

Skepticism as NKorea shows home-grown smartphone

August 16 2013, by Youkyung Lee



This undated photo released on Aug.10, 2013, by the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) and distributed Aug. 11, 2013 by the Korea News Service, shows North Korean Arirang smartphone. North Korea's announcement that it is mass producing a home-grown smartphone has been met with skepticism in the tech industry. (AP Photo/KCNA via KNS)

North Korea's announcement that it is mass producing a home-grown

smartphone has been met with skepticism in the tech industry in South Korea and abroad.

The North's state media last week showed leader Kim Jong Un inspecting "Arirang" phones at a Pyongyang factory. The Korean Central News Agency's Aug. 10 report said the factory began manufacturing smartphones "a few days ago" and they were already in high demand.

North Korea has promoted the development of science and technology as a means of improving its moribund economy. It says it developed a tablet computer last year and has its own Red Star operating system.

But access to the global Internet is severely restricted and mobile phones used on the state-authorized network cannot make overseas calls. The North's Intranet gives access to government sanctioned sites and works with its own browsers, search engine and email programs, according to South Korea's Unification Ministry.

Factory workers in photos released by the state news agency are inspecting and testing finished phones but no manufacturing is shown, said tech expert Martyn Williams on the northkoreatech.org blog.

"Despite KCNA's reporting that the handsets are made at the factory, they are probably made to order by a Chinese manufacturer," said Williams, who writes for PC World and other publications.



In this July 27, 2013 file photo, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un leans over a balcony and waves to Korean War veterans cheering below at the end of a mass military parade on Kim Il Sung Square in Pyongyang to mark the 60th anniversary of the Korean War armistice. North Korea's announcement that it is mass producing a home-grown smartphone has been met with skepticism in the tech industry. The North's state media early August, 2013, showed leader Kim Jong Un inspecting "Arirang" phones at a Pyongyang factory. (AP Photo/David Guttenfelder, File)

South Korean computer experts say North Korea is strong enough in software technology to have launched cyberattacks that disrupted banking and government websites in the South but it lags in hardware capabilities behind South Korea.

The 1950-53 Korean War ended in a truce and the Korean Peninsula remains technically at war. Since then, the South has prospered and produced giant corporations such as Samsung Electronics Co., which is

the world's biggest maker of smartphones, computer memory chips and displays. The North's economy has languished under socialist central planning though the capital Pyongyang is an oasis of relative affluence.

North Korea has shown a persistent interest in computer technology since the early 1980s so it is conceivable that a country, which has launched long-range missiles and tested nuclear weapons has also developed a smartphone, said Kang Ho Jye, a research fellow at Ewha Institute of Unification Studies.

But it might face difficulties in securing the necessary components for mass production.

"If people believe it is impossible for North Korea to make smartphones because it lags in technology, that's not right," he said "If people believe it is impossible because they are wondering how North Korea supplied components, then that makes sense."

North Korea said the Arirang phone features "Korean style" apps and can be used for "communications and learning." It sports a high-resolution camera and a touch screen.

Kim Mun-gu, a manager at a South Korean mobile phone company, said the Arirang smartphone appears to be using the Android operating system.

He said the photos aren't convincing as proof the North is manufacturing the phones.

"It looks too clean for a factory. If it's a factory, there should be components. There seemed to be machines but I can't tell whether they are operating or not," he said.

The "May 11 Factory" where North Korea says it is producing smartphones has been promoted as the country's hub for research, development and production of high-tech electronics. Kim's previous visit to the factory was in July 2011 to see what state media called an automated production system for LCD televisions—an announcement also doubted abroad.

Kim, who became leader after his father Kim Jong Il's death in late 2011, said making phones based on home-grown technology "can instill national pride and self-respect into the Korean people," according to KCNA.

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