

Surmising Kim Jong Un's Health Status and the COVID-19 Situation in the DPRK

1. Kim Jong Un's Unusual Behavior and COVID-19

Since *CNN* reported on April 20 that Kim Jong Un is under critical condition,¹ there have been a lot of rumors about his health status circulating around the world media. President Trump said at a press conference on April 21 that he does not know about Kim's condition.² However, at another press conference held on April 27, Trump reworded his statement by saying he knows "how he's doing, relatively speaking" and "you'll probably be hearing in the not-too-distant future."³ Still, nothing has been said (we, I, us, etc. are not academic language and haven't, doesn't, etc. are contractions that should be written out) about Kim's condition, from either the U.S. government or the DPRK government so far. The only mention has been where Moon Chung In, the top foreign policy adviser to ROK President Moon, said that "Kim Jong Un is alive and well" at a press interview with *CNN*, as someone who has an official "government position" about Kim's health.⁴

Even though *CNN*'s initial report refers to U.S. intelligence sources, there are two reasons why the report appeared as false. One is Kim Jong Un's quite unusual behavior and the other is the spread of COVID-19.

What is the unusual behavior? April 15 is Kim Il Sung's birthday and it is regarded as "the largest festive day for all Korean people" in the DPRK. Since he became a leader in 2011, Kim Jong Un has paid a visit to the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, where Kim Il Sung's body is enshrined, to greet him on this special day. Each of his visits were reported by the DPRK's state media. For unknown reasons, there was no report about his visit this year. This

¹ <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/20/politics/kim-jong-un-north-korea/index.html>

² <https://youtu.be/HDrWuOj8kHk>

³ <https://youtu.be/jfyjTZfCYxs>

⁴ <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/26/asia/kim-jong-un-north-korea-health-intl/index.html>

occurrence is indeed strange and can be enough of a reason to speculate something is wrong with Kim Jong Un's health.

Even so, does absence of report necessarily mean Kim Jong Un did not visit the Palace? There must be reasons why the DPRK official media would not report his visit. Kim Jong Un visited the Palace on February 16, Kim Jong Il's birthday this year. The pictures used to report this on *KCTV* show that he was accompanied by much less people this year compared to last year.



Source: *KCTV*, February 16, 2020



Source: *KCTV*, February 16, 2019

While there is not a set count of the number of officials that accompanied Kim Jong Un in the past, one can instantly tell that this is quite a small number, if not the smallest. Why so small? This clearly has something to do with COVID-19. They even look as though they are maintaining social distancing. Now that the world is suffering from the spread of COVID-19, people tend to pay more attention to their health. So why not Kim Jong Un's?

2. Possible Infection: Remote Areas and Pyongyang

From these pictures, we can surmise two possibilities as to why Kim Jong Un's visit to the Palace on Kim Il Sung's birthday was not reported this year. Both are related to the COVID-19 situation, but differently. The first possibility is that Kim visited the Palace with only a minimal amount of people, possibly with only his sister, Kim Yo Jong, so they did not want to disclose pictures that would make people both in the DPRK and abroad wonder why.

They can explain that it was a precautionary measure, but the DPRK still claims that no one infected with COVID-19 has ever been in their country as of today. Thus, there is no reason to decrease the number of people who would accompany Kim Jong Un on such an important occasion. They need a reasonable explanation, especially domestically for political reasons, and just decided not to disclose his visit, though it had taken place.

The second possibility is that Kim Jong Un himself has been infected with COVID-19, so he was unable to visit the Palace. To make this assumption valid, it must be proved that there are infected persons in the DPRK, despite their official stance.

Indeed, the DPRK made quick moves to protect their country from the spread of COVID-19. The first official report of COVID-19 spreading in China appeared on *Rodong Sinmun* on January 22, 2020.⁵ On the same day, Young Pioneer Tours, a China based travel company offering DPRK tours announced on their website that "the DPRK will temporarily close its borders to all foreign tourists as a precaution to the Coronavirus."

⁵ www.rodong.rep.kp/ko/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2020-01-22-0037

North Korea temporarily closes border until further notice — Coronavirus precaution

As of Wednesday the 22nd of January, 2020, the DPRK will temporarily close its borders to all foreign tourists as a precaution to the Coronavirus.

Whilst the current border closure time is undefined, we have been reassured by the Korean authorities that once precautionary measures against Coronavirus have been instituted, they intend to reopen the border. We hope this will come sooner rather than later.

As such, we are still taking bookings for upcoming tours and will continue to update our customers.

Related: [the coronavirus panic: has North Korea closed its borders before?](#)

Source: Young Pioneer Tours, <https://www.youngpioneertours.com/>, January 22, 2020

On January 26, the director of the National Sanitary and Quarantine Office under the Ministry of Health of the DPRK addressed the COVID-19 situation in China and explained measures to prevent infection in a column of the *Rodong Sinmun*.⁶ The explanation was quite detailed and what he suggested was almost what is being done now to prevent infection.

On January 29, the *Rodong Sinmun* reported that the emergency anti-epidemic headquarters were organized in Pyongyang and local areas. The report also says that this is a matter of national survival.⁷

By January 30, the *Rodong Sinmun* distributed an article titled “Hygienic and Anti-epidemic System Turned into State Emergency Anti-epidemic System.”⁸ The article notes, “In the wake of the emergency measure taken by the Party and state, the Non-Permanent Central Public Health Guidance Committee of the DPRK declared that the hygienic and anti-epidemic system will be switched to a state emergency anti-epidemic one till the danger of the novel coronavirus infection disappears.”

On the same day, breaking news cut local programs, the kind of breaking news broadcast that is only used for events of great consequence, such as the success of a nuclear test. This news

⁶ www.rodong.rep.kp/ko/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2020-01-26-0018

⁷ www.rodong.rep.kp/ko/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2020-01-29-0034

⁸ www.rodong.rep.kp/ko/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2020-01-30-0004

must have had a fresh and strong impact on the people of the DPRK unless they had already been in a serious situation because of the virus.



Source: *KCTV*, January 30, 2020

Since this day, *KCTV* has reported daily news regarding the COVID-19 outbreak of the outside world and what the DPRK government is doing “to prevent the virus from reaching the country.” Within a week or so, the DPRK government formulated a government system to cope with the situation. Disregarding effectiveness, this was a positive move to prevent the virus.

The poor nutritional status and medical system in the DPRK are often used as reasons to explain why the DPRK suffering from COVID-19 would be detrimental. It is true only if COVID-19 spreads nationwide, as it has in the West. Still, the movement of people beyond municipal borders is limited not only by political restrictions, but also by consistently poor public transportation in the DPRK.

One can watch how people live in remote areas of the DPRK in the *KCTV*'s regular program called “News from home of soldiers.” People appearing in this program look rather relaxed, though they are wearing masks when they are close with other people because wearing a mask has been mandatory since February. It would be disastrous if COVID-19 spread in these areas, but the author's impression is that they are still free from the virus.

Vein exploration workers in Sinseongcheon workers' district, Pyongan Namdo.



Source: *KCTV*, April 26, 2020

What about Pyongyang, where Kim Jong Un resides? One thing that can be said from what is available on *KCTV* is that Pyongyang is under strict control unlike the remote areas observed above, whether the capital is infected with the virus or not. All schools, department stores, and entertainment facilities, such as zoos or amusement parks have been closed since February. Situations on *KCTV*, like children entering elementary school, were not shown this year and pictures taken before February are used when they introduce activities of entertainment facilities and so on.

The picture below is from a news segment on *KCTV* showing Mansugyo Meat Store in Pyongyang. Only a small number of people are seen in the store. This is quite unusual because when they show this kind of scene, one where a lot of people enjoy shopping is often used. They could have made up the scene by mobilizing people, but they did not because it would be untrue for Pyongyang residents who are restricted to go to these stores under the COVID-19 situation. Therefore, with this small number of people, the residents would think they have some kind of special permission.



Source: KCTV, April 26, 2020

The DPRK government was initially insisting on the protection of Pyongyang from the virus. However, it could be surmised that Pyongyang became one of the places infected by COVID-19 because Pyongyang was accepting a lot of foreigners, especially Chinese, as tourists. Along with Pyongyang, two popular cities among Chinese tourists, Rason and Sinuiju are likely infected. If this assumption is correct and the DPRK government has a lockdown in place for Pyongyang, they might have successfully stopped the virus spreading outside of the capital.

3. Kim Jong Un's Slackness

The DPRK government often mentions that “any slightest slackness may result in serious consequences.”⁹ Without a doubt, Kim Jong Un is the most well protected person from COVID-19 in the DPRK. If he were ever infected, the cause would be his slackness.

We can observe the process in which he is becoming more and more slack in the pictures from the *Rodong Sinmun*.

Kim Jong Un is with military officers wearing masks in one of the pictures of the article, “Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Guides Artillery Fire Competition of Artillery Units under

⁹ www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2020-02-27-0004

KPA Corps 7 and Corps 9.”¹⁰ Although he was with a certain number of people, the responsibility of preventing infection seemed to fall on the officers simply wearing masks.



Source: *Rodong Sinmun*, March 13, 2020

Further, Kim Jong Un was talking with KWP high-ranking officials at the construction site of Pyongyang General Hospital in one of the pictures of the article, “Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Breaks Ground First for Construction of Pyongyang General Hospital.”¹¹ It is not hard to speculate that PCR tests had been done to those who stayed close to him in the picture.

¹⁰ www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2020-03-13-0005

¹¹ www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2020-03-18-0014



Source: *Rodong Sinmun*, March 18, 2020

Kim Jong Un was watching military exercises with KPA officers not wearing masks in one of the pictures of the article, “Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Guides Artillery Fire Competition between Large Combined Units of KPA on Western Front.”¹²

¹² www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2020-03-21-0010



Source: *Rodong Sinmun*, March 21, 2020

In a picture of the article, “Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Observes Demonstration Fire of Tactical Guided Weapon,” on the following day, Kim Jong Un observed a missile test.¹³ When the missiles hit the target, the high-ranking officials seem to be making a victorious cheer. The missile test might have succeeded, but this kind of behavior certainly increased the risk of infection.

¹³ www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2020-03-22-0005



Source: *Rodong Sinmun*, March 22, 2020

The slackness went on in April. Kim Jong Un observed another military exercise with officers not wearing masks. In the pictures of the article from April 10, “Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Guides Drill of Mortar Sub-Units of KPA Corps,” soldiers joining the exercise were not wearing masks.¹⁴

¹⁴ www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2020-04-10-0010



Source: *Rodong Sinmun*, April 10, 2020



Source: *Rodong Sinmun*, April 10, 2020

Kim Jong Un was even talking with plain soldiers not wearing masks in the picture of an article from April 12, “Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Inspects Pursuit Assault Plane Group.”¹⁵



Source: *Rodong Sinmun*, April 12, 2020

On the same day, the *Rodong Sinmun* reported, “A meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) was held on Saturday at the headquarters building of the WPK Central Committee.”¹⁶ Even though the PCR tests had been done to the participants, the risk of infection increased as the meeting was held in a room and nobody was wearing a mask.

¹⁵ www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2020-04-12-0005

¹⁶ www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2020-04-12-0004



Source: *Rodong Sinmun*, April 12, 2020

On April 12, the third Session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was held at the Mansudae Assembly Hall without the attendance of Kim Jong Un.¹⁷ Since the total number of representatives is over 680, if all attended, his slackness did not extend to this meeting.

¹⁷ www.rodong.rep.kp/en/index.php?strPageID=SF01_02_01&newsID=2020-04-13-0002



Source: *Rodong Sinmun*, April 13, 2020

Whether Kim Jong Un's slackness got him infected or not, he did not appear in public until May 1.

Kim Jong Un appeared with his sister, Kim Yo Jong, and cut the tape for the completion of the Sunchon Phosphatic Fertilizer Factory.



Source: Rodong Sinmun, May 2, 2020

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Links:

Kawaguchi's Blog in Japanese: <http://dprknow.jp/>

For several months, The New York Times writers, Vivian Morelli and Kantaro Suzuki searched for information about North Korean wristwatches.

Kawaguchi was interviewed by Suzuki and gave some comments about the watches.

Title: Made in North Korea. And that's almost all she knows for sure.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/22/fashion/north-korea-watches-moranbong.html>