



Why North Koreans Need Us

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Op-Ed

The New York Sun

May 5, 2008

For a country renowned for its reclusive nature, North Korea has a way of staying in the news. Recently, headlines were dominated by news of Pyongyang's assistance to Syria in building a nuclear facility that the Israelis have now destroyed. And last week began with news that a North Korean soldier had stepped across the heavily militarized zone separating North and South Korea and requested asylum.

A recent State Department report illustrates how North Korea essentially has been turned into a ruthless prison. It documented systematic killing, detention, and torture of those whom the regime dislikes. It described a vast network of political concentration camps, which hold an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 people. And it spotlighted a society where literally every one of the fundamental freedoms we take for granted — political speech, travel, religion, and assembly — is prohibited.

Given the threat to America and our allies posed by North Korea's nuclear ambitions, why is it that Congress and President Bush have continued to make human rights in North Korea a focus? The answer is that helping North Koreans achieve freedom is not only a policy consistent with our moral values as a nation — it is also a pragmatic security necessity. As Mr. Bush stated in his second inaugural address, "We are led, by events and common sense, to one conclusion: The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands."

Increasing respect for inalienable individual rights historically has been the avenue to fruitful alignments abroad. This was demonstrated after World War II and the Cold War, when liberation brought us powerful new allies, such as Germany, Japan, and the free nations of central Europe. The promotion of human rights proved to be an important end in and of itself. But it was also a critical means to a broader end: America's effort to provide for our security and that of our allies.

Any long-term effort to alleviate threats to peace in northeast Asia will have to induce Pyongyang to begin human rights and other reforms. As Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov said in his 1975 Nobel lecture, "Peace, progress, human rights — these three goals are insolubly linked to one another: it is impossible to achieve one of these goals if the other two are ignored." This linkage is key, and ought to form the basis of any future diplomatic path that is made available to Pyongyang by the international community.

At the same time, we should step up efforts underway to promote human rights and freedom for North Koreans — because North Koreans should be exposed to the differences between their way of life and that of their brethren in South Korea. Over the past three decades, South Korea's gross domestic product per capita has grown ten-fold to nearly \$25,000. The country now has the 12th-largest economy in the world and the 4th-largest in Asia. It is America's 7th largest trading partner. In contrast, the North's economy is in shambles, and persistent malnutrition has made the average North Korean significantly shorter than his South Korean counterpart.

Given the North Korean regime's attempt to totally blackout news and information from the outside world, the fruits of liberty on display in South Korea are not known to Koreans north of the DMZ. That is why the American government has increased its support for independent radio broadcasts into North Korea. Other governments — especially South Korea and Japan — should help by providing access to transmission facilities and also funding. We know North Koreans are trying to listen to the outside world — a recent survey of defectors found that nearly one-half of that group had access to radios capable of receiving "illegal" foreign broadcasts that the Kim regime failed to censor.

The governments of northeast Asia should also do more to help North Korean refugees. Many North Koreans escape to China in search of freedom or just subsistence — only to live underground in China for fear of forced repatriation and the dire consequences it can bring. There may be 100,000 or more refugees in this situation. Today, with the Olympic spotlight shining, China should allow them to be resettled to South Korea — consistent with its obligations under the 1967 Protocol to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. America has accepted a small number of North Korean refugees in recent years, and we should continue to do so — honoring our heritage as a refuge for those fleeing despotism.

Finally, governments that provide North Korea with humanitarian assistance should also insist that it verifiably reach those for whom it is intended. Pyongyang is adept at diverting aid to its military and regime supporters, and donated goods also end up on the black market. South Korea and China provide the most aid to North Korea, and should insist on monitoring its distribution.

The new government in South Korea, led by Lee Myung-bak, has sent good signals about North Korea and human rights and the curtailment of economic largesse for the North. Pyongyang recently expressed its displeasure at this by expelling South Korean government employees from the Kaesong Industrial Complex, a joint economic project between the two countries located inside North Korea. Mr. Lee's willingness to stick to his principles is commendable. We want to work with him in devising an approach toward North Korea that recognizes the importance of the regime's conduct toward its citizens.

To be realistic about peace and security in northeast Asia, we must understand the links between the way a government treats its citizens and the way it treats its neighbors. Pluralistic societies benefit their citizens and also improve international stability. We and our negotiating partners should proceed with this assumption in order to advance human rights and realize an associated improvement in national security.

Released on May 5, 2008

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