Foreign Minister Ri Yong-Ho and Swedish counterpart Margot Wallstrom that ended Saturday.

Sweden represents Washington's interests in talks with the North. It raised the issue of American detainees to "move things in the right direction," CNN quoted one source as saying.

"Any movement on the issue of these detainees would be a huge deal for the US," said the



A member of the South Korean delegation and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

source.

Kim Dong-chul, a South Korea-born American pastor, has been detained by the North since 2015 when he was arrested for spying. He was sentenced to 10 years of hard labour in 2016.

Kim Hak-song and Kim

Sang-duk — or Tony Kim — were both working at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, founded by evangelical Christians from overseas, when they were detained last year on suspicion of "hostile acts."

Reports on the detainees'

possible release come amid a flurry of diplomatic activities involving Pyongyang, Seoul, Washington and its allies.

During a visit to Pyongyang by Seoul's envoys earlier this month, Kim reportedly offered to meet Trump, with the US president subsequently

agreeing to talks by May although no specific time or venue has been set.

Kim also agreed to hold a summit with South Korean President Moon Jae-in next month — the third ever between the two Koreas — according to the envoys. (AFP)

Inspectors analyse toxin used on Russian spy

Salisbury, England

Inspectors from the world's chemical weapons watchdog yesterday began examining the poison used to strike down a former Russian double agent in England, in an attack that London blames on Moscow.

Britain says Sergei Skripal and his daughter, who are critically ill in hospital, were targeted with the Soviet-era military-grade nerve agent Novichok. It accuses Moscow of stockpiling the toxin and investigating how to use it in assassinations.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, who easily won another six-year term on Sunday, said the claims were nonsense and that Russia had destroyed all its chemical weapons. While the Kremlin told Britain to back up its assertions or apologise, Britain's fellow EU members offered it "unqualified solidarity".

Skripal, a former colonel in Russian military intelligence who betrayed dozens of Russian agents to Britain, was found collapsed along with his daughter on a bench in the small southern city of Salisbury two

weeks ago.

The identification of Novichok as the weapon has become the central pillar of Britain's case for Russia's culpability. Each has expelled 23 of the other's diplomats as their relations have sunk to a post-Cold War low.

On Monday, inspectors from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) began running independent tests on samples taken from Salisbury to verify the British analysis, said an OPCW source speaking on condition

of anonymity.

"The team from The Hague will meet with officials from the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory and the police to discuss the process for collecting samples, including environmental ones," Britain's Foreign Office said.

British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said on Monday, before meeting his European Union counterparts in Brussels, that Russian denials of responsibility were "increasingly absurd". (Reuters)



A police notice is attached to screening surrounding a restaurant which was visited by former Russian Spy



A fleet of Uber's Ford Fusion self-driving cars are shown during a demonstration in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, U.S.

Self-driving Uber kills woman

San Francisco

A woman crossing a street was killed by an Uber self-driving sport utility vehicle in Arizona, police said yesterday, leading the ride services company to suspend its autonomous vehicle program across the United States and Canada.

The accident in the Phoenix suburb of Tempe marked the first fatality from a self-driving vehicle, which are being tested around the globe, and could derail efforts to fast-track the introduction of the new technology.

The vehicle was in autonomous mode with an operator behind the wheel at the time of the accident,

which occurred overnight Sunday to Monday, Tempe police said.

"The vehicle was travelling northbound ... when a female walking outside of the crosswalk crossed the road from west to east when she was struck by the Uber vehicle," police said in a statement.

The woman later died from her injuries in a hospital, police said. Her name has not been released because her next of kin had not yet been notified, police said.

Tempe police could not immediately be reached for further comment. The city is 11 miles (18 km) east of Phoenix. (Reuters)