

Is Seoul Ready for Contingencies in North Korea?

Updated Sep. 12, 2008 09:06 KST

The government has apparently been forging a completely new policy to prepare for any contingencies in North Korea, an issue that is gaining fresh urgency amid reports of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il's ill health.

A senior government official on Thursday said the previous administration maintained a secret plan to prepare for contingencies including regime collapse in Pyongyang. But another senior official said, "The previous administration's plan was aimed at keeping the North Korean system stable rather than preparing for unification. It only envisaged a minimum of administrative measures we could take." He said the new administration "has been working out a new contingency plan under a new name. It even covers possible diplomatic measures vis-a-vis neighboring countries."

The plan focuses on the possibility that any contingencies in North Korea could lead to unification.



A South Korean military policeman stands guard in front of a sign pointing to Pyongyang at Dorasan Station in the demilitarized zone, in Paju, north of Seoul on Thursday. /AP

It also emerges that the government will resume formulation of Operation Plan 5029, a combined South Korean and U.S. military contingency plan for North Korea. Preparation was suspended by Cheong Wa Dae during the Roh Moo-hyun administration.

It was then downscaled to Concept Plan 5029, which mainly carried abstract concepts, since OPLAN 5029 could provoke North Korea. But military authorities in Seoul and Washington have in effect agreed to make the military plan an "operational program" that envisages concrete military operations including personnel mobilization and deployment.

Former senior government officials who experienced an emergency in North Korea with the death of leader Kim Il-sung in July 1994 said, "When Kim Il-sung died, it was certain that Kim Jong-il would take power. But now the situation will be more urgent. It's important to hold talks on this with the U.S. and China well in advance."



This 1980 file photo released by the Korea News Service shows Kim Jong-il, right, and his father Kim Il-Sung, who died in July 1994, attending a party to celebrate the sixth Korean Worker's Party convention. Kim took power from his father Kim Il-Sung in 1994 in the communist world's only dynastic handover, and perpetuated the family's all-pervasive personality cult in the secretive Stalinist state. /AFP

Park Kwan-yong, who was presidential chief of staff in the Kim Young-sam administration, said, "We have to update and complement the contingency plan continuously according to changing situations while paying attention to what action the U.S., China and the UN would take in this situation. We need to hurry to make a complete plan for an emergency, because nobody knows when it will happen."

Kim Deok, then director of the National Security Planning Agency (now National Intelligence Service), said, "In the present circumstances, we need to pay more attention to our relations with China and the U.S. than in the past. I'm afraid it's possible we may lose initiative," if Seoul is not fully prepared.

Chung Jong-wook, then senior presidential secretary for foreign affairs and national security, said, "We have to make sure that there is no conflict within South Korea over how to react when an emergency occurs in the North."

Meanwhile, it was confirmed on Thursday that North Korean leader Kim Jong-il's three sons -- Jong-nam (37), Jong-chul (27) and Jong-un (25) -- are all in Pyongyang. A senior South Korean government official said, "Jong-nam, who had been in Macao and China, returned around July and has since been staying in Pyongyang. It's unprecedented that the three sons of Kim's are together in one place for an extended period."

After he was deported from Japan in 2001 after attempting to enter the country with a false passport, Jong-nam lost favor in his father's eyes and led a wandering life abroad.



North Koreans participate in celebrations for North Korea 60th anniversary in Pyongyang on Tuesday, in this picture distributed by North Korea's official news agency KCNA on Wednesday. /REUTERS

One of the three is likely to inherit Kim Kong-il's mantle.

Experts speculate that the North Korean party elite, government and military want to maintain their vested interests by supporting one of Kim's sons as a symbolic leader, because they agree that they might all go to their ruin together if a power struggle should occur in the post-Kim Jong-il days. While he had apparently banned discussions of his successor until recently, Kim may have changed his mind since he fell ill.

Congratulatory messages which North Korea's top five power organs sent to Kim on the 60th anniversary of North Korea's founding on Tuesday are being seen as a loyalty oath to the sick leader. The five are the National Defense Commission, the Korean Workers' Party Central Committee, the Korean Workers' Party Central Military Commission, the Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly, and the Cabinet.

The agencies sent similar messages on Kim's 60th birthday in 2002 and on his 65th in 2007, but rarely on North Korea's anniversary. The agencies may have made an exception to consolidate the regime lest North Koreans become agitated by Kim's health problems.

At a rally on the eve of the anniversary, no. 2 leader Kim Yong-nam, the president of the Supreme People's Assembly, read a congratulatory message full of praise and pledges of loyalty to Kim Jong-il. "We will rely completely on the great leader comrade Kim Jong-il for our fate... He is a matchless patriot and an unparalleled great man who has led our republic along the road to victory and glory... We will uphold, with all our hearts and minds, the ideologies and leadership of the general, who is the symbol of Korea's victory and glory, and future based on the military-first ideology..."

Some observers speculate that the message may reflect a temporary vacuum. "Our republic is comrade Kim Jong-il himself. Only with the general will there be a socialist fatherland and a bright future." The message also hails Kim Il-sung, but twice as much space is devoted to eulogizing Kim junior.

A South Korean government official said, "Previous congratulatory messages also eulogized Kim Jong-il as a matchless hero and a genius. But his eulogy in the latest message is far stronger than previous ones. The messages were a kind of collective oath of loyalty to Kim Jong-il on his sick bed."

(englishnews@chosun.com)