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## THE PENINSULA

### **COVID Leads to Decline in Information Available about North**

#### **Korea**

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Finding accurate and current information about North Korea has always been difficult, but steps taken by Pyongyang in an effort to deal with the COVID pandemic have made the problem of getting information about the North even more difficult. A key source of first-hand information on the ground has been supplied by refugees who have illegally fled North Korea and resettled in South Korea or elsewhere. In addition, information has come from other individuals who have lived or visited temporarily in North Korea—diplomats, foreign journalists, aid workers, and even tourists. The COVID pandemic has resulted in the imposition of restrictions that have made it much more for these people to be in North Korea. As a result, it is much more difficult to gather information.

#### **The Outflow of North Korean Refugees Has Virtually Stopped**

One of the most important sources of information about conditions inside North Korea has been refugees (“defectors”) who have recently fled the North. The world-wide outbreak of COVID has led to much more restrictive controls along the North Korean-Chinese border, which is where most border crossing has traditionally occurred. Chinese citizens engaged in economic activities with North Koreans have been denied entry into the North, and very strict border controls have prevented North Koreans from leaving the North.

In the past some North Koreans legally entered China to conduct business and then returned to Korea. An even larger number entered China illegally. Some sought to exit China and resettle elsewhere, primarily in South Korea. But a larger number sought

employment in the northeast Chinese border areas where a significant population of Chinese citizens of Korean ethnicity live. China's more robust economy provided greater economic opportunities than North Korea's restrictive state-directed economy.

The first-hand knowledge of life in North Korea based on observations by recent refugees in South Korea and occasionally information gleaned from legal and illegal laborers from North Korea working and living in China has been a significant source of information about conditions in North Korea. This group is not a perfect sample of life in North Korea since most of the individuals who have left the North are from Chinese border areas, and fewer are from Pyongyang and southern parts of North Korea. These individuals are generally lower-level workers, and very few are senior government officials. Despite these limitations, however, information gleaned from these refugees is an important first-hand source of information about living and working conditions in the North.

Over the past two decades, some 35,000 North Koreans have secretly fled the North. The vast majority have chosen to settle in South Korea. In-depth interviews with these new arrivals are a particularly important source of information about current conditions in North Korea. South Korean intelligence officials conduct in-depth conversations with new arrivals, and frequently journalists, both South Korean and journalists from other places, are able to conduct interviews with the new arrivals. The Ministry of Unification permitted me to meet with some of these new arrivals on my visits to Seoul when I was U.S. Special Envoy for North Korea Human Rights Issues. Those conversations were valuable in giving a sense of conditions in the North.

The largest annual number of refugees reaching South Korea was in 2011 when 2,706 settled in the South. That number averaged 1,500 annually for the following 5 years (2012-2016). From 2017 to 2019 it was about 1,100. In 2020, when the COVID pandemic hit, Pyongyang imposed draconian measures to close borders and limit border crossings in order to reduce contact by North Koreans with individuals who may have been exposed to COVID, primarily in China. This resulted in a drop, and only 229 refugees reached South Korea in 2020. That further declined to only 63 in 2021. In the first 9 months of this year, 42 North Korean refugees have resettled in South Korea. ([Statistics on North Korean Defectors](#), South Korea Ministry of Unification.)

The [number of North Korean refugees](#) reaching the United States and Europe has always been a small portion of the number of those who chose to go to South Korea. In the last three years the number of refugees going to the United States and Europe has also dropped. The largest number of refugees from North Korea recently admitted to United States was 12, who were admitted in 2021. For the two or three years prior to that, however, no refugees were admitted to the United States.

An indication of the value of interviews conducted with the North Korean refugees is the decision by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to establish a [UN Human Rights Office in Seoul](#). For example, a report on Pyongyang's egregious [violation of human rights of North Korean women](#) was produced by the UN office in Seoul largely based on extensive interviews with refugees from North Korea who found asylum in South Korea. The sharp decline of refugees from North Korea has meant that one of the major sources of information about the North is no longer available.

#### **Foreign Diplomats Are No Longer Reporting from Pyongyang**

Another important source of information about conditions in North Korea has been foreign diplomats who are stationed in North Korea or make periodic visits to Pyongyang

and COVID paranoia the number of diplomats in Pyongyang has significantly declined. A [news story](#) in February 2021 reported that two Russian diplomats returning to Russia were required to push their belongings and their children on a small rail trolley as they walked across the rail bridge over the Tumen River, which is the boundary for the small stretch of border between North Korea and Russia. Pyongyang permitted no trains between the two countries, and no North Koreans were permitted to help the Russian diplomats leave.

Within a few weeks of the COVID shutdown in early 2020, the North Korean government arranged for a [charter flight for German, French and Swiss diplomats](#) to leave Pyongyang. Regular North Korean and other international flights were no longer permitted. These three countries—some of the very few who maintain a diplomatic presence in North Korea—closed their embassies, at least temporarily. Diplomats from these countries have not returned to Pyongyang for almost three years.

The United States and North Korea do not have diplomatic relations, and our two countries have not exchanged ambassadors. For many years, the embassy of Sweden in Pyongyang has also served as the “protecting power” for the United States in North Korea. The Swedish ambassador has been particularly helpful in providing [assistance to American citizens detained in North Korea](#). Since the outbreak of the COVID pandemic, official North Korean policy has been to avoid personal contact with foreigners, including diplomats physically present in Pyongyang. In August 2020, all Swedish diplomats left North Korea and have not returned. ([The Washington Post](#); [Reuters](#).)

The last embassy of a country of the European Union in Pyongyang closed in October 2021. Romania had an embassy in North Korea well before 1990. Even after communist Romania took a more democratic turn in 1989 following the execution of then-Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu by the armed forces, the Romanian diplomatic outpost in Pyongyang remained open. When the [last two Romanian diplomatic officials left North Korea](#) over a year ago, that was the last European Union country to withdraw its diplomats from Pyongyang.

Most of the embassies with a presence in Pyongyang before the COVID pandemic continue to maintain a presence, but the offices are staffed with locally hired North Koreans. The Swedish embassy, for example, still has an ambassador to North Korea, Andreas Bengtsson, who was appointed in 2021, but his office is currently at the Foreign Ministry in Stockholm. It is not clear when he might be in Pyongyang.

One of the most important tasks of a foreign diplomat is to report to her or his foreign ministry on conditions in the country to which the diplomat is accredited. While most of that information is confidential and not made public, a great deal of information reaches journalists and others via diplomats. Some diplomats have reported publicly on conditions in North Korea. For example, John Everard, the British Ambassador to Pyongyang (2006-2008), published an insightful account of his time in North Korea. While it does not focus on confidential diplomatic matters with North Korea, it gives a [perceptive view of life and conditions in the country](#).

#### **Foreign Journalists, Humanitarian Workers and Travelers No Longer Visit North Korea**

The third group of foreign residents or visitors to North Korea are professional journalists and humanitarian aid workers providing assistance to North Korea. The two groups have quite different goals regarding information. Journalists are there specifically to report on

current conditions in North Korea. Humanitarian aid workers are there to provide much-needed philanthropic assistance, and providing information publicly about conditions in North Korea makes it difficult to carry out their charitable activities.

The government is particularly sensitive about information that may cast doubt on the official North Korean version of events, and foreign journalists are particularly suspect. Journalists and photographers must have a special visa to visit North Korea, and they are carefully guided and guarded when visiting the North. It is a crime for journalists to enter North Korea with a visitor's visa under any false pretense. Furthermore, publishing unfriendly stories can result in denial of a visa for a subsequent visit.

Journalists are most frequently brought in with a group of other news media for anniversary events or special occasions, and they are tightly controlled. In 2016, journalist Barbara Demick described the North Korean government's efforts to control foreign media in these terms: "North Korea recently invited a bevy of foreign journalists to the country, but predictably restricted the press to closely monitored tours of model factories and tightly choreographed events."

North Korea does not treat journalists carefully to encourage positive stories. The directors general of two major South Korean media outlets—*Dong-A-Ilbo* and *Chosun Ilbo*—were both sentenced to death in absentia for "insulting the dignity" of the DPRK. Such actions indicate how foreign journalists are considered and treated. Since the COVID outbreak, North Korea's prohibition on visitors has included journalists, and no foreign journalists are known to have visited the North since early 2020 when the COVID lockdown began.

Foreign humanitarian aid workers have also been forced to leave North Korea. The United Nations maintains an office in Pyongyang to assess need and coordinate the delivery of aid. The UN office has been helpful as well for other national governments which provide humanitarian and development assistance to the North. Private charitable organizations have also worked closely with the United Nations assistance office in Pyongyang.

In March 2021, United Nations officials announced that the last two international civil servants from the World Food Program at the UN office in Pyongyang had left the country, and UN efforts were being conducted remotely. The UN spokesperson who announced the departure of the last international officials said, "The strict COVID prevention measures have impacted humanitarian operations in [North Korea], causing reduced operational capacity, stock out of essential humanitarian supplies, and delayed delivery of humanitarian programs." The UN presence in Pyongyang has always modest, but it has now only a few local Koreans.

Humanitarian aid officials from various foreign countries and private religious and humanitarian organizations have generally not maintained a permanent residence in North Korea. They visit North Korea periodically, but locally hired aides have provided continuity in the country. In December 2020, the International Red Cross closed its offices in Pyongyang, and most other humanitarian organizations no longer maintain a presence in the North because they have not been able to carry out their humanitarian missions. By March 2021 all foreign diplomats and aid workers had left North Korea.

Foreign tourists have not been permitted to visit North Korea for almost three years because of COVID limitations. Visits by foreign travelers have been a source of information about North Korea in the past, though the governments of the United States, Canada, Australia, and a number of other countries have strongly warned their own citizens against

of a tour to North Korea, and online advertising includes dates for tour booking—a 5 day New Year's Eve tour from Beijing to Pyongyang and return (December 29-January 3/4 ); a 2 day New Year's Eve tour from Dandong to Pyongyang and return (December 30-January 1); in addition to two to four tours monthly from January to October 2023. At the conclusion of the enticing message touting the unique and exotic adventure of a visit to the People's Democratic Republic of Korea is this "NOTICE: The North Korea border is currently closed due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Please check [COVID-19 & North Korea](#) for updated information."

North Korea's borders have always been heavily guarded, and information about conditions inside the country has always been difficult to assess. The COVID pandemic has made it even more difficult to gather information about the internal conditions. [Satellite imagery](#), which has become increasingly higher quality and more readily available in unclassified form, plays an increasing role in our understanding of conditions in North Korea. But such imagery is most helpful when we have the ability to compare and interpret aerial images with information we get on the ground in person.

In August of this year, Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un [declared victory](#) over COVID, and the leader's sister said that he was among those who had been afflicted with the virus. The leader blamed South Korea for the pandemic and promised "deadly retaliation." The victory over COVID in the North, however, has not yet resulted in significantly better living conditions for the North Korean people. Despite the announcement of victory, the impacts of COVID are likely to continue. Neighboring China has faced COVID with the same authoritarian restrictions that North Korea has imposed on its citizens, and Chinese leaders appear to be facing a harsh and surprising backlash. The Kim regime may well face similar problems.

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Return to the Peninsula