

Handshake ushers in historic Korea summit

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SEOUL — Under a towering picture of Kim Il Sung, South Korean president Kim Dae-jung stepped off his plane at Pyongyang's Sunan Airport Tuesday morning amidst cheering North Koreans in traditional dresses.

For the first time since North and South became divided in 1945, Koreans witnessed a sight many thought they would never see: North Korean leader Kim Jong Il extending his hand to Kim Dae-jung.

The two Kims walked side-by-side, with the North Korean leader occasionally deferentially pausing to allow Kim Dae-jung to soak up the glory of bridging more than 50 years of division and bitter history.

Kim Jong Il, wearing a tan, military-style uniform reminiscent of his father, escorted the South Korean president to what appeared to be an American-made luxury car. The two smiled as they walked, greeting North Korean officials while the North's Kim saluted military officials.

"For the past 55 years this path has been blocked, and now on this historical day it will be opened," Kim said before leaving an airbase south of Seoul.

Journalists at the press center in the Lotte Hotel in downtown Seoul clapped and cheered at the sight of the two Kims together. Only 50 South Korean journalists were allowed to travel with Kim Dae-jung to Pyongyang.

Over the past few days, South Koreans in Seoul have festively celebrated the summit.

The summit has deep personal meaning for many Koreans who still have relatives in North Korea. Family reunions are one of the top issues on Kim Dae-jung's agenda, as the North has allowed only one official exchange in the 1970s.

At Kyongbok Palace in downtown, school children on Saturday took colored stickers and placed them on a large mural with cartoon caricatures of Kim Jong Il and Kim Dae-jung. A former North Korean defector who owns restaurants in the south offered free naengmyon - a cold noodle dish that's a favorite in the North - to first-generation North Koreans living in the South.

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Moon Sun-choi's grandparents and parents fled the North Korean town of Hamheung during the 1950-53 war that claimed more than two million Koreans' lives.

"My grandmother really wants to go to North Korea," said Moon, a 24-year-old reporter with the Hankuk Ilbo. "I called her this morning and she was crying watching TV."

Moon's grandmother lost a son during the war's chaos. They don't know if he is still alive.

"She really wants to find him," Moon said. "She thinks he's alive in North Korea so she really wants unification."

North Korea is a very strict and stubborn country, Moon said, and she never thought a summit would happen in her lifetime.

"I thought that if they were to meet, I thought the only way was through war," Moon said.

Kim Dae-jung will stay at the Baekwhahon State Guest House in Pyongyang during his two-night, three-day stay. Neither North nor South Korean officials have commented on the leaders' itinerary.

"We have agreed not to disclose the actual itinerary," said Oh Hong-keun, minister of the Government Information Agency. "It has been a very difficult process in actually materializing the summit."

North Korea requested a one-day delay in starting the summit, citing technical difficulties. One South Korean newspaper said the delay was an embarrassment, and questions were raised if the summit would proceed.

With Kim Dae-jung's heralded arrival Monday in Pyongyang, the world will carefully scrutinize the summit's progression.

The two Kims are scheduled to have at least two exclusive meetings.

Their agenda is not specific, but the Koreans previously agreed to cover issues of "reconciliation and unity, exchanges and cooperation, and peace and unification of

the two Koreas is likely decades away. Since the end of the Korean War, the countries have had relatively little contact but strong militaries.

When the war ended, North Korea modernized rapidly with the help of the Soviet Union, its main benefactor. Its heavy industry grew and its economy outpaced South Korea's.

But in late 1960s under President Park Chung-hee, South Korea embarked on an aggressive economic plan that launched the country ahead of North Korea.

Now the two Koreas stand in sharp contrast to one another. North Korea has been limping through six years of famine and a sluggish economy.

The Stalinist country is heavily dependent on foreign aid and has deliberately used its long-range missile program as a bargaining chip to gain concessions from other countries.

North Korea's missiles, chemical and biological weapons have been a focus of concern for the United States, Japan and South Korea. Kim Dae-jung has said all issues are open for discussion at the summit, but the South Korean government has said the issue of U.S. servicemembers is non-negotiable.

About 37,000 U.S. servicemembers are stationed in South Korea as part of a defense treaty. U.S. forces have been in South Korea since the end of the Korean War.

North Korea has long demanded the withdrawal of U.S. forces as a precondition to cooperation. The North has claimed that the South Korean government is a mere puppet of the U.S. and repeatedly tried to broker a separate peace treaty with the United States.

The Korean War, which began 50 years ago this month, ended in an armistice rather than a peace

North and South Korea have the onerous distinction of sharing the demilitarized zone, the world's most heavily armed border. The two-and-a-half mile wide zone, mandated by the armistice, stretches from coast-to-coast, sealing off any contact between the two countries.

The summit marks a success of Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine Policy," which seeks reduced tension on the peninsula through economic and cultural exchanges.

Traveling with Kim Dae-jung is a host of high-ranking government and business officials. Part of South Korea's strategy is to lure North Korea out of its isolation through business exchanges.

And North Korea needs the money. The country gets about \$8 million a month from Hyundai Group as part of a deal that allows southern tourists to visit Mt. Kumgang, a revered peak in the north.

Other South Korean companies have also started ventures in North Korea. Trade between the Koreas in 1989 amounted to \$18 million and rose to \$300 million by 1997.

Isaac Greene contributed to this report.