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North Korea Tries to Build New Leader's Image

By CHOE SANG-HUN



SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea's state-run television called its young, untested leader, Kim Jong-un, a "military genius" on Sunday and showed him driving a tank, sitting in the cockpit of a warplane and interacting with soldiers in a youthful display of camaraderie that was unlike the style of his late father.

The broadcast, a documentary on North Korea's Central TV, also claimed that Mr. Kim, believed to be in his late 20s, oversaw the April 2009 test launch of the country's long-range rocket.

"I had determined to enter a war if the enemies dared to intercept" the rocket, he was quoted as saying in the program, which showed him and his father visiting the control center during the test.

The program appeared to be part of North Korea's frenzied campaign to burnish Mr. Kim's credentials as a leader who can command its army of 1.2 million soldiers, which is one of the world's largest armed forces and is crucial to his consolidation of power.

Mr. Kim took over after his father, the longtime dictator Kim Jong-il, died on Dec. 17. Late last month, he became supreme commander of the military, officially taking on the first of his father's several top military and party posts.

North Korea's propaganda campaign has since billed him as the "great successor" of his father's "songun," or "military first," policy, which emphasizes military might. But the North's development of nuclear weapons and tests of long-range missiles have brought economic sanctions that have deepened the country's isolation and poverty.

Sunday's documentary began with Mr. Kim riding a white horse, as his father often did in propaganda murals in North Korea. It was unclear when and where much of the video had been shot.

Mr. Kim was said to have been groomed as successor at least from 2008, when his father had a stroke. He was officially unveiled as heir in 2010, when he was made a four-star general and vice chairman of the Workers' Party's Central Military Commission.

Although he is said to have graduated from the top military academy in Pyongyang, there is no indication that he served in the army.

The North Korean media have been busy filling in the gaps in his military résumé, claiming that he wrote his first thesis on military strategy when he was 16. During his New Year's Day inspection of a tank division, he participated in a firing exercise, "making the New Year's first sound of gunfire," the documentary said.

Unlike his father, who usually stood solemnly during such inspections and was kept at a reverential distance from soldiers unless he took group pictures, Mr. Kim was seen laughing and clutching the hands of officers and soldiers.

His father rarely made public appearances for three years after his own father, North Korea's founding president, Kim Il-sung, died in 1994, and even when he did, he always wore a grim expression. He was said to be in mourning during this time.

But Kim Jong-un has lost no time establishing public credentials as a leader. The documentary was broadcast on what is believed to be his birthday. He is believed to have turned 28, 29 or 30. North Korea has not announced his birth date, and the day's official news reports did not mention the birthday.