

North Korea Welcomes Russian Spies

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Kim Jong Il posing in 2009, left, and at talks with Fradkov on Tuesday.

Spymaster Mikhail Fradkov has met with a remarkably healthier-looking North Korean leader Kim Jong Il and his youngest son amid speculation that Kim is no longer grooming the young man to replace him.

Fradkov, head of the Foreign Intelligence Service, led a delegation of intelligence officials to Pyongyang for the talks Tuesday, news reports said.

A Russian diplomatic source told Interfax that the talks had covered North Korea's nuclear program, humanitarian aid and economic issues, namely projects between Russia and South Korea.

The talks took place in a "warm and friendly atmosphere" and ended with a dinner where Fradkov presented gifts to Kim and his son, Kim Jong Un, RIA-Novosti reported, also citing North Korean media.

The inexperienced Jong Un, believed to be 28 or 29, was in September made a four-star general and given a senior political role in what was widely seen as the official start of

succession.

But in April, signals emerged of a slowdown in the transition process when the young Kim was surprisingly overlooked for a post at the powerful National Defense Commission.

Diplomats and analysts agree that Kim appears in better shape now than the sickly figure photographed in parliament in 2009 and the frail person holding on to a handrail at a military parade last year.

Published images of the 69-year-old “Dear Leader” meeting with Fradkov on Tuesday show him looking portly and pudgy-faced.

“He does look better. ... He is not that guy who was propped up and was dragged around” last year, said Brian Myers, a specialist on the secretive state’s ideology at Dongseo University in South Korea.

Myers added that Kim’s heavy schedule of so-called “field-guidance” inspections in the past few months has been quite extraordinary, but he cautioned against reading too much into his recovery. “He’s certainly not the man he was before the stroke,” he said.

Most images from the North are issued by the state media, which is largely used as a propaganda tool.

It is widely suspected that Kim suffered a stroke in 2008. This sparked a flood of media reports that the isolated state was on the threshold of a leadership change. Now experts and diplomats are re-evaluating their short-term projections and say the world may have to get used to Kim — and his nuclear brinkmanship — for a few more years, at least.

Daniel Pinkston, an expert on Korean affairs in Seoul with the International Crisis Group, said any improvement in Kim’s health increases the chances for a third generation of dynastic rule. “It seems people are falling in line behind the succession, and of course the longer Kim stays alive the better position he is to make his preferences and to have succession fulfilled,” he said.

(MT, Reuters)

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