



North Korea: Communism at Its Worst

For once, a United Nations body has done the world a service in shining a bright light on the murderous regime in Communist North Korea, which systematically enslaves, starves and executes its own people. In a scathing report released in February, the UN Human Rights Council's Commission of Inquiry details ongoing gruesome violations of human rights by the North Korean government under its sociopathic leader Kim Jong-Un, heir to a regime established by his grandfather and father. The atrocities recounted in the report, as well as in earlier eyewitness accounts and memoirs, should cause world outrage. For Americans who think that we can live in our own bubble, consider this simple question: If the North Korean Communist government treats its own people with such cruelty, what is a nuclear North Korea capable of when it comes to their enemies—South Korea, Japan and the United States?

The UN special report details how the North Korean regime imprisons hundreds of thousands of its citizens in an extensive gulag system. There prisoners—and their children—become slaves forced to work in factories, mines and farms. Women in these camps are raped regularly by guards, and then executed if they become pregnant. Children and adults in these camps are routinely beaten, tortured and starved. Outside of this gulag, regular North Koreans are not much better off. They face thought control, arrest, starvation and mass execution.

In late 2013, as many as 80 people were executed in public displays across North Korea for having been caught with Bibles or Western videos of South Korean or American daytime television serials. These executions were held in seven cities across North Korea, including the port city of Wonsan where 10,000 people, including children, were herded into a stadium to watch victims shot. Relatives of those executed were arrested and sent to camps. These atrocities were carried out in order to preserve a system of totalitarian control over its citizens.

This mind control makes George Orwell's Big Brother in 1984 look like a soft libertarian.

The United Nations special report sends a clear message that North Korean leaders should be brought to justice through Security Council action. Julie de Rivero, director of the Geneva-based Human Rights Watch, told the Associated Press that the report is a "game changer." Whether the United Nations will do anything about this report or act to bring North Korean leaders to justice is doubtful. But the report verifies decades of crimes against humanity through dozens of interviews with people who have escaped North Korea and reports from eyewitnesses, many of which had previously been disclosed in personal stories and news reports.

Although proclaimed as a workers' paradise by its rulers, North Korea is a highly stratified class society ruled by a privileged neo-feudal class of party officials. In 1957, Kim Il Sung ordered the entire population to be broken into three broad classes, with 51 subgroups. Family background determined this class ranking. High-ranking officials, party members and senior military officers compose the core ruling class with access to jobs and food. The ruling class lives in or around Pyongyang, the country's capital, where about 100,000 to 200,000 people live. Involved in counterfeiting, cyberterrorism, drug trafficking and black-market trading of humanitarian food shipments, the ruling elite is corrupt even by Communist standards.

The Tragedy of Shin Dong-hyuk

The story of Shin Dong-hyuk, who was born and raised in a slave labor camp before his escape at the age of 20, graphically depicts the grim life faced daily by untold thousands of prisoners in North Korea. Shin was born in Camp 14, one of the most notorious of dozens of slave labor camps found in North Korea today. His life as a slave laborer is recounted in *Escape from Camp 14*, written by Blaine Hardin, a long-time

Washington Post reporter covering North Korea. Shin's experience conveys the horror of these camps, but is also a tale of heroic escape, personal recovery, and salvation through Christ.

One of Shin's first memories of his life was as a four-year-old brought with several thousand other prisoners to witness an execution of a fellow prisoner. Before the execution by a firing squad, a guard told the crowd that the prisoner about to be shot had rejected "redemption" through hard labor that had been generously offered by the North Korean government. The execution was intended to be an example for other prisoners. To prevent the prisoner from cursing those about to take his life, guards stuffed pebbles into his mouth, and then shot him. Over the course of the next ten years, Shin witnessed many such executions, including those of his own mother and brother, whom he had reported to the guards for planning an escape. His only feelings of outrage at the time of these executions were directed at the prisoners themselves who disobeyed camp rules.

Born in a prison camp, Shen grew up thinking that starvation was the way most people died. Constantly hungry, he learned to steal from other prisoners, including his mother, and to eat insects and rats. His education was rudimentary, enough just to work in the camp's uniform factory, mine or farm. Most of his education involved learning the ten rules of the camp, beginning with Rule 1, "Do not try to escape. Anyone caught escaping will be shot immediately." Rule 9 captures the mentality of camp life: "Prisoners must genuinely repent their errors. Anyone who does not acknowledge his sins and instead denies them or carries a deviant opinion of them will be shot immediately." This was the catechism that Shen memorized and internalized as a child. He was a child interned because his parents had been sent to labor camps for infractions against the state. He never fully learned what crimes they had committed. He did not ask.

As a boy, he witnessed frequent deaths from executions and starvation. He saw one of his classmates beaten to death by a teacher using a chalk pointer. His mother beat him for stealing food. He did not know his father, who was allowed to sleep with his mother only five nights a year. Shin learned to live by snitching to the guards on his classmates and other inmates. Love and mercy had no meaning to him. He had never heard of God.

Only later, after his escape, did Shin learn that an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 prisoners live in labor

camps across Northern Korea. One of the biggest camps is 30 miles long and 25 miles wide, an area larger than the city of Los Angeles. Electrified barbed wire fences encircle these camps. Two of the camps serve as reeducation zones where a few of the more fortunate detainees receive remedial instruction in the teachings of Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung, the grandfather of the current dictator Kim Jong Un. Growing up, Shin never heard of the ruling dynasty. Shin's Camp 14 is a complete-control district. It is notorious because of its brutal working conditions and the putative seriousness of crimes committed by its inmates, many of whom are purged ruling party officials.

Established in 1959 in central North Korea, Camp 14 holds an estimated 50,000 prisoners. It has farms, mines and factories located in steep valleys. Prisoners in Camp 14 tend crops, mine coal, sew military uniforms or make cement, working 12- to 15-hour shifts. They subsist on a starvation diet of corn, cabbage and salt. They lose teeth, their gums turn black, their bones weaken, and most die of starvation by the age of 50. Prisoners wear filthy rags, living without soap, socks, gloves, underclothes or toilet paper. Shin lived without a bed, chairs, tables, running water, bath or shower.

Shin's dreary life changed dramatically as a teenager, for the worse, when he reported to camp authorities that he overheard his mother and brother, whom he hardly knew, planning an escape. The next day he was seized by guards. Over the course of nine months, he was gruesomely tortured, including having his body hung over a charcoal fire. Finally one day Shin was escorted from his cell, and brought with his father, who had also been tortured, to witness his mother and brother shot before a firing squad. Only later was it revealed that the guard who reported the escape had not told his superiors that his informant was Shin. In witnessing the execution of his mother, Shin showed no emotion. Instead he blamed his torture on his mother and brother for having broken the rules.

Shin's Escape and Redemption

Shin returned to camp work. His job was carrying heavy sewing machines at the camp's textile factory to be repaired. When he accidentally dropped one machine, the camp commandant ordered Shin's middle finger chopped off. Shin nonetheless remained a loyal worker, reporting on fellow workers. He was assigned to become close to a new prisoner, Park, who, it turned out, was a disgraced high party official. As they got to know one another, Park told a fascinated Shin about

how well high party officials lived in Pyongyang and that many North Koreans had escaped to China. They began plotting their escape, which came one day when they were assigned to chop firewood in the mountains. On that day, they made a wild dash across an electrified fence. Park was electrocuted immediately, allowing Shin to run across his body. Shin fled to the mountains, hid in a nearby village, stole food and learned to survive. He did not know where he was, but he had been told that he could successfully escape if he made it to China. Two years and hundreds of miles later, Shin, through sheer cunning, was able to bribe his way into China. Later, he entered South Korea as a political refugee.

Shin was living alone, doing menial labor jobs in Seoul, when he was contacted by *Washington Post* reporter Blaine Hardin. After Shin's story was aired as a segment on *60 Minutes*, he was invited to come to America. Eventually he was taken in by a Christian couple in Columbus, Ohio, where Shin lives today. The adjustment outside the camp has been difficult for Shin. He has learned how to laugh and cry like other humans. He has discovered God and has become a Christian.

Other survivor accounts of life in North Korea have emerged. Before Shin's story was told, Kang Chol-hwan's story was written by French journalist Pierre Rigoulot in 1987. Later translated into English as *The Aquarium of Pyongyang*, the book found its way to the desk of George W. Bush, who declared it "one of the most influential books I read during my presidency." The North Korean government refuses to allow outside visitors to the camps in order to verify accounts coming from these survivors. As Kim Jong Il said, "We must envelop our environment in a dense fog to prevent our enemies learning anything about us." Like Stalin's gulag system before, these camps are denied by authorities. It's an old trick: deny the existence of the camps as enemy propaganda, and then, when confronted with evidence of their existence, reply that this is old news.

A Nation of Haves and Have-Nots

Camp prisoners suffer the most, but daily life in North Korea outside the camps is one of starvation, privation and mind control. North Korea cannot feed its own 23 million people, who need about 5 million tons of rice and grain annually to subsist. North Korea falls about one million tons short each year, having to rely on China and humanitarian relief efforts.

Food aid from United States, Japan, South Korea and the United Nations mitigated the worst aspects of the famine

that engulfed North Korea in the 1990s. Estimates of death caused by the famine range from 600,000 to 2.5 million. Life in North Korea continues to be grim. The United States remains the largest relief donor to North Korea. Shin and other witnesses recount seeing donated rice, wheat, corn, vegetable oil, clothing, blankets, bicycles and other aid items on sale in private markets marked "A Gift from the American People." North Korean bureaucrats, party officials and army officers steal about 30 percent of such aid to sell to private traders, usually for dollars and euros. Private markets, allowed by a corrupt bureaucracy, help stave off a complete catastrophe, while providing a source of hard currency to a few traders and party officials.

These few markets have not eliminated hunger or large-scale malnutrition. United Nations surveys conducted by the World Food Program, as a requirement for relief, have shown that two-thirds of North Korean children are stunted or underweight—double the figures for Angola. In more remote provinces in North Korea, hunger, stunting, and wasting diseases are two to three times more prevalent than in Pyongyang, where the elite live. In 2002, the North Korean government began to allow private farming on small plots of land, but food from these plots continues to be raided by the military.

As one South Korean expert on North Korean agriculture noted, "At harvest time, soldiers bring in their own trucks to the farms and just take." On large state cooperative farms, the military deploys permanent troops at harvest time to make sure the army gets its share. An estimated one-quarter of the total grain harvest is seized by the army. This permanent deployment of soldiers on farms has spawned widespread corruption. Farm managers pay off soldiers, who turn a blind eye to food later sold in private markets. Shootouts from rival soldier bands have been reported by defectors and aid groups.

While average North Koreans suffer, Kim Jong Un, who came to power in 2011 following his father's death, lives in opulence. He rules over the world's largest prison as a feudal overlord. He owns seven huge mansions and yachts. He has consolidated his power further by purging party and military ranks, including his uncle and the uncle's immediate family. Most recently, South Korean media reported that a loyalist to his purged uncle was executed by being burned to death with a flamethrower. Other members of the Ministry of Public Security, once headed by Kim Jong Un, have been arrested

and executed. The Kim dynasty has been built on fear, violence and propaganda, but Kim Jong Un has injected new barbarism into the regime.

Reports of Kim's new edict that all North Korean males must wear hairstyles like his own can be dismissed in the West as the antics of a madman. Less easy to dismiss, though, are his test firings of missiles across the straits to Japan. Japanese authorities have warned that they will counter new tests, and Secretary of State John Kerry has assured our Japanese ally that America will stand with it. Japanese government officials cannot be certain of America's resolve after witnessing our hollow threats in Syria and Ukraine. Nor have our allies been reassured by the previous failures of the administrations of William Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama to convince North Korea to stop testing nuclear weapons and selling nuclear technology to Iran.

Kim might be a caricature of a Communist dictator, but there is a method to his madness. His brutal repression and subjugation of his people are designed with one purpose in mind: To maintain power. His boisterous threats to attack South Korea, bomb Japan or nuke the United States might one day be designed only to pump up his loyalists at home. But the real question is whether Kim might one day decide that to maintain power he needs a real war. This might not be likely, but his assistance to a nuclearized Iran, a sworn enemy of the West, is an immediate threat. North Korea needs to be taken seriously, not just as matter of Christian conscience for how it treats its people, but as a threat to world peace.

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—*Joseph Cardinal Mindszenty*

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20 copies	\$7.00	500 copies	\$110.00
50 copies	\$12.00	1000 copies	\$210.00

The Mindszenty Report is published monthly by
Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation
7800 Bonhomme Ave.
St. Louis, MO 63105
Phone 314-727-6279 Fax 314-727-5897

Subscription rate: \$20.00/year, \$36.00/two years.
Outside the U.S.A. \$28.00

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