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NORTH, SOUTH KOREA AGREE TO OFFICIAL TALKS

by

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AFP/AFP/File - Lights are off at the South Korean checkpoint on the road to Kaesong in North Korea on May 3, 2013. North and South Korea agreed in principle Thursday to hold their first official talks for years, signalling a possible breakthrough in cross-border ties after months of escalated military tensions

North and South Korea agreed in principle Thursday to hold their first official talks for years, signalling a possible breakthrough in cross-border ties after months of escalated military tensions.

A surprise offer from Pyongyang proposed talks on a range of commercial and humanitarian issues from reopening a joint industrial complex to resuming cross-border family reunions.

The South replied within hours, with the Unification Ministry saying it viewed the offer "positively" and would announce a date, venue and agenda later.

Analysts welcomed the development, but advised caution, saying the nature and agenda of the dialogue might prove to be an insurmountable sticking point.

"I think this is an attempt by the North to seize the initiative, but it's premature to say whether the offer is likely to lead to a sincere dialogue," said Yang Moo-Jin, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul.

Official contacts between Seoul and Pyongyang have been essentially frozen since South Korea accused the North of torpedoing one of its warships in March 2010 with the loss of 46 lives.

The North's proposal, carried in a statement from the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea (CPRK), said the venue and date for talks "can be set to the convenience of the South side".

Initial subjects for discussion would be the Kaesong joint industrial zone, which was closed at the height of the recent tensions, and the resumption of cross-border tours to the North's Mount Kumgang resort, the CPRK said.

At the same time, humanitarian issues such as reuniting family members separated after the 1950-53 Korean War "can be discussed... if necessary", the statement said.

It added that a positive response would see the North consider rolling back measures it took when relations went into a tailspin in April, including restoring a cross-border official hotline.

South Korea has already offered working-level talks to discuss the retrieval of raw materials and finished goods left behind by South Korean factory managers when they left Kaesong.

"We hope that South and North Korea can build trust through this opportunity," the South's Unification Ministry said in its response to the North's offer.

Seoul is likely to be wary of agreeing to a wide-ranging agenda.

While President Park Geun-Hye has spoken of the need for dialogue, she has made it clear -- with US backing -- that substantive bilateral talks would require the North to show commitment to abandoning its nuclear weapons programme.

Pyongyang has repeatedly insisted that its nuclear deterrent is not up for negotiation.

The Kaesong industrial complex, established inside North Korea in 2004, was the most high-profile casualty of the tensions that followed the North's nuclear test in February.

Born out of the "Sunshine Policy" of inter-Korean conciliation initiated in the late 1990s by South Korean president Kim Dae-Jung, Kaesong was a crucial hard currency source for the impoverished North, through taxes and revenues, and its cut of worker wages.

Operations at the complex ground to a halt after the North pulled all its 53,000 workers out in early April. The South withdrew its managers and officials soon afterwards.

The Mount Kumgang resort, developed by the South's Hyundai Asan company, opened in 1998 as a symbol of reconciliation between the two Koreas. It once earned the impoverished North tens of millions of dollars a year.

But Seoul suspended tours by its citizens after a North Korean soldier shot dead a South Korean housewife in July 2008. In response the North scrapped a deal with Hyundai Asan and seized its properties there.

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