

North Korea absent at Moon funeral: church official

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GAPYEONG, South Korea (AFP) - North Korea has decided not to send a delegation to South Korea to attend the funeral of Unification Church founder Sun Myung Moon, a senior church official said Thursday.

"When I was in the North, I was told by the officials there that there would be no funeral delegation to visit the South," said Park Sang-Kwon, president of an automaking joint venture the church established in North Korea in 1999.

Speaking to reporters at the church's headquarters at Gapyeong, east of Seoul, Park said officials in Pyongyang had cited lingering anger over a recent US-South Korea military exercise.

"They said the North still had hard feelings... and it may be inappropriate for them to send the delegation after criticising the South so much in recent weeks," he said.

Pyongyang had denounced the August 20-31 computer-assisted simulation exercise, named Ulchi Freedom Guardian, as a provocative rehearsal for war.

Moon, a self-styled messiah who gathered a global following behind his church that spawned a multi-billion-dollar business empire, died on Monday at the age of 92.

His funeral will be held at Gapyeong on September 15.

Speculation that the North could send a rare delegation to the South had been fuelled by a public message of condolence on Moon's death issued Wednesday by North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un.

Although a staunch anti-communist, Moon began building a relationship with North Korea in the 1990s. In 1991 he visited Pyongyang and met with then leader Kim Il-Sung for talks that touched on reunification of the divided peninsula.

As well as anger over the military drill, Park said Pyongyang was also occupied with the fallout from a typhoon.

"It appears to me that the timing (for sending a delegation) wasn't right given that the recent typhoon has dealt huge damage to the country and its people.

"I was told that officially more than 50 people had been killed, with another group of 50 people still missing, and that the real casualty figure is far higher than that," he said.