

VOA Note #24

DATE: July 7, 1994

PLACE: Geneva

Event: Kim Il Sung is Dead!

**Participants: DPRK Foreign Ministry officer Li Yong Ho,
DDPRK UN Mission Official Han Song-ryol and
US State Department North Korea Affairs Officer C.
Kenneth Quinones**

Nearly a year had passed since the two negotiating teams were able to return to Geneva and re-engage in the US-DPRK nuclear talks. The events of the previous two months had been traumatic and both sides were uncertain how the third round of talks might go. Again I did my best to restore some mutual trust by meeting prior to the talks with selected members of the DPRK delegation. We confirmed that each side would take turns hosting the other at their diplomatic mission. Also, it was agreed that the two chief negotiators would take turns hosting one another for luncheon. These informal talks enabled me to assure bob Gallucci that the North Korean delegation appeared eager to return to the negotiating table.

But no sooner did the talks resume that Kang Sok-ju opened with a litany of allegations that the US had demonstrated insincerity regarding the June 11 joint statement. Gallucci sat impassively and looked Kang straight in the eyes. When it came his turn to speak, Gallucci dismissed Kang's allegations and shifted the focus back to the nuclear issue. Obviously Gallucci had learned that Kang always had to begin each session with a political harangue as ordered by his superiors in Pyongyang. But Kang also soon realized that such political rhetoric was of no consequence other than to waste both sides time. He discontinued the practice and instead began to concentrate from the beginning on the business at hand – forging an agreement to shut down North Korea's nuclear program. Although the first day of talks proved inconclusive, both sides emerged from them reassured that the events of the previous ten months had not caused any permanent damage to the negotiation process.

Once the talks had resumed, I moved to the same hotel where the US delegation was staying. The telephone rang very early the next morning. As I answered, a familiar albeit rather intoxicated voice jarred me awake, "Is Kim Il Sung dead?" the voice of a Japanese diplomat asked. "Why?" I answered. My Japanese colleague responded, "Well I am here with some Japanese journalists and they received a telephone call from Tokyo informing them that Pyongyang radio and television was playing very sad music." The Japanese government could not confirm anything so the journalists thought that someone in the US government might know what was going on.

First I called the Operations Center at the US State Department in Washington, D.C. The duty officer – it was before dawn – could only confirm that Pyongyang was playing sad music. He suggested that I call the White House operations center in Rome where the US president was visiting. Again I got the same answer, "We have not heard anything."

During a visit to Pyongyang in October 1993 I had met the Russian TASS correspondent to North Korea. US government officials were still barred from calling Pyongyang directly, but a US correspondent could make such a telephone call. I

contacted CNN correspondent Mike Chenoy who was staying at the same hotel. I gave him my Russian contact's telephone number in Pyongyang and asked him to call. Ten or so minutes later a surprised Mike called back, "Yes, Kim Il Sung is dead."

I again called Washington to inform the Operations Center at the State Department and then told the White House staff in Rome. Next I woke up Robert Gallucci and he asked me to immediately come to his room. On the way there I ran into a Yomiuri reporter who had already heard something unusual had happened. I politely bid the young woman "Good Morning" and continued toward Gallucci's room. She followed. Inside his room I told Gallucci the news. Promptly he asked me to contact the DPRK delegation to find out their intentions. We agreed to meet later for breakfast at a small bakery about a ten minute walk from the hotel.

No one answered the telephone at the DPRK mission. I let it ring for at least ten minutes. Finally a sleepy woman answered in Korean, "What do you want?" When I asked to speak to Han Song-ryol, she told me, "Wait," and put the telephone down. After another long wait, Han answered in a sleep voice, "Who is this?" As soon as I had identified myself, I asked him, speaking in English now, whether he could confirm that Kim Il Sung was dead. Han immediately dismissed the possibility. I asked him to check and to call me back.

Twenty or so minutes later he called and confirmed that "The Great Leader has died." We agreed to meet at 9:00 AM in a very expensive hotel which we believed no journalist could afford to stay and thus we could have privacy. I then grabbed my cellular telephone (I alone on the delegation had one so that the North Koreans could call me if necessary at any time) and went to my rental car (the only one authorized for a member of the delegation so that I could easily meet North Korean officials at out of the way places). I found Gallucci and other members of the delegation walking toward the bakery and was invited to join them for breakfast. Over coffee, cheese and tasty bread I briefed Gallucci. He designated his assistant and I to meet the North Koreans at 9:00 AM to decide how to proceed. We were certain that the DPRK delegation would have to return to Pyongyang, but we would emphasize our desire to engage in a future round of talks.

A few minutes before 9 AM I parked the car in front of the five star hotel. Dressed very casually we strolled into the plush lobby filled with fancy furniture and red velvet covered walls. The setting was right out of the late 19th Century ornate top class French hotel. We stunned the front desk staff by asking where we could buy coffee for a couple of friends we would soon be meeting. A stunned waiter ushered us to a small table on the hotel's front porch. Shortly afterward Han Song Ryol and Li Yong Ho arrived in a DPRK mission sedan. Over coffee, the two North Korean diplomats confirmed Kim Il Sung's death, which they had first learned from me but only afterward received confirmation from Pyongyang. They informed us that their delegation had been ordered to return as soon as possible to Pyongyang, but they expressed confidence that the US-DPRK would resume as soon as possible. After the brief exchange, they headed back to their diplomatic mission.

The price for the four cups of coffee was outrageous. The State Department later rejected my request for reimbursement because the purchase had not received prior approval and the cost exceeded any reasonable amount for four cups of coffee.

Later the DPRK government expressed its appreciation by awarding me a Kim Il Sung badge which was presented to me by Han Song-ryol at 1 AM in the parking lot of the US Mission in Geneva. The DPRK government had failed to inform its delegation of Kim Il Sung's death, but not I and the US government.

Whether and when the US-North Korea nuclear negotiations might resume once again had become uncertain.

C. Kenneth Quinones
November 16, 2008