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From: Abedin, Huma <AbedinH@state.gov>
Sent: Sunday, January 1, 2012 5:44 AM
To: H
Subject: Fw: N.Korea rallies for successor, no mention of nuclear arms (Reuters)

From: OpsNewsTicker
Sent: Saturday, December 31, 2011 09:58 PM
To: NEWS-Mahogany; NEWS-Korea
Subject: N.Korea rallies for successor, no mention of nuclear arms (Reuters)

SEOUL, Jan 1 (Reuters) - North Korea in a policy-setting message for New Year called on its people to rally behind anointed successor Kim Jong-un by becoming "human shields" but made no mention of its nuclear arms programme, the key source of regional security concern during his deceased father's reign.

The North's three main state newspapers said in "a joint editorial" published on Sunday that Kim Jong-un has legitimacy to carry on the revolutionary battle initiated by his grandfather Kim Il-sung and developed by his father Kim Jong-il, who died two weeks ago of a heart attack.

"Kim Jong-un, the supreme leader of our Party and our people, is the banner of victory and glory of Songun Korea and the eternal centre of its unity," the joint editorial carried by the North's state KCNA news agency said.

"The dear respected Kim Jong-un is precisely the great Kim Jong-il. The whole Party, the entire army and all the people should possess a firm conviction that they will become human bulwarks and human shields in defending Kim Jong-un unto death."

The joint editorial assailed the South Korean government for pursuing confrontation and war manoeuvres despite efforts by the North to reopen dialogue, and it repeated its demand for the withdrawal of the U.S. military from the South.

But conspicuously absent from the 5,000-word New Year editorial was any mention of its nuclear arms programme.

Momentum was building in diplomatic contacts between the North and the United States before the announcement of Kim Jong-il's death on Dec. 19, raising expectations that the two sides may be closer to reaching a compromise to restart stalled talks aimed at ending the North's nuclear programme.

Those talks stalled in 2008 when Pyongyang balked at intrusive inspections of its nuclear sites under a 2005 deal by six countries including the United States and South Korea to give the impoverished North aid in return for disarmament.

Last week, in a fiery message that marked the first communication with the outside world since Kim Jong-il's death, the North's National Defense Commission, which is seen as the apex of power, declared it would not deal with the current government in the South.

South Korean President Lee Myung-bak had angered Pyongyang by cutting off aid to the destitute neighbour when he took office in 2008 demanding nuclear disarmament and economic reform as preconditions to reopen food assistance and political engagement.

Tensions on the divided peninsula had reached a new peak in 2010 when the North launched an artillery barrage into a South Korean island killing civilians. The North was also blamed for a torpedo attack against a South Korean navy ship killing 46.

The North's state media said on Saturday that Kim Jong-un has been officially appointed supreme commander of its 1.2-million strong military, two days after the official mourning for the dead leader ended in a move seen as a rush to solidify succession and boost the junior Kim's grip on power.

Kim Jong-un was named a four-star general and given the vice-chairmanship of the ruling party's Central Military Commission by his father in 2010.

Experts believe the untested new leader, who had only been groomed for rule since 2009, will rule with the aid of a close coterie that includes his uncle and key power-broker, Jang Song-thaek, at least in the early stages of the leadership transition.

Jang, husband of Kim Jong-il's younger sister, Kim Kyong-hui, stood behind his nephew in Wednesday's mass funeral parade, escorting the hearse carrying Kim's body.

Despite Pyongyang's determination to project an unbroken line from Kim Jong-un's iron-fisted predecessors, which began with his grandfather, Kim Il-sung, there have been questions among outsiders about his capacity to lead the country.

North and South Korea are technically still at war under a truce ending the 1950-53 Korean War.

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