

NHK Interview September 10, 2008
What Happened to Kim Jong Il?
Commentary by C. Kenneth Quinones
Professor of Global Studies
Akita International University
Akita, Japan.

Question: What is your assessment of reports regarding Kim Jong Il's health?

Answer: We must treat such information very carefully. The source of information announced by South Korea's director of National Intelligence Service (NIS) is unknown and therefore is unconfirmed and is of uncertain reliability. It remains possible that Kim Jong Il is indeed very ill. He is 66 years old, has high blood pressure, is diabetic and may have other health problems. But at the same time it is possible that someone could be spreading rumors about Kim Jong Il's ill health in the hope of seeing how South Korea and other nations might react to such news. It is therefore best to be patient and to await an official announcement from the DPRK.

Question: Why is Kim Jong Il's health such a matter of concern?

Answer: The situation in Northeast Asia is very sensitive because Kim Jong Il has not publicly named his successor. Although he has three sons, he has not yet designated either one of them or some other individual to take over when he dies.

Consequently, the possibility of a struggle for power in Pyongyang exists so long as his successor is unclear. Only North Korea's generals have sufficient power to dominate the government in Pyongyang. But if these generals compete with each other for power, or if Kim Jong Il's sons try to decide among themselves who such assume power, political chaos could ensue. In such a situation, either China or South Korea might intervene. This would greatly complicate the situation. Obviously further progress toward resolution of the Japanese abduction issue and the nuclear issue must await a return to calm in North Korea.