

Kim Jong Un's motorcade heads out on Day 2 of China trip

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Security officials stand guard while a Mercedes limousine in a motorcade believed to be carrying North Korean leader Kim Jong Un passes along a street in Beijing, Wednesday, Jan. 9, 2019. (AP Photo: Mark Schiefelbein)

Beijing: The motorcade of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un headed out Wednesday morning to an unannounced destination on the second full day of a visit to China that has been shrouded in secrecy but is seen as part of preparations for a possible second summit with President Donald Trump.

Kim could not be seen but the limousine he uses was observed zipping east down a main thoroughfare in Beijing and then returning about an hour later.

South Korea's Yonhap News Agency said Kim visited a technology development zone and spent around 20-30 minutes touring a factory run by famed traditional Chinese medicine maker Tong Ren Tang.

His trip to China, the fourth in the past 10 months, is believed to be an effort to coordinate with his only major ally ahead of a possible second meeting with Trump. It comes after US and North Korean officials are thought to have met in Vietnam to discuss the site of the summit.

North Korean and Chinese state media announced his visit shortly in advance of his arrival, in a break with standard protocol dictating such trips are only confirmed after they happen. However, neither side has provided details of what he has done since arriving aboard his personal armored train on Tuesday morning.

Yonhap said Kim met with President Xi Jinping for about an hour on Tuesday and later attended a dinner at the Great Hall of the People in central Beijing hosted by Xi and his wife, Peng Liyuan. Kim was accompanied by his wife, Ri Sol Ju, the agency said.

At Tuesday's daily Foreign Ministry briefing, spokesman Lu Kang gave said details of Kim's visit would be released in due course. He said Beijing remains supportive of efforts to end tensions over US demands for a halt to North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.

"We always believe that, as key parties to the Korean Peninsula issue, it's important for the two sides to maintain contact and we always support their dialogue to achieve positive outcomes," Lu said.

Tuesday was also Kim's birthday. His visit is also seen as part of an effort to win Chinese support for a reduction of U.N. sanctions imposed over his nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs that have severely impacted his country's already ailing economy.

While North Korea hasn't conducted any launches or detonations in more than a year, it's displayed no real intention of abandoning the programs that are seen as guaranteeing the hard-line communist regime's survival.

Kim's visit also comes after he expressed frustration in his annual New Year's address over the lack of progress in negotiations with Washington since the Singapore summit with Trump in June, saying that if things don't

improve _ meaning that if sanctions relief and security guarantees arenâ€™t in the offing _Pyongyang might have to find a new way forward.

While Trump says he considers Xi key to enticing Kim into taking concrete steps toward denuclearization, the presidentâ€™s own relationship with his Chinese counterpart has frayed over the US-China trade war.

Officially, at least, China says it considers the tariff battle and North Koreaâ€™s weapons programs to be entirely separate.

- AP