

North Korea

'Let's meet again in afterlife'

An 'obsessive' bunch go into totalitarian fog

LONGMONT, Colorado, Oct. 21. (AP) In an anonymous office building in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains, in a part of Colorado where cattle ranches fade into strip malls, a gravel-voiced man with a Brooklyn accent is moving through the streets of Pyongyang.

Joe Bermudez is staring into a computer screen at a detailed satellite image, maneuvering his cursor past guarded checkpoints and into restricted neighborhoods where the North Korean elite live behind high concrete walls. Looking down on the city from more than 250 miles up, he lingers over what he believes is the private airport of Kim Jong Un, North Korea's young leader, pointing out a pair of VIP helicopters and a Soviet-era biplane. He moves north, jumping across the countryside and picking out hidden tunnels, walled compounds and a small flotilla of military hovercraft designed to storm South Korea's beaches.

"Driving around," he calls it when he follows roads in search of something new, humming absent-mindedly as his eyes flick across the screen.

Bermudez is a watcher, one of the largely anonymous tribe of researchers who study North Korea, one of the world's most isolated nations. There's Michael Madden, a largely self-taught analyst with an encyclopedic knowledge of the government elite, and Curtis Melvin, whose research ranges from monetary policy to electricity grids and who shambles through the buttoned-down Washington think tank where he works in jeans and a frayed T-shirt. There's Adam Cathcart at Britain's University of Leeds and Cheong Seong-Chang at the Sejong Institute outside Seoul. There's the longtime US intelligence officer, a man quietly revered by many in these circles, who now writes Pyongyang crime novels under the pseudonym James Church.

They are university professors, think tank analysts and writers for a string of North Korea-centric websites. They are collaborators and competitors. They are the Kremlinologists of Pyongyang.

And they insist North Korea is nowhere near as mysterious as you think it is. At least not always.

Secretive

"North Korea is a very secretive place. But it's not as secretive as many people believe," says Andrei Lankov, a Russian-born professor at Kookmin University in Seoul. "It's much, much easier now to get information."

The chaos that swept North Korea during a mid-1990s famine dramatically changed how information flows in and out of the country, while policy changes have eased restrictions on visitors.

Still, North Korea remains like nowhere else. It is a repressive and deeply isolated nation where the Internet is limited to a tiny elite and most outsiders are under near-constant government surveillance. It has been ruled by one family for more than six decades, with the founder worshipped as a near-deity. It has no political opposition, no free press and no freedom of movement. It has an archipelago of political prison camps that rights groups estimate hold at least 80,000 people.

Major news — like the collapse last year of a 23-story Pyongyang apartment building — can go officially unreported for days, if ever. The inner workings of the country's top leadership, meanwhile, are so opaque that some watchers remain unsure if Kim Jong Un is truly in charge of the country. He may, they say, be only a figurehead, with real power resting with a cabal of powerful bureaucrats.

Secrecy is deeply rooted. "When the enemies peek into our republic, they see only a fog," Kim Jong Il, the father of Kim Jong Un and the country's ruler until his death in 2011, once said.

And yet North Korea is not an impenetrable bubble, say the watchers, who have spent years refining methods of peering inside.

They do it by poring over strings of digitized satellite images, and by talking to North Korean refugees who have fled to China and South Korea. They parse North Korean news reports for what is, and is not, reported. They talk to diplomats, business people and, when they can, to North Koreans. They read obscure Chinese journals for political clues and gauge economic changes by measuring how much North Korean light can be seen from space. They forge relationships with secretive government agencies that track North Korea.

Clues

The watchers search everywhere for clues: What does it mean that Kim Jong Un has put on weight? How significant is it that he used the word "people" 90 times in a recent major speech, but didn't say "nuclear" once? Do a handful of phrases in government statements, innocuous to anyone but a watcher, reflect a late 1990s power struggle?

Sometimes researchers are lucky

— like the propaganda poster, photographed by a tourist in 2009, that signaled the rise of Kim Jong Un. But most of their work must be slowly knitted together, a series of threads that eventually reveal something larger.

Take satellite imagery. At first, Bermudez says, satellites seem to offer seductively easy answers: How many political prisoners are being held? Is Pyongyang close to developing a nuclear-capable long-range missile? Are more exports flowing to China?

Finding answers, though, requires diving deeply into the image. The analysis begins with sophisticated software that reveals hundreds of shades of light, including some infrared wavelengths, and a vast range of colors. Analysts merge separate images to make them clearer and use software to lessen distortion. That analysis is then woven together with other information: historical data, other imagery, research reports.

It's easy to be fooled. To demonstrate this, Bermudez pulls up an image of a complex outside the North Korean city of Chongjin. Look at it from directly overhead, and it's just a cluster of buildings with some agricultural fields off to one side. But look from an angle — "off-nadir" in the analyst's lexicon — and things jump into view, and that cluster of buildings becomes the political prison known as Camp 25.

"If I was looking straight down, I wouldn't see the barbed wire. I would have trouble seeing the shadow of the guard tower," says Bermudez, chief analytics officer at the AllSource Analysis, a commercial intelligence firm based in Longmont. From an angle: "All of a sudden it becomes more real."

For decades, it was hard to see anything in North Korea. Control

Until the 1990s, few foreigners traveled there, and few North Koreans traveled abroad. The country was trapped in a Stalinist time warp, with control of information so absolute that many North Koreans knew nothing beyond government propaganda. In some years, fewer than a dozen North Koreans managed to flee the country.

That began changing when the end of Soviet aid and then a series of floods caused a 1990s famine that outside researchers believe killed hundreds of thousands of people. Government control broke down for a time as Pyongyang struggled to keep the country functioning. Tens of thousands of North Koreans fled their homeland, and foreign aid and aid workers began to flow in.

While the government soon reasserted its control, things had changed immensely. Thousands of tourists now visit North Korea every year. Foreign businesses, from Chinese mining companies to French clothing manufacturers, make deals with North Korean partners. About 27,000 North Korean refugees now live in South Korea and thousands of North Koreans legally travel abroad every year, most often to China. North Korea's own official data, long derided as a meaningless fog, is — at least occasionally — now helpful to researchers.

The ranks of the watchers grew with the spread of information, including drawing in people who might have been dismissed a few years earlier. They are not university professors, retired spies or former diplomats.

They are people like Michael Madden.

Madden is a friendly, foul-mouthed former academic with a Star Wars tattoo on his forearm (of the mysterious bounty hunter Boba Fett) and an exhaustive knowledge of North Korea's leadership. A decade ago, the 33-year-old stumbled into North Korea research and found himself addicted.

Also:

SEOUL, South Korea: A silver-haired South Korean woman adjusted her 83-year-old North Korean husband's necktie. He held her hands and stroked her shoulder. Before this week, they hadn't seen each other since war tore them apart 65 years ago, and there is no reason to believe they will ever see each other again.

"Let's meet again in the afterlife," Oh In Se told his 85-year-old wife, Lee Soon-kyu, during their final meeting Thursday at the North's Diamond Mountain resort. "Be healthy," his wife replied. "Live long."

Their bittersweet parting was among many at the close of the first round of three-day reunions of hundreds of elderly Koreans on opposite sides of the world's most militarized border for more than six decades.

About 390 South Koreans, many in wheelchairs, traveled to the resort to reunite with their relatives under humanitarian reunion programs that the rival Koreas occasionally hold.



North Korean Son Gwon-Geun (center), cries with his South Korean relatives as they bid farewell following their three-day separated family reunion meeting at the Mount Kumgang resort on the North's southeastern coast on Oct. 22. (AFP)



Charles Jose, assistant secretary and spokesman of the Department of Foreign Affairs, talks to the media after issuing a statement on Wednesday's killing of a couple of Chinese diplomats and the wounding of a consul-general by a fellow Chinese in Cebu city, central Philippines, at suburban Pasay city, south of Manila, on Oct. 22. (AP)



Asia

Communist Party's deadly sins: China's Communist Party has banned its members from "extravagant eating and drinking", engaging in "improper sexual relationships with others" and playing golf, state media reported Thursday.

The ruling party's Political Bureau adopted new rules on clean governance and discipline earlier this month, the official Xinhua news agency said, describing the measures as "a moral ethical code that members must abide by."

Party members were already barred from "keeping paramours and conducting adultery" but the new rule on sexual activity was stricter, Xinhua said.

Playing golf and excessive eating and drinking were explicitly listed as violations of discipline for the first time, it added.

The regulations — which apply to everyone in the 88-million-strong Communist Party — also forbid forming cliques within the party and nepotism.

Since ascending to the party leadership in 2012, President Xi Jinping has launched an austerity drive and a sweeping crackdown on corruption, with thousands of officials falling from power.

But critics of the campaign liken it to a political purge targeting Xi's opponents. Spending on luxury goods and in high-end restaurants has plummeted amid the crackdown, with government officials intimidated by high-profile corruption prosecutions.

The document did not detail punishments for violating the new rules, but the party maintains its own feared internal disciplinary system, which operates without judicial oversight.

Party discipline superseded criminal law, Xinhua said. (AFP)

FM emoji use sparks debate: The Australian foreign minister's use of a red-faced emoji to depict Russia's Vladimir Putin sparked debate among lawmakers in Canberra Thursday, demanding to know what the icon means for relations between the nations.

The image was used to describe the Russian leader when Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, who regularly tweets the icons, conducted what was dubbed as the world's first political emoji interview with website Buzzfeed in February.

The ideogram — a fuming red face with angry eyes and a downturned mouth — prompted a brief back-and-forth in parliamentary hearings about Australian-Russian relations.

Philippine typhoon toll hits 54

China to take custody of couple

MANILA, Philippines, Oct. 22. (Agencies) Beijing has claimed diplomatic immunity for a Chinese couple suspected in the shooting deaths of two Chinese diplomats and the wounding of the country's consul-general in the central Philippines, and will take custody of them, an official said Thursday.

A Chinese man has been accused of killing diplomats Sun Shan and Hui Li and injuring Consul-General Song Ronghua on Wednesday in a restaurant in Cebu City, where they worked at Beijing's consulate. Police say the alleged attacker is the husband of another Chinese diplomat who has also been taken into custody.

The Department of Foreign Affairs in Manila said Beijing has invoked the Chinese couple's diplomatic immunity under the 1961 Vienna Convention and a 2009 bilateral accord and has asked to take custody of them so they can be investigated and possibly tried in China.

"The Chinese government would like to take custody of them and they will have to undergo the Chinese legal process," department spokesman Charles Jose said at a news conference.

In Beijing, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said an investigation is underway to determine the motive for the attack and gather details. "We felt deeply distressed over this incident," she said at a regular news briefing.

The 1961 Vienna Convention spells out protections afforded to diplomats and embassy staff, including immunity from local laws and criminal prosecution. China and the Philippines agreed in a 2009 accord that their consular diplomats enjoy those immunities.

Transfer

Jose said Chinese and Philippine officials are discussing the transfer of custody, which is to occur after a security team arrives from Beijing. The suspects are currently still in the custody of Philippine police in Cebu, about 570 kilometers (350 miles) south of Manila, at Beijing's request, he said.

China has previously insisted on trying its citizens who have been accused of crimes in other countries. A Beijing court

sentenced a Chinese man to life in prison in 2012 for murdering his girlfriend in Canada. In 2011, a Shanghai court handed a 15-year prison term to a Chinese man who admitted he killed a taxi driver in Auckland.

In Wednesday's shooting, initial reports differed on whether the man or the woman was the suspected attacker but Jose backed police findings, based on witness accounts and security camera video at the Cebu restaurant where the shootings happened, that the husband allegedly fired the shots.

"The shooting was an extreme act of a relative of a staff of the consulate," Jose said.

Police Chief Superintendent Prudencio Tom Banas said the couple has not issued any statement that could explain the motive for the shooting, partly because they could not speak English.

The victims and the suspects were attending a birthday lunch in a private room at the Lighthouse restaurant when the shooting occurred, Banas said.

Citing witnesses and video from a restaurant security camera, Banas said the gunman first fired at the consul-general and his deputy, Sun Shan, in the room. Hui Li, a finance officer, ran outside the room but the attacker followed and shot her, he said.

Also:

MANILA: A Philippine soldier opened fire on a prayer meeting at a military base on Thursday, killing five of his comrades before troops intervened and shot him dead, an army spokesman said.

Nine other people were also wounded in the rampage at an army camp on the southern island of Basilan, a hotbed for Muslim extremist groups, said Colonel Benjamin Hao.

"There was a bible study (session). He went there, to back (of the room) and then suddenly opened fire," Hao told reporters.

Responding soldiers shot the gunman dead but the motive for the attack remained unknown.

"His battalion commander said that he had changed after going on vacation. He was surprisingly quiet. Before that, he was talkative, kind of jolly, but when he came

back, he was different," Hao said. The gunman, who he identified only as corporal in the mortar section, was not a member of the bible study group, Hao added.

"We believe it is an isolated incident but we will look closer into its medical and psychological aspect in order to determine the root cause," he said.

Soldiers in the island of Basilan face numerous threats, battling Muslim armed groups like the al-Qaeda-linked Abu Sayyaf, which has been blamed for the Philippines' deadliest terror attacks.

The group, which hides in the thickly-forested hills of Basilan, has been behind beheadings and kidnappings of foreign tourists and Christian missionaries as well as bomb attacks.

MANILA: The death toll from a ferocious typhoon in the Philippines climbed to 54 on Thursday, as home-wrecking floods shifted downstream to coastal villages, displacing tens of thousands of residents.

Inundations from torrential weekend rains in mountain regions caused by Typhoon Koppu cascaded into coastal fishing and farming villages, submerging them in waters up to three metres (10 feet) deep, officials said.

Residents of Bulacan and Pampanga province, around two hours' drive from the capital Manila, fled by foot to evacuation centres as the waters rose quickly overnight, aggravated by a high tide, they said.

"The waters have nowhere else to go. Imagine two to three days worth of rain from the mountains coming down," Nigel Lontoc, assistant director of the region's civil defence office, told AFP.

Close to 60,000 people left their homes in Bulacan and Pampanga, a geographic catch basin for waters from the upland provinces of Nueva Ecija and Aurora, which bore the brunt of Koppu on Sunday and Monday.

Lontoc said the floods in the coastal areas may last a week.

Koppu made landfall on the east coast of Luzon, the Philippines' biggest and most populated island, early Sunday with 210-kilometre (130-mile) per hour winds.

relationship with Russia." Bishop later told reporters that Putin, as a "hard man", would have liked the emoji. (AFP)

Suu Kyi slams her opponents: Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi accused some of her opponents Wednesday of being "dishonest" in their campaigning ahead of crunch polls that her party is expected to sweep if the vote is free and fair.

In some of her most pointed criticisms yet of her opponents, the veteran democracy campaigner said some politicians and parties were "stooping low" during their campaigning — although she stopped short of naming names.

"As we have gone around the country campaigning for the 2015 election, we heard that some people or some political parties are breaking the rules or using dishonest ways in their campaign," she told thousands of flag-waving supporters in the eastern town of Tachileik, close to Myanmar's borders with Thailand and Laos.

The once junta-run nation heads to the polls on November 8 in what voters and observers hope will be the freest election in decades.

Myanmar was run for decades by a brutal and isolationist junta but the military ceded power to a quasi-civilian government in 2011 paving the way to this year's elections.

In recent weeks the country has been gripped by a colourful and boisterous election campaign and Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) is expected to make major gains. (AFP)



Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi greets supporters and Shan ethnic minorities on arrival at Tachileik airport in Shan State to campaign for National League for Democracy (NLD) on Oct 21. (AFP)