

Unification Church founder still critical

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SEOUL (AFP) - The founder of the controversial Unification Church remains critically ill three days after he was admitted to a South Korean hospital with complications from pneumonia, his spokesman said Friday.

Sun Myung Moon, 92, was still unconscious in the intensive care unit of Seoul's St Mary's Hospital after being admitted Tuesday.

"The doctor said swellings have reduced so that's a good sign, but there hasn't been a dramatic difference yet," spokesman Ahn Ho-Yeol told AFP, adding he did not know the cause of the swelling.

Close family members, including Moon's youngest son and successor as church leader Hyung Jin Moon, are all keeping a vigil outside the unit, said Ahn.

A few devout followers of the church visited the hospital to pray for the founder. They were told to pray at their churches to avoid inconvenience at the facility, Ahn said.

The church's website has posted a message urging the faithful to hold special prayers from Thursday until September 24 for the recovery of "the true father", including a three-day fast beginning Friday.

"With their prayers and devotion, we believe the founder's health will improve," said Ahn.

The Unification Church, set up by Moon in Seoul in 1954, is one of the world's most controversial religious organisations. Its devotees are often dubbed "Moonies" after the founder.

It is widely known for conducting mass weddings among followers involving thousands of couples. It says it evangelises in some 200 countries and according to another spokesman has some three million followers worldwide.

The church's vast business empire includes The Washington Times newspaper and the New Yorker Hotel in Manhattan.

The church also has business interests in North Korea, where Moon was born. He visited the country in 1991 to meet then-president Kim Il-Sung.