

"Commander Kim" speaks Swiss German

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"Commander Kim" speaks Swiss German

Not only will the next leader of North Korea reportedly be a drink-loving basketball fan but the youngest son of Kim Jong-il is also an alumnus of a Swiss private school.

Little is known about Kim Jong-un. But what is clear is that the 26-year-old spent his early years at the International School of Berne, where as a "shy" student he learned German, French and English, and honed skills in skiing and playground dispute resolution.

Two major South Korean newspapers reported that North Korea's main bodies and its overseas missions had been asked to pledge loyalty to Kim Jong-un. However, there were no signs his father, who reportedly suffered a stroke last August, intended to step down anytime soon. The Dong-a Ilbo newspaper said North Korea was teaching its people a song praising the new "Commander Kim".

The possible transfer of power comes at a time of mounting tensions over North Korea's rocket launch on April 5, the May 25 underground nuclear test and signals that it may be preparing to test-fire medium- and long-range missiles.

Kim Jong-un's young age is a potential problem in a society that venerates seniority. Jong-un studied at the International School of Berne in the 1990s, but left in 1998 at the age of 15 before taking his baccalaureate exam.

The Swiss weekly news magazine L'Hebdo reported that he went by the pseudonym Pak Chol and learned to speak English, German and French - as well as Swiss German.

He was humble and friendly with the children of American diplomats and often helped break up fights between classmates, explained a former school director. A car arrived every day after school to pick him up; classmates and school officials thought he was the driver's son.

From 2002 to 2007 Jong-un took military studies at Kim Il-sung University in Pyongyang, where officers are trained, but has never held an important post.

He was not the only family member to be educated in Switzerland. The middle son, Jong-chol, also studied at the Bern boarding school in the 1990s.

And the eldest son, Jong-nam, 38, went to a private school in Geneva. Jong-nam was considered the favourite to succeed his father until he was caught trying to enter Japan on a fake passport in 2001. He reportedly told Japanese officials he wanted to visit Tokyo's Disney resort.

SWITZERLAND AND NORTH KOREA

Switzerland, along with Sweden, is a member of the supervisory commission, which ensures compliance with the armistice between the two Koreas signed on July 27, 1953. Five Swiss officers are based at Panmunjom in the demilitarised zone between North and South Korea. Switzerland has no diplomatic representation in North Korea.

In the wake of the famine of the 1990s, Switzerland was one of the first to offer humanitarian aid and it subsequently turned its humanitarian commitment into a long-term development programme. Its planned aid budget for 2009 is SFr 5.7 million. The programme is run by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), which has an office in Pyongyang.

Much of the programme is specifically geared to improving agricultural output, but it is also aimed at integrating North Korea into the international community. Swiss cooperation has been strongly criticised in parliament, and is to end after 2011.

On May 20, 2003 Swiss Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey became the first foreign government official to cross the demarcation line separating North and South Korea. She said Switzerland was prepared to act as a mediator to resolve the nuclear stand-off in the region.

Despite normal diplomatic relations between Pyongyang and Bern, in October 2006 Switzerland introduced sanctions on North Korea over its nuclear weapons test that month.

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