

Activists demand formal peace plan to end 70-year long Korean War



By [Joe Heim](#)

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Although fading in memory or forgotten entirely by many Americans, the Korean War has never ended.

That was the message peace activists and protesters wanted to reinforce in Washington this week to mark the 70th anniversary of the armistice that brought a cease fire between North and South Korea, following a bloody three-year war that killed several million Koreans and about 36,000 American troops.

The July 27, 1953, armistice ended hostilities and established a 160-mile demilitarized zone between the two nations, but it never delivered on a promised peace agreement that was to follow. That failure has haunted the peninsula for decades and represents an existential threat, said Christine Ahn, who was born in South Korea but is an American citizen and activist who has long pushed for a formal peace agreement between the countries.

“We are still in a state of war, and as we see in the current growing tensions on the peninsula, with the U.S. sending three nuclear submarines and the massive military exercises and North Korea testing unprecedented numbers of missiles, we are just one step, one accident away from nuclear war,” Ahn said in an interview Wednesday.

Ahn, the founder and executive director of Women Cross DMZ, which in 2015 arranged for 30 female activists, community leaders and scientists from around the world to visit North Korea and then cross the demilitarized zone into South Korea, said that tensions between the two nations “have not been this bad in a very long time.”

Last year North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said the country would never give up its nuclear weapons, and the regime authorized its military to launch preemptive nuclear strikes. Earlier this month, North Korea fired a suspected intercontinental ballistic missile after warning about “resolute” consequences for the U.S. military’s reconnaissance activities in the region. South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol convened an emergency meeting of the National Security Council to discuss the missile launch.

For Ahn, the increased hostilities have resulted from a long-failed process. “We know that the past 30 years of sanctions [against North Korea] and military exercises and isolation have failed,” Ahn said. “What actually works is engagement, diplomacy and a real commitment to building a new, prosperous and hopeful future.”

Women Cross DMZ helped bring several hundred people, including religious leaders, veterans and families with relatives in North Korea, to Washington this week to take part in workshops, hold rallies and meet with lawmakers and policy leaders working on Korean Peninsula issues as part of what it called a National Mobilization to end the Korean War. More than 100,000 American citizens have relatives in North Korea who they are unable to visit because of restrictions imposed six years ago.

At a news conference on the U.S. Capitol grounds Thursday morning, Reps. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.), Judy Chu (D-Calif.) and Delia C. Ramirez (D-Ill.) joined Ahn to reiterate their support for the [Peace on the Korean Peninsula Act](#), legislation introduced earlier this year by Rep. Brad Sherman (D-Calif.) and co-sponsored by 33 members of Congress.

Lee, whose father served in the Korean War, said the proposed legislation calls for “urgent diplomacy” to create a road map for peace. “It’s time that we wake up from our collective amnesia to remember the death and destruction that this war entailed and chart a new path forward, one based on global peace and security and rooted in human security,” Lee said. “We must put an end to the longest standing war in the United States’s history.”

In a meeting at the White House in April, [President Biden told Yoon](#) “our mutual defense treaty is ironclad, and that includes our commitment to extended deterrence, and — and that includes the nuclear threat and — the nuclear deterrent.” Biden added, “We continue to seek serious and substantial diplomatic breakthroughs with [North Korea] to bolster stability on the Peninsula, reduce the threat of proliferation, and address our humanitarian and human rights concerns for the people of [North Korea].”

Some more conservative Korean and American groups have criticized Ahn and Women Cross DMZ for not calling out North Korean leader Kim Jong Un’s repressive regime and its clampdown on freedoms and human rights, said Andrew Yeo, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and a professor at Catholic University.

“There are those on the far right who hate this group, who say they’re North Korea sympathizers and communists and so forth,” Yeo said. “I think [Women Cross DMZ] feel that if they raised North Korean rights abuses, they’re just perpetuating the same discourse that makes Americans not think about the humanity of North Korea, the North Korean people.”

The outgoing U.N. special rapporteur for North Korean human rights [said last year](#) that he was “gravely concerned about the deteriorating human rights situation under further isolation of the country, in particular the aggravation of the food crisis and stricter control of people’s freedoms.”

Asked about the criticisms, Ahn said she has long advocated for improved human rights and humanitarian conditions in North Korea. “But just condemning North Korea for their human rights violations without trying to actually improve their day-to-day conditions seems to me disingenuous,” she said.

Dan Leaf, a retired Air Force general and former deputy commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, also spoke to the Korea peace groups Thursday and joined in their demand for an official end to the war. In an interview, Leaf said the threat of a nuclear war beginning on the peninsula has driven his call for a peace plan to be pursued.

“We are one bad decision away from nuclear war with North Korea,” Leaf said in his remarks at the news conference. “They have the delivery systems, warheads and stated willingness to preemptively attack South Korea, other neighbors, and the United States. While such an attack may seem irrational, we cannot be so naive as to wish away the possibility that Kim Jong Un, out of premeditation, misunderstanding or desperation, might begin a world-altering war.”

The United States cannot wait for North Korea to make the first step in a peace process, Leaf said.

“Our obstinate refusal to pursue peace only enables Kim Jong Un’s bad behavior,” he said. “It doesn’t impede it.”

Leaf said his objective, “is to complete the work that 36,651 Americans gave their lives for, a final formal peace on the Korean Peninsula.”

For Joy Lee Gebhard, who also spoke to supporters of a peace plan at the Capitol, the push for a permanent peace is not just a question of strategic geopolitics. It’s personal. And it’s urgent.

Gebhard, 88, was born in northern Korea in 1935. She was a promising student with four siblings. As war approached in 1950, her mother sent her with a family friend to study in southern Korea. She never saw her mother again. And it was not until 1988, 38 years later, that she was able to visit North Korea and reconnect with her sisters and brother. None of them recognized her. Nor she them.

Gebhard, who came to the United States in 1956 and now lives in Fauquier County, was able to visit her family members several times over the years in North Korea. Because of travel restrictions imposed in 2017, however, she hasn’t been able to see or communicate with them since.

“As suddenly as I found my family, I have lost them again,” she said. “I believe that we must end the Korean War so that families can be reunited and we can heal from the wounds of war.”

She wants to see her siblings, she said, and to visit her parents’ graves one last time.