

Koreas hold basketball friendlies in latest peace gesture

By Kim Tong-Hyung
The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — The rival Koreas recently held two days of friendly basketball games in Pyongyang in their latest goodwill gesture amid a diplomatic push to resolve the nuclear standoff with North Korea.

Players from North and South Korea were mixed into two teams that competed against each other at the North Korean capital's Ryugyong Jong Ju Yong Gymnasium.

A capacity crowd of 12,000 at the arena applauded as the two women's teams — dressed in white jerseys that read "Peace" and green jerseys that read "Prosperity" — marched onto the court holding hands.

Team Prosperity defeated Team Peace 103-102, with North Korea's Ro Suk Yong scoring 18 points, according to pool reports. The game between the men's mixed teams that followed ended in a 102-102 tie.

The South Koreans also played the North Korean men's and women's teams before returning home.

The games preceded a visit to North Korea by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo for meetings over the future of the North's nuclear program. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, a noted basketball fan, was not seen at the gymnasium.

"Once they started playing, the players showed quick chemistry and I was proud of them," said Lee Moon-kyu, the head coach of South Korea's women's team, who will also lead a combined Koreas team at the Asian Games next month in Indonesia. Lee, who plans to bring two or three North Korean players to the Asian Games, said he was impressed with "No. 9 and No. 7 on Team Peace," referring to North Korea's Ri Jong Ok and Jang Mi Kyong.

North Korea's sports minister, Kim Il Guk, said in a speech that the games reflect the "revered determination of the leaders of the North and South to bring



forward the future of a self-reliant unification."

The South Korean delegation, including 50 players and government officials, arrived in Pyongyang on two military aircraft.

"It feels like the first time I came here all

over again," said Hur Jae, head coach of South Korea's men's national team, who previously visited Pyongyang for a joint game in 2003. Hur, a former guard whose

GOODWILL GESTURE. South and North Korean players play friendly basketball games at Ryugyong Jong Ju Yong Gymnasium in Pyongyang, North Korea. The rival Koreas held two days of friendly basketball competitions in Pyongyang in their latest goodwill gesture amid a diplomatic push to resolve the nuclear standoff with North Korea. (AP Photos/ Jon Chol Jin)

two sons are among the players who travelled to the North, talked about his friendship with retired North Korean player Ri Myong Hun, a 7'9" center who anchored the country's national team during the 1990s and early 2000s.

"There was a buzz when I shared a glass of soju and talked with Ri Myong Hun in 2003," Hur said. Ri did not attend a dinner reception for South Korean players.

The exchanges are the latest result of a diplomatic outreach to the South that Kim announced during his annual New Year's speech. That led to the North's participation in the PyeongChang Winter Olympics in February and two summits between Kim and South Korean President Moon Jae-in. Kim has also met with China's President Xi Jinping and U.S. President Donald Trump.

The inter-Korean summits have facilitated a slew of goodwill gestures between the Koreas, which have also agreed to field combined teams at the Asian Games.

Basketball diplomacy has something of a history in North Korea.

Former NBA player Dennis Rodman arranged a game in Pyongyang in 2014 for Kim's birthday.

South Korea's Hyundai business group built a basketball stadium in Pyongyang during a previous era of rapprochement between North and South Korea, and a joint game was played there in 2003. Two rounds of inter-Korean basketball games were also played in 1999.

JFA says Nishino will not return as Japan's coach

By Jim Armstrong
AP Sports Writer

TOKYO — Despite leading his team to a thrilling and unexpected ride at the World Cup, Akira Nishino will not be back as Japan's coach.

The Japan Football Association (JFA) has confirmed Nishino will not continue as coach of the national team when his term concludes at the end of July.

"We (the JFA) will not persuade Nishino to stay on the job as his term comes to an end," JFA president Kozo Teshima said at a media conference.

Japan's squad returned home following its round-of-16 defeat to Belgium at the World Cup in Russia.

The 63-year-old Nishino took over just two months before the World Cup following the surprise dismissal of Vahid Halilhodzic.

Exceeding expectations, Nishino led Japan to its first appearance in the knockout stage since the 2010 tournament in South Africa.

In April, the JFA said Nishino would manage the team until the end of the tournament.

"I coached the team with the notion that I will only do this until the end of the World

Cup. I feel like I've fulfilled my duties," said Nishino, who was JFA's technical director before taking the job.

Four years after a hugely disappointing campaign in Brazil, Japan entered the World Cup as one of the lowest-ranked sides. Few expected the Blue Samurai to get out of their group, not least because of the change at the top.

But following a 2-1 victory over Colombia and a 2-2 draw with Senegal, Japan advanced from its group despite a 0-1 defeat to Poland in its final group match. Admittedly, its progress was down to the fact that it received fewer yellow cards than Senegal after the teams could not be separated on points, goal difference, or goals scored.

After a series of lackluster results in friendlies under Halilhodzic leading up to the World Cup, JFA sacked the Bosnian saying there were communication problems between him and some of the players.

Nishino took over with little time to prepare and got Japan to play a more attacking style which was on display when they took a surprising 2-0 lead over Belgium before three late goals dashed hopes of an upset.

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