

Korea The Dear Leader has left the building By Sunny Lee Aug 28, 2010

BEIJING - The South Korean government is keen to see whether Kim Jong-un, the heir-apparent of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, is accompanying the father on a secretive trip to China amid reports that the young heir will finally make his official debut next month.

Analysts are scratching their heads over the Dear Leader's visit to China, the second this year. It all started when a senior aide of South Korea's Presidential Office told reporters on Thursday that Kim had embarked on a secretive visit to China during the wee hours of that day. Neither Beijing nor Pyongyang confirmed the report. But South Korean media said Kim Jong-il spent his first day in China in the northeastern city of Jilin that borders North Korea. They said Kim visited a middle school attended by his father, Kim Il-sung, the founder of the country, and a memorial park with historical significance. Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping reportedly accompanied Kim, Japanese reports said. Much remains murky about Kim's itinerary. But international media outlets dispatched to the city quoted testimonials of local eyewitnesses who said they saw an "important person" in town. But they couldn't tell with confidence whether it was Kim. On Friday morning, a convoy of 40 cars left the Wusong Hotel in Jilin where Kim reportedly stayed overnight. One-and-a-half hours later they arrived in Changchun, a major industrial city located two hours north of Shenyang, the largest city in China's northwestern region. South Korea's official Yonhap news agency ran a picture of a dark Mercedes Benz with a subtitle that said, "Kim Jong-il is believed to be inside." The car's windows were opaque. International media have yet to demonstrate physical evidence of Kim's presence in China.

Despite only circumstantial evidence, plus no confirmation from Beijing or Pyongyang, multiple diplomatic sources in China believe the Dear Leader is in the Middle Kingdom. Skeptics remain too. Some observers point out that it would be strange for Kim to visit China again when he made the previous trip only 80 days ago. They challenge the widespread speculation that Kim's trip has to do with the heir issue, the nuclear front or economic aid, arguing these issues must have been already sorted out in Kim's previous visit, and most of these matters should be dealt with at a lower diplomatic level, not Kim Jong-il himself.

Yet Koh Yu-hwan, a professor of North Korea studies at Seoul's Dongguk University, who is currently a visiting scholar at Stanford University, said since the media reports first cited an official at the South Korean Presidential Office, it should be seen as credible. "If the report is correct, then it reveals there is urgency. I think Kim Jong-il went to China to make an important deal," said Koh. It is not clear what the urgent matter likely was. But it was important enough that Kim Jong-il had to excuse himself from a widely expected meeting with former US president Jimmy Carter. Carter arrived in Pyongyang on Wednesday, a day before Kim's departure, to seek the release of a US citizen who has been held since January for illegal entry. On Friday, China's state-controlled media aired the news of Carter departing North Korea after successfully securing the release of Aijalon Mahli Gomes. Yet they remained mum about Kim's visit.

"We don't know yet whether Kim spoke with Carter. If he did not speak with Carter, then this is very strange behavior for Kim Jong-il because he is known to show great respect for his elders. Jimmy Carter was a counterpart to his father," said Bradley Martin, author of the book *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty*, which he wrote after making seven trips to the reclusive country. Carter helped defuse tensions in 1994 by going to Pyongyang to negotiate with North Korean leader Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il's father. North Korea had threatened to reprocess its spent nuclear fuel and the Clinton administration was considering a pre-emptive air strike on the North's nuclear site near Pyongyang. "When South Korean president Kim Dae-jung went to Pyongyang in 2000, Kim Jong-il showed him great respect because Kim Dae-jung was his elder. That's Korean behavior. If he has not seen Jimmy Carter, I can only imagine what in the world is going through his mind. Is he thinking clearly?" Martin said.

Some analysts, like Russian expert on North Korea Andrei Lankov, have raised doubts on the mental state of the frail leader, who is believed to have had a stroke and who made an irrational blunder with currency reform last year that backfired. Others believe Kim is highly calculating. "What is certain is that Kim Jong-il is sending a signal to the US, by not meeting Carter," said Han Suk-hee, an expert on Chinese-North Korean relations at the Graduate School of International Studies at Yonsei University in Seoul. "North Korea is expressing its discontent to the US over the current economic sanctions. They want them to be lifted," he said.

South Korean media said Kim's visit likely had to do with the heir. The logic of the very popular view goes that the aged leader wants to introduce Kim Jong-un, who is still in his 20s, to the Chinese leadership to seek their blessing and to get him acquainted with them before he dies. Zhang Liangui, a Chinese expert on North Korea at the Central Party School, an elite institution that grooms promising mid-level officials, debunks this view. "Kim Jong-il doesn't have to bring his son. It's North Korea's matter," he told Asia Times Online.

Some view that North Korea is currently undergoing arguably its worst economic crisis, which has been exacerbated by unusually large-scale floods that prompted thousands of North Koreans to evacuate northwestern Shinuiju city bordering China this week. The situation is apparently so severe that Pyongyang, which has been rebuffing United Nations sanctions, officially turned to the UN for help. Against this backdrop, North Korea is slated to hold a rare meeting of the nation's ruling political party early next month at which the heir could be made public.

"Seeking economic aid from China is an important item. But if Kim Jong-il visits China, it will have to do with issues encompassing other matters as well," said Zhang at the Central Party School. Zhang said he still did not know whether Kim was in China. Park Sun-won, a national security adviser to former South Korean president Roh Moo-hyun, said: "If it is not a very big issue covering both the economic and political scope, Kim Jong-il himself wouldn't have made a journey twice." Whether it's about the economy or the heir, Koh at Stanford said the key factor for both of these issues lay in whether China supported them. "If China endorses the heir and props up the North's economy, North Korea is likely to continue to survive in the post-Kim Jong-il era," Koh said. "But China is unlikely to do so without Pyongyang yielding a concession on the nuclear front. China wants denuclearization. China and North Korea likely made a big deal by trading denuclearization and the heir/economic support."

Lee Gee-dong at South Korean government-run Institute for National Security Strategy in Seoul viewed the prime agenda between Pyongyang and Beijing as being to resume the six-nation negotiations for the dismantlement of the North's nuclear program. Koh agreed. "The first step for North Korea to overcome its multitude of difficulties is to have economic sanctions lifted, imposed by the UN. The sanctions won't be lifted without the resumption of the six-party talks." Analysts said North Korea would also want to use the occasion to "turn the page" from international blame over the sinking of the *Cheonan*, the South Korean navy corvette that a Seoul-led international investigation determined was torpedoed by North Korea. The US is unwilling to resume the six-party talks unless North Korea first commits itself to denuclearization. South Korea demanded the North to apologize first for the *Cheonan* attack. "However, if both China and North Korea, at their highest level, with Kim Jong-il from North Korea and [President] Hu Jintao from China, declare an interest to resume the six-party talks, it can move the international community," Lee said.

Last week, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Wu Dawei visited North Korea. Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency said that "the two sides reached a complete agreement" on the resumption of the six-party talks and on how to realize denuclearization. Analysts believe Kim's visit to China was likely decided during Wu's visit. Wu, China's point man in charge of the nuclear issue, arrived in Seoul on Thursday to promote the resumption of the nuclear talks.

But questions still remain regarding why the aged Dear Leader, 69, who remains in frail health, made an arduous journey to China. For Koh at Stanford, the answer is surprisingly easy. "North Korea is run by one person: Kim Jong-il. Only he can call the shots in that country."

Sunny Lee (sleethenational@gmail.com) is a columnist/journalist covering North Korea. He grew up in Seoul and graduated from Harvard University and Beijing Foreign Studies University.