

(News Focus) N. Korea a 'tinderbox' after leader's death: experts

By Lee Chi-dong

WASHINGTON, Dec. 19 (Yonhap) -- While the U.S. government is trying to deal with the surprise death of North Korea's leader in a steadfast manner, experts here are voicing concerns over potential volatility in the secretive communist nation.

The North has proved unpredictable and the loss of its "Dear Leader," Kim Jong-il, after 17 years of iron-fisted rule raises uncertainties, they said.

Bill Richardson, a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, said he feels "extreme concern," adding, "North Korea and the Korean Peninsula is a tinderbox."

"The issue is going to be, will there be stability in the North Korean leadership?" Richardson, former governor of New Mexico, known for personal ties with the regime, told CNN. "Will they continue their recent efforts of engaging South Korea and the United States over food aid, over nuclear talks?"

One issue is whether the North's stated next leader, Kim Jong-un, will take over power smoothly. The 29-year-old, the third son of the late leader, had been groomed to take the helm for a relatively short period. His control over the all-powerful military there remains untested, although Pyongyang's propaganda media label him as "the Great Successor."

Richard Bush, a senior researcher at the Brookings Institution, expressed doubt about Jong-un's capability to rule the nation, population 23 million, under heavy diplomatic pressure from South Korea, Japan and their Western allies.

"The most likely scenario is a collective leadership that will rule in the name of the Kim family," he said, adding that Jong-un has not had enough time to consolidate power in key posts. The late leader Kim was designated as heir-apparent two decades before he took over power with the death of his father, Kim Il-sung, the founding leader of the North. But Jong-un began taking key posts only three years ago, after his father suffered a stroke.

"A key figure in the collective leadership will be Jang Song-taek, the husband of Kim Jong-il's sister," Bush said.

Whether such a leadership system, if introduced, will succeed remains up in the air, he noted, saying it is "not impossible" that different factions in the leadership will fight among themselves over power and resources.

With Kim's death, according to the researcher, the prospects for regional negotiations on North Korea's nuclear program in the near future are very low.

"The successor regime will have to consolidate itself before it will be prepared to engage the United States, South Korea and others," he said.

The North and the U.S. had discussions in Beijing last week over possible food aid from the U.S., with a new round of high-level talks expected this week. Diplomatic sources said Pyongyang seemed willing to tentatively suspend its uranium enrichment program in return for the massive shipment of food from Washington, which would pave the way for the resumption of the six-party nuclear bargaining.

The demise of the North's leader dented that upbeat outlook.

Doug Bandow, a senior analyst at the Cato Institute, agreed that there is no prospect for imminent nuclear negotiations or a dramatic revolution to topple the current regime.

"Some observers hope for a 'Korean Spring,' but the DPRK's largely rural population is an unlikely vehicle for change," he said. The DPRK is the acronym for the North's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

He also expressed doubts over China's role.

"Beijing views the status quo as being in its interest," he said. "Above all else, China is likely to emphasize stability, though it may very well attempt to influence the succession process outside of public view."

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