North Korean Leader Kim Jong Il Is Dead

By EVAN RAMSTAD

SEOUL—Kim Jong Il, the dictator who used fear and isolation to maintain power in North Korea and his nuclear weapons to menace his neighbors and threaten the U.S., has died, North Korean state television reported early Monday.

North Korea's transition of power will be closely watched by the world as the country prepares for leadership under Kim Jong Eun. The WSJ's Deborah Kan and Seoul reporter Evan Ramstad discuss what this could mean for stability in the secretive nation.

His death opens a new and potentially dangerous period of transition and instability for North Korea and northeast Asia. Mr. Kim in September 2010 tapped the youngest of his three sons, Kim Jong Eun, to succeed him, and North Korean state television on Monday said the younger Mr. Kim will lead the country.

Mr. Kim, who was 69 or 70 years old, according to varying accounts, died during a train ride on Saturday, a weeping television announcer said. He was believed to have been in ill health since suffering a stroke in 2008, and North Korean media said he experienced an “advanced acute myocardial infarction,” or heart attack.

South Korean shares tumbled along with other Asian markets in early trading Monday on concerns about potential instability in the region. South Korea’s Kospi Composite down 3.1% in late-morning trading after initially dropping 4.4%. South Korea’s currency, the won, fell sharply against the dollar.
White House Press Secretary Jay Carney said late Sunday that the administration is "closely monitoring" reports of Mr. Kim's death, that President Barack Obama had been notified and that U.S. officials are in close touch with South Korea and Japan.

"We remain committed to stability on the Korean peninsula, and to the freedom and security of our allies," Mr. Carney said.

South Korea put its military on "high alert" and President Lee Myung-bak convened a meeting of the national security council after the news of Mr. Kim's death, the Associated Press reported.

In Tokyo, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda called an emergency meeting of his National Security group to assess the situation. Japan has been among the countries most worried about North Korea's military ambitions and nuclear tests.

"I've issued instructions (to the defense ministry) to do everything to establish an alert, monitoring stance," Defense Minister Yasuo Ichikawa said on the way into the session on Monday.

Meanwhile, roughly 20 minutes before its daily noon newscast, state broadcaster China Central Television broke in with a special report on Mr. Kim's death. It was a three-minute bare-bones account that echoed the facts from North Korea's official media, plus a chronology of the major events of his life, intercut with stock footage. Several minutes later, it aired the program again.

The state-run Xinhua news agency offered a similar just-the-facts report.

Mr. Kim took power after the death in July 1994 of his father, Kim Il Sung, who founded North Korea in 1948. The country, a declining communist industrial power when he took control, fell into abject poverty under his rule. However, Mr. Kim continued to command attention and relevance in the world by building nuclear weapons and selling other arms.

He staked his legitimacy on his father's 46-year rule. Kim Jong Il never called himself president of North Korea. Instead, he bestowed on his father after death the title of "eternal president," while he took lesser titles such as chairman of national defense and general secretary of the main political party.

Mr. Kim suffered a stroke-like illness in August 2008 and was incapacitated for two months, forcing him to begin to groom a successor.

In 2009, reports surfaced that Mr. Kim had chosen Kim Jong Eun to carry on the family's regime. Those reports were confirmed in September 2010, when Mr. Kim appointed his son, who is believed to be 27 or 28 years old, a four-star general in the North Korean military and to high-level posts in the ruling political party.

In October 2010, his first public image was released by North Korean state media, showing a striking resemblance to his father and grandfather, Kim Il Sung, the North Korean founder.

Since the public appointment, Kim Jong Eun has frequently been seen following his ailing father on "on-spot" inspections.

"We must fight with greater resolve to overcome today's crisis, behind comrade Kim Jung Eun's leadership, for another great victory for the Juche revolution," an announcer on North Korean state television said in announcing the elder Mr. Kim's death. Juche is North Korea's state ideology, which emphasizes independence and self-determination.

Although a succession plan has been laid out, conditions aren't as favorable as they were in 1994 for continuing the family's control. North Korea is much poorer and less stable now. A famine from 1995 to 1997 killed two million to three million
North Koreans, aid agencies estimate, and sowed distrust in the government. North Koreans have learned more about the outside world in recent years, thanks to increasing use of cellphones and availability of DVDs.

The potential for instability in North Korea poses difficulties for the rest of the world because the country in recent years made significant progress in the development of nuclear weapons. It conducted tests of nuclear explosives in 2006 and 2009 and is believed to possess a small number of nuclear bombs, though none that can be transported by missiles.

For its neighbors South Korea and China, Mr. Kim’s death brings an additional risk: the prospect for a greater outflow of North Koreans into their countries if instability occurs.

When Mr. Kim came to power in 1994, North Korea was still trying to recover from the collapse of its economic sponsor, the Soviet Union. Famine overtook the country, but Mr. Kim relied on his father’s formula for controlling North Korea’s roughly 24 million people.

He limited their access to information, ability to travel and earn wealth. And he maintained a system of gulag-like prison camps, massive in scale and horrific in condition, to instill fear.

China eventually took over as North Korea’s main benefactor. Prodded by Beijing, Mr. Kim experimented with economic liberalization in 2002 by allowing some markets to form. But by 2008, Mr. Kim grew fearful that economic freedoms were eroding the power of his regime. He ordered crackdowns that included a confiscation of private savings in late 2009.

Mr. Kim also resisted efforts by China, the U.S. and other countries to persuade him to give up the nuclear-weapons research that his father started in the 1970s. The research climaxed in October 2006 when North Korea first tested a half-megaton nuclear device. It tested a more powerful nuclear explosive in May 2009, leading to stiff sanctions by the United Nations Security Council that further damaged the economy.

In 2010, North Korea revealed progress in turning enriched uranium into a source of fuel for nuclear weapons, further aggravating other countries.

Over the past year, Mr. Kim repeatedly reached out to China for more economic and security assistance and lashed out at the three countries long considered to be North Korea’s main enemies: South Korea, Japan and the U.S.

---Jaeyeon Woo in Seoul and Takashi Nakamichi in Tokyo contributed to this article.

Write to Evan Ramstad at evan.ramstad@wsj.com
North Korean Leader Kim Jong II Is Dead - WSJ.com

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB1000142405274870386420457632904388797060.html

This undated picture released by North Korea’s official Korean Central News Agency on Nov. 2 via the Tokyo-based Korean News Service shows Kim Jong II inspecting Korean People’s Army unit 789.