

Snow and tears mark funeral for North Korean leader
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SEOUL, Dec 28 — The world watched anxiously today as North Korea staged a huge funeral in the capital, Pyongyang, for former leader Kim Jong-il, searching for signs of what to expect from the isolated nation that may be close to attaining nuclear weapons capacity.

Bleak pictures from state television showed a funeral cortege led by a limousine carrying a huge picture of the 69-year old, who died on December 17, passing serried ranks of olive green-clad soldiers whose bare heads were bowed in homage in the main square of the snow-covered capital.

Kim Jong-un (fourth left) and his uncle Jang Song-thaek (third left) accompany the hearse in this still image taken from video, December 28, 2011. — Reuters pic
A hearse carrying the coffin was led by a weeping Kim Jong-un, the son and heir, accompanied by Jang Song-thaek, his uncle and a key powerbroker in the transition, and Ri Yong-ho, the army chief of staff.

"Seeing this white snow fall has made me think of the general's efforts and this brings tears to my eyes," Seo Ju-rim, a red-cheeked, weeping female soldier, told North Korean television, referring to the late Kim.

One of the myths surrounding Kim Jong-il was that he could control the weather and state media has reported unusually cold and wild weather accompanying his death.

Video showed weeping civilians who swayed with grief and shouted "father, father" as black Lincoln and Mercedes limousines and army trucks streamed past the crowds. It was not clear whether the pictures were live or recorded, although a state television announcer said it had been carried live.

"I wished it was a dream, how can this be true," sobbed one middle-aged woman named Kim. "How can anything like this ever happen in the world?"

At one stage, weeping women were held back by men who linked arms to prevent them surging towards the cortege. The procession ended after about three hours with 21 guns fired in salute as the top leadership looked on from a podium.

Kim Jong-un will become the third member of the family to run the unpredictable North Asian country as it enters 2012, the year that was supposed to mark its self-proclaimed transformation into a "strong and prosperous" nation.

The North has conducted two nuclear tests and Larry Niksch, who has tracked North Korea for the nonpartisan US Congressional Research Service for 43 years, believes it could take as little as one to two years to have a working nuclear missile once it produced enough highly enriched uranium for the warhead's core fuel.

The prospect of an untested leader, believed to be in his late 20s, having nuclear capacity has alarmed many.

"Yes, we are watching and will be analysing how any changes can be reflected in our policy," a South Korean government official said. He was not authorised to speak to the media, so could not be identified.

Uncle Jang, power behind the throne

State television showed Jang Song-thaek walking directly behind Kim Jong-un alongside the limousine carrying the coffin. Jang ranked a lowly 19th in the list of names on the state funeral committee but his public elevation confirmed that he will play a key role in shaping policies.

A uniformed man tries to control crowds attending the funeral procession. — Reuters pic
An ascetic-looking, bespectacled 65-year-old, Jang has overcome a purge, bitter palace intrigue and personal tragedy to become vice chairman of the National Defence Commission, the supreme leadership council which Kim Jong-il led as head of the military state.

"Kim Jong-un is clearly the head of the new leadership but, in terms of hierarchy and influence, Jang appears to have secured considerable position," said Yoo Ho-yeol, a North Korea expert at Korea University in the South.

Strong it may be — North Korea is backed by neighbouring China and has a 1.2 million-strong armed forces — but prosperous it is not.

On average, the 25 million North Koreans have a life expectancy three-and-a-half years lower than they did when "Eternal President" Kim Il-sung, the new leader's grandfather, died in 1994, according to UN data.

The United Nations, in a country programme for 2011-15, says North Korea's main challenge is to "restore the economy to the level attained before 1990" and to alleviate food shortages for a third of its people.

Indications from the transition suggest Kim Jong-il's "military first" policy will continue, meaning the military gets the lion's share of scarce resources and further hardship for the majority in a country that endured starvation in the 1990s.

Leverage from outside, with the exception of China, is limited. All the United States, South Korea and Japan can do is hope that the regime does not collapse, nor flex its military muscle as it did in 2010, when it shelled a South Korean island.

North Korea was established in 1948 and under its founding father, Kim Il-sung, went to war to try to conquer the South. It failed and in 1953 a dividing line that would become the world's most militarised frontier was drawn across the peninsula.

Crowds attend the funeral procession for the late North Korean leader. — Reuters pic
Prospects of a purge

While Kim Il-sung was revered by his people for fighting Japanese colonial rule, the halo over his successors has steadily dimmed to such an extent that his grandson, the new ruler, will have to rely on people such as his uncle, Jang, to hold on to power, at least in the short term.

Official media in the North have built Kim Jong-un, a jowly and rotund man in his late 20s, into a leader worthy of inheriting the crown, naming him "respected general", "great successor", "outstanding leader" and "supreme commander".

This year, dissident groups based in South Korea, citing North Korean refugees and businessmen working in China, linked the youngest Kim to a crackdown on business activities and a tougher policy on people seeking to flee from North Korea.

Those reports could not be verified independently, but would again suggest that under the new man, further repression is more likely than an economic opening.

It also gives little hope for the 200,000 North Koreans who human rights group Amnesty international says are enslaved in labour camps, subjected to torture and hunger or execution.

"There is likely to be a politically motivated purge and imprisonment, and it could go on for a considerable period of time," said Pak Sang-hak, who heads a group in Seoul working to support defectors, and is himself a defector.

"That is especially because of the relative instability of Kim Jong-un's leadership. There might also be persecution as a way of intimidation and discipline." — Reuters

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