

On North Korean side of DMZ, it's change in the air

By Eric Talmadge
The Associated Press

PANMUNJOM, North Korea — Lt. Col. Hwang Myong Jin has been a guide on the northern side of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that divides the two Koreas for five years. He says that since the summits between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and the presidents of South Korea and the United States, things have quieted down noticeably in perhaps the last place on earth where the Cold War still burns hot.

“A lot of things have changed. Listen to how quiet it is,” he said as he stood on the balcony of a large building overlooking the blue and white barracks and concrete demarcation line that mark the boundary between North and South.

“The South used to blast psychological warfare propaganda at us,” he said. “But since the summits, they have stopped. Now there is a peaceful atmosphere here.”

Indeed, all is quiet — deceptively so — in the DMZ these days.

When Kim Jong Un was in Beijing recently for his third summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping, the northern part of the zone was buzzing with busloads of Chinese tourists taking selfies and eating ice cream cones outside the surprisingly well-stocked souvenir shop near the DMZ entrance.

A group of ethnic Korean high school students from Japan filed out of their tour bus as North Korean People's Army soldiers watched disinterestedly with automatic rifles slung over their shoulders. Inside the souvenir shop, still



more tourists, from Europe, looked over hand-painted propaganda posters. American tourists are still banned from visiting North Korea under an order issued last year by U.S. President Donald Trump that restricts all non-essential travel.

Though the DMZ has taken on something of a tourist trap atmosphere over the years — the South side is also a popular tourist destination and has its share of kitschy souvenirs — Lt. Col. Hwang stressed that it remains first and foremost a military site.

“It's not that we want tourists to come, but people want to see,” he said. “There are dangers.”

The dangers are, in fact, all around the DMZ, though they are invisible to the

throng of day-tripping tourists.

While world attention tends to focus on the North's development of nuclear weapons, North Korea has for decades stationed most of its conventional fire near its border with the South. South Korea's capital, Seoul, is only about 50 miles away from the DMZ and would be vulnerable to a heavy artillery attack, potentially augmented by chemical shells, that could cause hundreds of thousands of casualties.

Getting North Korea to agree to move at least some of its big guns away from the border will likely be a key topic of negotiations in the months ahead, particularly now that the U.S. and South Korea have agreed to halt their next set of annual war games, which never fail to

CALM & QUIET. Chinese tourists take photos outside the museum of the armistice agreement between North and South Korea at the truce village in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) which separates the two Koreas, in Panmunjom, North Korea. Since the summits between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and the presidents of South Korea and the United States, things have quieted down noticeably in perhaps the last place on earth where the Cold War still burns hot. (AP Photo/Dita Alangkara)

outrage the North and heighten tensions on the peninsula.

Hwang generally follows a strongly patriotic and unapologetic script as he shows visitors around the usual spots — the building where the armistice that ended the 1950-1953 Korean War was signed, a giant stone engraved with North Korean founder Kim Il Sung's last words, various other spots where talks took place. He still stays strongly on message — his job is to get the North's position across to the tourists, even if they aren't especially interested in listening.

But he also pointed out a tree planted by Kim Jong Un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in when they held their first summit here in April, and the pavilion where Kim hosted Moon when he came to the North's side in May. And when speaking to an American journalist, Hwang also seemed a tad less belligerent — or perhaps just a bit more relaxed.

“War only brings disaster to our people. Nobody wants a war,” he said. “We held military talks with the South here, too. The talks are moving in the direction of what humanity wants. That's peace. That's a positive thing.”

Talmadge is The AP's Pyongyang bureau chief.

Japan lawmaker slammed for calling childless people selfish

By Mari Yamaguchi
The Associated Press

TOKYO — A leader of Japan's ruling party has sparked an uproar by calling people without children selfish, the latest in a series of comments by senior politicians urging women to have more babies.

Toshihiro Nikai, secretary-general of the Liberal Democratic Party, said recent generations think they're better off without children. He contrasted them with older people who had large families despite the devastation of World War II.

He urged women to have babies to contribute to Japan's prosperity. The country is struggling with an aging and declining population.

“Before, during, and after the war, nobody said it's better to not have children because it would be too much trouble. Today, people have a selfish idea that they are better off without having children,” Nikai said. “In order for everyone to pursue happiness, we should have (women) bear many children, so our country will prosper and develop.”

Opponents said Nikai's remark neglected people's right to choose their family

size and was insensitive to those who are forced to give up hopes of having children because of financial or medical difficulties. They also criticized Nikai for rejecting family diversity, including same-sex couples and single parents.

Opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan leader Yukio Edano told Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in a parliamentary

debate that the decision whether to have children “is part of the most basic right of self-determination, in which third parties should never interfere.”

Abe agreed, saying the decision whether to marry or have children should be up to each individual, and acknowledged that he and his wife Akie have no children. “We should not impose our opinion on

others,” he said.

Abe pledged to provide financial support for child rearing and education.

Government statistics show 946,060 babies were born last year, the lowest number since Japan began compiling statistics in 1899 and below 1 million for the second year in a row.

Abe has promoted women's advancement at work to address labor

shortages caused by Japan's aging and declining population, although rights activists say his measures are inadequate because they are not based on human rights.

Several senior lawmakers have been criticized recently for urging women to focus more on childrearing.

In May, an Abe confi-

dante, Koichi Hagiuda, angered some women and single-parent fathers by saying women should be primarily responsible for rearing children because “all babies prefer mommies (to daddies), there is no mistake.”

Another ruling lawmaker, Kanji Kato, said every married couple should have at least three children.

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