



N. Korean leader sends condolences over Moon

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Unification Church members at a memorial service mourning the death of leader Sun Myung Moon in the church's Seoul headquarters on September 4. North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un has sent condolences Wednesday over Moon's death.

SEOUL (AFP) - North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un sent condolences Wednesday over the death of Unification Church founder Sun Myung Moon, fuelling speculation he might send a rare delegation to South Korea for the funeral.

Moon, a self-styled messiah who gathered a global following behind his church and spawned a multi-billion business empire, died on Monday at the age of 92.

His funeral will be held September 15 at the church's headquarters in Gapyeong, east of Seoul.

Although a staunch anti-communist, Moon began building a relationship with North Korea in the 1990s. In 1991 he visited Pyongyang and met with then leader Kim Il-Sung for talks that touched on reunification of the divided peninsula.

A church-affiliated firm, Pyeonghwa (Peace) Motors, established a joint carmaking business in North Korea in 1999.

Kim Jong-Un's message was carried in a short report on the communist state's official Korean Central News Agency.

"I express my deep condolences to widow Han Hak Ja and the bereaved family upon receiving the sad news that Moon Sun Myung... died of illness," the message read.

"Though he passed away, his efforts and feats made for the reconciliation and unity of the nation, the reunification of the country and the world peace will last forever."

Since Moon's death, there has been increasing speculation that North Korea would seek to send an official delegation to pay its respects at his funeral.

Moon had sent Unification Church delegations -- including some of his family members -- to the funerals of both Kim Il-Sung in 1994 and Kim Jong-Un's father Kim Jong-Il last year.

Official delegations from the two Koreas, who technically remain in a state of war, rarely cross the heavily militarised border.

When Kim Jong-Il died, a private group of prominent South Korean citizens, including a former first lady and a leading businesswoman, visited Pyongyang to express their condolences.

North Korea sent an official delegation to the funeral in South Korea in 2001 of Hyundai Group founder Chung Ju-Yung, who had championed closer ties with Pyongyang.

Another delegation attended the funeral in 2009 of former South Korean president Kim Dae-Jung, who instigated the "Sunshine Policy" with North Korea that led to his historic summit with Kim Jong-Il in 2000.

The summit presaged a flurry of North-South exchanges, but these virtually dried up with the election in 2008 of South Korea's current president, Lee Myung-Bak, who took a more hardline approach towards Pyongyang.

South Korea's Unification Ministry said Wednesday it had received no formal request from Pyongyang to attend Moon's funeral.