

## **Escape from North Korea: The Untold Story**

Of Asia's Underground Railroad, by Melanie Kirkpatrick

Highway from Hell: Humanitarian relief from a totalitarian regime

The Weekly Standard, Book Review, Copyright 2012 The Weekly Standard

By Joseph Loconte

September 17, 2012, Vol. 18, No. 01

In the mid-1990s, a severe famine brought millions of North Koreans to the brink of starvation. Floods precipitated the crisis, but the failed economic policies of Kim Il Sung—the paranoid dictator intent on maintaining a vast military machine and acquiring nuclear weapons—were the real culprit. The result, as the *Economist* described it in 1997, was North Korea's "descent into destitution." The country's state-run health care system essentially collapsed, clean water became scarce, strict food rations were enforced. The U.S. State Department estimated that during 1995-97 between one and two million North Koreans perished because of the famine.

Thus, for the first time since the founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1948, many North Koreans made plans to escape the regime—a crime punishable by imprisonment, torture, or worse. By the late 1990s, tens of thousands fled to China, South Korea, or other destinations. Few could expect to evade the nation's police and security forces, however, without help from the outside. Many were forcibly sent back. Yet the response of the "international community" to their plight was a mix of indifference, paralysis, and bad public policy.

The best hope for North Korean refugees seeking sanctuary came from outside the international community: an informal, multinational network of safe houses and transit routes run by private citizens, working mostly through Christian churches and humanitarian groups.

Here, journalist Melanie Kirkpatrick chronicles the efforts of these modern-day emancipators. Though largely overlooked by policymakers and pundits, they have established a clandestine rescue operation not unlike the underground railroad that brought American slaves to freedom prior to the Civil War. "Sixty years of political oppression have not dulled North Koreans' appetite for freedom," Kirkpatrick writes. "The Christian and humanitarian workers devoted to this cause see their mission as the liberation of North Korea one person at a time."

*Escape from North Korea* reads like a primer for the uninitiated, offering a concise overview of the human-rights situation in North Korea, drawing heavily on interviews with asylum seekers and human-rights advocates. In a well-researched and often poignant work, Kirkpatrick describes what must rank as among the most dangerous human-rights campaigns in the 21st century.

Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, a demilitarized zone stretching 2.5 miles wide and 155 miles long has divided North and South Korea. Stocked with land mines and barbed wire, and patrolled by heavily armed soldiers, the DMZ is virtually impenetrable; it effectively prevents the people of North Korea from fleeing south. Instead, many head north and cross the Tumen and Yalu Rivers to China, with the hope of eventually making their way to South Korea or other friendly locales.

It is a fearsome undertaking. As Kirkpatrick explains, no North Korean survives long in China without assistance, and no North Korean gets out of China without help. As Pyongyang's staunchest ally, Beijing forcibly repatriates asylum seekers—a violation of international law. Once returned, they face indefinite prison terms, the confiscation of their property, or execution. On the eve of the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, for example, North Korea executed 15 people (most of them women) for trying to cross the border into China.

Nevertheless, with help from the underground railroad, North Koreans continue to flee. Once in China, they look for routes out of the country: by train, express bus, car, boat, or on foot. Their next step is to find sanctuary in places such as Vietnam, Burma, Laos, or Thailand. If they reach Bangkok safely, they go to the South Korean embassy. After months of interviews to make sure they aren't spies, they are allowed passports to Seoul. All told, it is a 6,000-mile trek to gain asylum in South Korea. If North Koreans were allowed to leave Pyongyang and go directly to Seoul, they would travel 120 miles.

North Korea's underground railroad can be traced to the work of Tim Peters, an evangelical Christian pastor from Michigan whose missionary experience in the region exposed him to the suffering of North Korean refugees. In 1996, he founded Helping Hands Korea to assist North Koreans hiding in China. Ten years later, a *Time* cover story called him "the public face" of the rescue movement. Based in Seoul, Peters focuses on those who would suffer the most if caught and repatriated: pregnant women who would be forced to have abortions; children suspected of being fathered by Chinese men, who would be killed to

maintain the state's vision of racial purity; people with medical problems who would not survive imprisonment; and, given the militant atheism of the regime, anyone suspected of having become Christian.

Helping a North Korean is a crime in China, punishable by fines, jail time, or deportation. But this fact has not deterred Peters and a growing number of activists from setting up shop. Kirkpatrick tells the story of Long Island businessman Steven Kim, for example, who worked in China and witnessed the fate of North Korean women sold as sex slaves to Chinese men. Before he was arrested, Kim helped about 100 women escape to freedom. After spending four years in a Chinese prison, he launched the nonprofit 318 Partners, named after Article 318 of the Chinese criminal code that convicted him.

These and other humanitarian groups rely on a network of Christians working secretly in China and elsewhere in Asia. Thanks in part to Protestant missionaries from South Korea and the United States, there are now an estimated 70 million Christians in China—about the same number of people who belong to the Communist party. Kirkpatrick describes how Chinese Christian communities provide safe houses for refugees, help them find temporary jobs on the black market, purchase train tickets, guide them to border crossings, and give advice on how to avoid arrest.

"The first survival tip a North Korean learns when he reaches China is: Find a Christian," writes Kirkpatrick. "Christians run almost all of the aid organizations. So, too, much of the informal assistance that refugees receive comes from Christians, especially local Chinese. Christians are the only people who seem to care."

All of this comes as a shock to North Korean refugees, who have been force-fed a diet of atheist, anti-Christian prop-aganda all of their lives. Freedom of religion hasn't existed in North Korea since the Korean War ended in 1953, and most North Koreans have never seen a house of worship, a Bible, or any religious literature. The cult of personality surrounding the nation's dictators, beginning with Kim Il Sung, functions as the state religion. Yet the example of Christians offering help—at great risk to themselves and out of love for God and neighbor—serves as "a powerful recruiting tool" among the refugees.

The great tragedy is that only a tiny fraction of North Korea's 24 million people have been able to escape its vast gulag of violence, oppression, and mind control. A United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights estimates that over 200,000 people (a third of whom are children) are locked away in prison camps where they are subject to beatings, rape, torture, experimentation, and arbitrary execution.

No one knows for certain, but it's estimated that perhaps a million North Koreans have been killed by the regime. A 2007 report by Christian Solidarity Worldwide in London, drawing on extensive eyewitness accounts, found prima facie evidence of crimes against humanity: "The widespread and systematic nature of the attacks means that a large number of perpetrators have incurred criminal responsibility for international crimes committed in North Korea." Even the usually feckless U.N. Human Rights Council managed to pass a resolution earlier this year, without opposition, condemning Pyongyang's human-rights abuses.

Perhaps the most sobering and encouraging lesson of Escape from North Korea is that the failure of political leadership to confront a human-rights disaster need not be the end of the story. When the 1990s famine forced many North Koreans to seek asylum, the international community sent billions of dollars in food aid to Pyongyang. But most of it was diverted to the military and Communist party elite, propping up the ruling family. The South Korean government, committed to a "Sunshine Policy" of engagement, worked hard not to antagonize its militarized neighbor. Japan, anxious about North Korea's nuclear ambitions, pursued a policy of rapprochement. China actively collaborated with North Korean agents to shuttle refugees back to Pyongyang. Bill Clinton, distracted by his sex scandal, made no effort to assist North Koreans seeking sanctuary.

Civil society actors stepped into the breach. The remarkable efforts of these Christian activists—mostly American, South Korean, and Chinese—not only embarrass the international diplomatic community, they invalidate liberalism's cynical narrative about religious belief. Many political and cultural elites view conservative Christianity as the enemy of tolerance, justice, and human rights. Yet Kirkpatrick's refreshingly frank account is a story of Christian zeal in the cause of human freedom: a gospel message of love, hope, sacrifice, and rescue.

The result is a daring missionary effort that is reclaiming the lives of between 2,000 and 3,000 North Koreans every year. Their emancipation may hold the key to their country's future. "Help one man or woman escape, and that person will get word back home about the freedom that awaits on the outside of their prison state," writes Kirkpatrick. "The seeds of the collapse of the Kim family regime are being planted by those who flee."