

# Kim Jong-Il: The Dear Leader... or no more?

When North Korea's head of state, 'Dear Leader' Kim Jong Il, did not show up for the 60th anniversary ceremony of the country on Tuesday, there were speculations that he had serious health problems. But if Japanese professor Toshimitsu Shigemura from Waseda University is to be believed, Kim is already dead. Outrageous as this seems, it is hard to come by any credible information about the reclusive leader of a notoriously secretive country. A look at some of the speculations about him that have been doing the rounds

## HE ISN'T ALIVE

In his recently published book, *The True Character Of Kim Jong Il*, professor Shigemura, an expert on North Korea, claims that the dictator succumbed to diabetes in 2003 and that up to four 'doubles' stand in for him. Some even attended meetings with Russia's Vladimir Putin and China's Hu Jintao. According to him, Kim was actually dead when he 'disappeared' for about 42 days in 2003, but that he had trained his look-alikes well before his 'demise' since he was afraid of being assassinated during a public appearance.

## POSSIBLE SUCCESSORS

### THE SON

Jong-chol, the second of Kim's three known sons, is considered to be the favourite to succeed his father.

### BROTHER-IN-LAW

Jang Song-taek, 62, is the husband of Kim's sister and a ruling Workers' Party official. He is often seen as the second-most powerful man after Kim in the ruling party structure.

### HEAD OF STATE

Kim Yong-nam, 80, is the head of the North Korean parliament's leadership council and is the country's nominal head of state.

### THE GENERAL

Jo Myong-rok, head of the Political Department of the North's army and Kim's number two in the National Defence Commission.

## HE IS SEVERELY ILL

On Tuesday, South Korean daily *Chosun Ilbo* reported that Kim fell seriously ill and collapsed on August 22. On Wednesday, fresh reports emerged of his collapse, possibly due to a stroke, but North Korean diplomats rubbish these claims, attributing them to a "conspiracy plot". The media has been paying close attention to reports about Kim's health. If he is indeed seriously ill, there are fears his absence could interfere with international efforts to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear programme.

## OR IS HE STILL LIVING IT UP?

Even as North Korea reels under a food crisis, Kim is known to partake of gourmet cuisine and fine wines without restraint. In an account of his train journey with Kim through Russia in 2001, former Russian presidential envoy Konstantin Pulikovsky claimed that Kim's 16-car private train overflowed with French wine and fresh lobsters were delivered to stations before his arrival. There is plenty of gossip about his womanising as well, including his 'pleasure brigade' — specially selected women who are made to dance nude during his marathon bacchanals.

## THE "CULT OF PERSONALITY"

Is Kim a ruthless lunatic or a brilliant strategist? The answer is probably both. But in North Korea, he is hailed as the Dear Leader, whose birth was greeted by a new star in the sky. This "cult of personality" is often built up with relentless propaganda in dictatorships, but defectors say he was involved in terrorist activities including the bizarre kidnapping of a film director and his girlfriend in 1978 (he's a movie buff with a collection of tens of thousands of films). Even as the world remains on tenterhooks with his politics of brinkmanship and affinity for missiles, millions of North Koreans struggle to survive in a crumbling economy. As Kim, in the only public broadcast of his voice, said, "Glory to the heroic soldiers of the People's Army." And the rest be damned.

— Asavari Singh



SASIKUMAR