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Kim Il-sung asks for thaw in ties with the U.S.

By: Josette Shiner

Dateline: PYONGYANG, North Korea

PYONGYANG, North Korea – President Kim Il-sung of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, for 43 years the most implacable foe of the United States, says he is ready to "bury the hatchet" and seeks an American embassy in his showcase capital of Pyongyang "as quickly as possible."

In the first interview he has granted to an American newspaper in many years, President Kim – or "the great leader Comrade Kim Il-sung," as he must be called by everyone here – said that improved relations with the United States are "the order of the day" with the collapse of the Cold War.

"There is spring between the people of our country and the people of the United States, spring begins," he told The Washington Times. "My wish is to establish [a U.S. embassy] as quickly as possible.

"We are ready."

To signal his good will toward the United States, he said North Korea would turn over the remains of additional American soldiers killed in the Korean War, which ended in 1953.

"We've already sent several groups of remains to the United States," he said. "We plan to send more as soon as we discover, unearth, the remains. I think it is the correct thing, from the humanitarian point of view."

President Kim, appearing relaxed and jovial in a 2 1/2-hour interview, followed by a private luncheon of roast goose and quail-egg soup. He seemed to be in vigorous health on the eve of his 80th birthday, presenting the image of a self-confident, reflective elder statesman rather than the reclusive, dogmatic dictator he is usually portrayed as in the West.

His neatly groomed capital, regarded by diplomats as among the dullest and quietest in the world, has been uncharacteristically abuzz this week with round-the-clock preparations for massive celebrations.

His robust appearance contradicts persistent reports in the West that his health is failing, and he discussed with zest and ease a range of topics, from nuclear weapons and the reunification of Korea to his recent visit with American evangelist Billy Graham, his enthusiasm for tiger hunting and his formula for a long life.

The interview, at the Presidential Palace, was granted after a delegation of editors and reporters of The Times, led by Wesley Pruden, the newspaper's Managing Editor and editor-in-chief, had spent 11 days here interviewing highest-ranking government, military and Workers Party officials.

President Kim was most emphatic on the issue of whether his government is building nuclear weapons, which is thought to be the main obstacle to improving relations with the United States. He said his government is "quite ready to receive the inspection from outside."

"We don't need nuclear weapons," he said. "What is the use of producing one or two nuclear weapons while the big countries have several thousand, several tens of thousands of nuclear weapons? And we don't have a delivery system either.

"This will be soon solved. I don't think there will be any contradiction between our country and the United States in terms of the nuclear issues."

[The Japanese news agency Kyodo reported yesterday that North Korea would open three nuclear facilities to international inspection. Choe Chong-sun, head of the Foreign Affairs Bureau of the North Korean Atomic Energy Ministry, said his government would list three nuclear power plants in its initial report to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

[These would include a 5,000-kilowatt experimental reactor in Yongbyon, 60 miles north of Pyongyang, which was built in 1986, along with 50,000-kilowatt and 200,000-kilowatt plants now under construction. Mr.

Choe said North Korea would introduce four new reactors in Sinpo, near the Sea of Japan.

[According to international atomic-energy regulations, North Korea must accept nuclear inspection by outside experts within 90 days of the pact's being ratified and put into effect by parliament. North Korea signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in December 1985 but refused for years to endorse the safeguards accord.]

President Kim answered several questions submitted in writing by The Times, and then answered several more that were posed during the face-to-face interview and luncheon. Questions were asked in English, answered in Korean, and translated consecutively by an interpreter supplied by the government.

He confirmed what many analysts have thought to be true, that his son Kim Jong-il, who must be addressed here as "the dear leader," is already the de facto ruler of the country.

"He is already taking full responsibility for our country," President Kim said. "In fact, all affairs of our country are run by him."

The younger Kim, who recently celebrated his 50th birthday, has been groomed for decades as Kim Il-sung's successor and already has the titles of party secretary and supreme commander of the armed forces. Foreign analysts believe he might also soon be named to be president as well.

Kim Il-sung, who has confounded his foes for decades with his ability to survive the severe and chilling conspiracies of the last rigid Stalinist state, vows that "optimism" is the secret that has enabled him to become the longest-ruling chief of state in the world.

"This is my philosophy: Even if the sky is falling down upon us, there will always be a hole for me to rise up through," he said. "When we were fighting against the Japanese imperialists I never felt pessimistic. If one feels optimistic there is nothing that can't be solved."

This and other secrets of the man have been well guarded. In addition to being the longest-serving head of state, he may be the least known. He has granted only two interviews to American journalists in his life.

The last was in 1972 to Selig Harrison, then a reporter for the New York Times. Correspondents for The Washington Post, the New York Times and several other news organizations have briefly visited Pyongyang in recent years – Michael Chinoy, the CNN correspondent in Beijing who accompanied Billy Graham to Pyongyang, met President Kim last week – but until now he had granted no interviews.

Over lunch, President Kim, the only ruler North Korea has ever had, boasted of the "worry-free life" his subjects enjoy, though they are denied almost every freedom, particularly of speech and easy association with one another, common to citizens of nearly every other country in the world. He belittled the failures of socialist nations elsewhere as the reward of the faithless.

He recounted an encounter with beggars on arriving by train in Moscow in 1984. "I thought, why do there have to be so many beggars in the socialist countries?" he recalled.

"In my country now everybody has housing, nobody is sleeping outside. There are no beggars. There are no opium addicts. There's no unemployment, not a single person is without food and every child has 11 years' compulsory education. Plus we have free medical care and no taxation. I think these are the good points in my country."

But he conceded that his people have "day-to-day desires" for consumer

goods that cannot be satisfied. He said a "light industry revolution" will address these needs within a few years. He has "launched a campaign," he said, to replace all one-bedroom apartments with flats of three and four bedrooms.

Unlike his subordinates, President Kim avoided the ideological harangues and anti-American diatribes familiar to foreign visitors to North Korea. He even avoided harsh words when talking about the war that left the Korean peninsula divided by a demilitarized zone, patrolled 40 years after the fact by United Nations troops, along the 38th parallel.

"We can forget the bitter past and unite together," he replied to a question about Korean reunification. "What is the use of taking issue with bygone days? That will bring us nothing. We must look into the future and realize the unity of our nation. That is important."

The author of a fiercely independent strain of Marxist-socialist dogma called "Juche," or self-reliance, President Kim said he nevertheless believes there is room in this theory to lead North Korea into the world economic markets.

"Our broadening economic ties with other countries does not mean any change in our principled stand of maintaining economic independence," he said. "Our people shall strive for their national prosperity and struggle shoulder to shoulder with all of the Asian people for the co-prosperity of Asia."

He praised the Chinese model of economic development but said it would not be imitated by Korea. "We actively support China's policy of economic construction, regarding it as suitable to her situation," he said.

President Kim blamed the bitter relations with the United States on the Cold War and called on the U.S. to "amend its Korea policy without

hesitation."

"If the United States, the only superpower, desists from power politics of its own accord on the occasion of the end of the Cold War . . . it will enjoy people's support," he said.

"Since I set out on the road of the revolution I have believed in the people and shared good times and bad with them and felt the worth of life and happiness in that. Nothing is impossible if one relies on the inexhaustible strength of the people."

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Credit: THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Map, NORTH KOREA, By The Washington Times