VOA NEWS

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From Washington, this is VOA news. I'm Joe Parker reporting.

Key U.S. leaders are expressing a growing optimism that decades of hostility on the Korean peninsula are closer than ever to becoming to an end.

U.S. President Donald Trump at a White House news conference today: "I don't think he's playing. No, I don't think he's playing. You know it's never gone like this, it's never gone this far. I don't think it's ever had this enthusiasm for somebody for them wanting to make a deal. I agree, the United States has been played beautifully, like a fiddle, because you had a different kind of a leader. We're not going to be played, OK? We're going to hopefully make a deal, if we don't, that's fine. The United States in the past was played like a fiddle."

Earlier on Friday, [Korean] North Korean leader Kim Jong Un became the first North Korean leader that set foot in South Korea, where he crossed the border to shake the hand of South Korean President Moon Jae-in.

The two leaders agreed to work toward removing all nuclear weapons from the Korean peninsula and vowed to pursue talks that would bring a formal end to the Korean war.

Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis spoke about the negotiations at a meeting in Poland.

"I don't have a crystal ball. I can tell you we are optimistic right now that there's opportunity here that we have never enjoyed since 1950."

He was asked if the U.S. will be prepared to vacate South Korea. "That's part of the issues we'll be discussing in the negotiations with our allies first and, of course, with North Korea. So, I think for right now, we have to go along with the process, have the negotiations, and not try to make preconditions or presumptions about how it's going to go. We -- the diplomats are going to have to go to work now."

The White House and Pentagon see the diplomatic progress as a result of Washington's maximum pressure campaign.

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel visited the White House today for a one-day working meeting with President Trump.

"We're working on a lot of different subjects including trade, including NATO, including military of all types. And we have a really great relationship and we actually have had a great relationship right from the beginning, but some people didn't understand that. But we understand that what's important."

The meeting follows a three-day visit to the U.S. by French President Emmanuel Macon.

Palestinian officials say Israeli soldiers shot dead three Palestinian protesters along with another 600 injured in Gaza as thousands of Palestinians demonstrated along the border for a fifth consecutive week.

Protesters gathered a few hundred meters from Gaza Strip's border fence with Israel on Friday, with some stones being thrown and tires set on fire. Witnesses say a smaller group approached the fence and tried to break through it.

Israel has defended opening fire on the protesters, saying it is defending its sovereign border. They also accuse Hamas, which rules Gaza, of using the protesters as cover to carry out attacks. Hamas denies the charge.

Nigerian so-called Queer Women are telling their stories. The new book released this week is a collection and interviews with two dozen women. It offers an unprecedented window into what it means to be a lesbian in Nigeria, where homosexuality is illegal.

For VOA, Chika Oduah reports from Abuja.

The book recounts a series of intimate interviews with 25 queer Nigerian women of various religious and social, economic backgrounds.

That's one of the women featured in the book. She asked to be identified as woman A. She said most queer Nigerian women are like her, living in the closet.

In 2014, Nigeria banned same-sex marriage. The law is far-reaching. Anyone who breaks the law could face up to 14 years in prison.

Asked what impact their book may have in Nigeria, woman A is cautious. "I wish someday, I would be able to openly by my death."

Chika Oduah, for VOA news, in Abuja.

Human Rights Watch said that the law effectively criminalizes Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender people in Nigeria.

And police say at least two dozen people have been killed and seven others wounded in an attack by Boko Haram extremists in Nigeria's northeastern city of Maiduguri.

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That's the latest world news from VOA.