

Under ICBM's red glare, Pyongyang pretties up its "pyramid"

By Eric Talmadge
The Associated Press

PYONGYANG, North Korea — While North Korea's second launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) dominated headlines, Pyongyang quietly unveiled renovations around the capital's biggest landmark: a futuristic, pyramid-shaped, 105-story hotel, the world's tallest unoccupied building.

After decades of embarrassing delays and rumors that the building may not even be structurally sound, could this be Kim Jong Un's next pet project?

If nothing else, it at least has a new propaganda sign: "Rocket Power Nation."

Walls set up to keep people out of a construction area around the gargantuan Ryugyong Hotel were pulled down as the North marked the anniversary of the Korean War armistice. Revealed were two broad new walkways leading to the building and the big red propaganda sign declaring that North Korea is a leading rocket power.

That, of course, is Kim's other pet project.

The day after the anniversary, North Korea test-launched its second ICBM, which experts believe demonstrated that the North's weapons can now theoretically reach most of the United States.

For more than a week leading up to the anniversary, a major holiday in North Korea, "soldier-builders" at the site in central Pyongyang were clearly visible behind the walls, along with heavy equipment for digging and brightly colored



propaganda billboards that are a staple of North Korean construction sites, intended to boost morale.

Rumors, almost always unfounded, of plans to once and for all finish the hotel project are something of a parlor game among Pyongyang watchers. And it remains to be seen if the current work on the Ryugyong is intended to be a step toward actually finishing the long-stalled project or, more likely, an effort to make better use of the land around it.

But it's not surprising that work to do something with the idle landmark would begin. Pyongyang has been undergoing massive redevelopment since Kim assumed power when his father died in late 2011.

At Kim's orders, several major high-rise

areas have been completed, including one with a 70-story residence and dozens of other tall buildings in the capital's "Ryomyong," or "dawn," district in April. Pyongyang also has a new international airport, a massive sci-tech complex with a main building shaped like a giant atom, and many other recreational and educational facilities.

How Kim can afford to pay for the apparent construction boom and his significantly accelerated testing of multi-million-dollar missiles is a mystery, but has led many sanctions advocates to point the finger at China, by far North Korea's biggest trading partner, for not doing enough to turn the economic screws on its neighbor.

From a distance, the glassy, greenish-

PET PROJECT. The sky is overcast at the end of a workday on July 17, 2017, in Pyongyang, North Korea, where the 105-story pyramid-shaped Ryugyong Hotel is seen in this photograph towering over residential apartments. The hotel has been under construction since 1987 and was intended to be a landmark and a symbol of progress and prosperity, but the economic difficulties the country went through forced the project into repeated delays. Nearly 30 years later, it has become a major Pyongyang landmark, but has never been used as a hotel as it was intended. (AP Photo/Wong Maye-E)

blue Ryugyong looks like it's ready for business. But it is believed to be far from complete inside and possibly even structurally unsound.

Work on the building started in 1987 while Kim's grandfather, Kim Il Sung, North Korea's founder and "eternal president," was still alive. It was supposed to open in 1989 and would have been the world's tallest hotel — surpassing another in Singapore that was built by a South Korean company.

But a severe economic crash and famines in the 1990s left North Korea in no position to pump funds into the hotel's construction, and it stayed little more than an embarrassing concrete shell for well over a decade before Egypt's Orascom Group — which was also key in establishing the North's cellphone system — helped pay for work to complete the building's shiny exterior in 2011.

Questions remain about whether it is structurally sound enough to ever operate as a hotel or office building.

Officials have offered no information regarding their plans for its future.

Eric Talmadge is The AP's Pyongyang bureau chief.

70-year-old YouTube hit redefining beauty in South Korea

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and Instagram.

Since then, everything has "flipped like a pancake," Park quips.

"I learned then that my grandmother was just like us. She likes to travel, eat tasty food, and take pretty photos," said Kim, who films and edits the videos.

"I'm her fan, too. She is such a cool person."

Her fans love Park's unfiltered comments in her local dialect, such as a remark about Korean soap operas — "those things get pregnant days and nights."

Park's unabashed willingness to share her story and emotions, and her lack of shame over her poor education, appeal to young South Koreans.

"The reason she is so popular is that she talks candidly without pretension about things that women feel uncomfortable about," said Lee Taek Gwang, a professor of culture studies at Kyunghee University. "She talks about topics that we don't dare to talk about, especially on women's issues."

About cosmetic companies' promises to make women younger and prettier, Park scoffs, "You just have to be born again."

Offering make-up tips to help people



look a decade younger, she warns teenage viewers, "You guys shouldn't do this or you'll look like infants."

On YouTube and Instagram, Park and her granddaughter document adventures such as kayaking on the Han River in Seoul and doing a magazine shoot. The duo recently went to Japan's Tottori prefecture.

Park, whose father refused to send her to school because she was a girl, is having the time of her life.

As a teenager, she cut firewood in the

mountains, walking hours to haul it home. A neighbor gave her brief lessons in reading and writing. She does not know how to spell most words.

"My mom and dad didn't teach me even though we were not poor because they wanted to put me to work," she said. "As I do YouTube now, I feel sorry that I haven't been educated."

Still, nothing deters Park from writing, even if her Instagram posts are almost illegible and need "interpretation," she laughs.

ENGAGING ELDER. South Korea's YouTube star, Park Makrye, 70, right, and her granddaughter, Kim Yura, 27, left, give a demonstration of make-up tutorials for Park's YouTube channel during an interview at her home in Yongin, South Korea. Her fans love Park's unfiltered comments in her local dialect, such as a remark about Korean soap operas — "those things get pregnant days and nights." (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)

Her fans have dubbed her unique way of expressing herself, with no spaces between words and respellings like "shampangyi" for champagne, as the "Makrye font." They compete to guess what they mean.

Even though Park's family was relatively well off, she was left on her own when her husband ran up debts and abandoned her and their three young children. She woke up every morning at 4:00 to run a restaurant, returning after 9:00 at night. She repaid the debts and raised the kids on her own at a time when many single mothers were forced to put their babies up for adoption and received little to no government assistance.

All three children finished high school, and Kim, her granddaughter, was the first in the family to attend college.

Asked how long she would run her diner, Park replied in a second.

"Until I die."

China donates 100 busses for use in Cambodia's capital

By Sopheng Cheang
The Associated Press

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia — China turned over to Cambodia 100 busses to be used to expand public transportation in its capital, Phnom Penh.

The donation of the vehicles comes three years after municipal bus transportation was reintroduced in the capital. Currently, the city of roughly 2.5 million people has about 1.5 million motorbikes and more than 30,000 cars clogging its roads.

The value of the new busses was not announced. Labels on the busses indicated they came from China's Zhengzhou Yutong Bus Co., one of the world's leading bus producers.

China is Cambodia's most important political and economic ally. It has provided millions of dollars in aid and investment over the past decade, agreed to write off debts, and granted Cambodia tariff-free status for hundreds of



items. Cambodia in turn generally supports China's positions on international political issues.

Phnom Penh mayor Khuong Sreng, said at the handover ceremony that the donation reflected the close relations between the two countries and would help

EASING CONGESTION. A Chinese man stands in front of the first line of busses donated by China to Cambodia during a handover ceremony in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Cambodia's key ally, China, provided 100 busses to impoverished Cambodia to help relieve traffic jams in the capital. (AP Photo/Heng Sinith)

reduce traffic jams and air pollution in the capital, as well as ease the burden of transport costs for the poor.

He said the donation reflects the strong relationship and good cooperation of the two countries, and also helps Phnom Penh to reduce the traffic jams as well as air pollution and the poverty of the people.

In 2014, public bus service was reintroduced in Phnom Penh in an effort to ease traffic congestion. An initial effort at such service was tried in 2001, but was cancelled after two months due to a lack of interest from the largely motorbike-riding public. Motorbike taxis are a popular form of transport, as they are in many Southeast Asian nations.