

THE KOREA TIMES

Fund NK refugees before it's too late

By Casey Lartigue, Jr.
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In April 2013, University of Texas Professor Jeremi Suri upset a number of expats in South Korea and experts around the world with his New York Times column, "Bomb North Korea, Before It's Too Late."

Some local pundits I know could barely mention the column without cursing Suri, denouncing him as an oddball pontificating from afar, suffering no consequences for his reckless proposal. I wondered: Have these people heard North Korean refugees discuss North Korea?

A reporter who recently interviewed me along with Park Yeon-mi, a North Korean refugee and my TV podcast co-host, was taken aback by her strong responses to his questions about tourism in North Korea. My point to him: Tourism to North Korea is this week's hot topic for you, but for her it is about a country that "broke" her family.

Her relatives were tortured after she escaped, her father died in China when the family was on the run and she and her mother both were ready to commit suicide when they were threatened by Mongolian police with repatriation to North Korea. Plus, she was recently notified that she is on North Korea's target list. Tourism to that hellhole? I wonder if runaway American slaves in the 1850s would have supported tourism to Alabama.

Another North Korean refugee friend can't decide if he is more disgusted with North Korea or America. He was tortured by North Korean agents, his relatives were tortured after he escaped. He dreams of the day he can dance on the graves of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il.

Why is he angry with America? He accuses it of being too soft on North Korea. He advocates assassinating, not talking with, the North Korean leader and the top elite. He says that North Korea's power comes from America dealing with it in a civilized way. The only way North Korea will come to its senses, he says, would be a brutal demonstration of American power, not polite American diplomacy.

At a discussion I moderated on July 13, Kang Myeong-do, the son of a former prime minister of North Korea, claimed that America should have bombed North Korea in the 1990s when its nuclear program was still in its infancy. Kang should know – in 1994, after he escaped North Korea, he revealed secret details about North Korea's nuclear bomb program. He stresses today that the North Korea "problem" would not exist if the Clinton administration had taken radical action back in the 1990s.

I pushed him a bit by asking him what would be the radical policy today. His response? The United States should close the border to North Korea, both literally and figuratively, to starve the country. I doubt China would welcome that, but his point of radical action is not far removed from former CIA analyst Sue Mi Terry arguing to "Let North Korea collapse" with a tougher policy of containment.

Another refugee friend of mine was disgusted when she heard recently that the South Korean government promised \$7 million more in humanitarian aid to North Korea. She says when she was in North Korea that she never received or even heard about any aid from South Korea, the North Korean regime was still claiming to be aiding South Korea. Her suggestion? Cut off all foreign aid to the North Korean government; instead, give the money to refugees to send to relatives. That would flood North Korea's emerging markets and give more people the financial means to escape.

I like that idea. One, instead of a sliver of foreign aid perhaps trickling down, people could receive the money directly from family members. Two, that would verify in a practical way South Korea's wealth. Three, the Kim family regime couldn't take credit for the money coming from the "rats and cowards" who escaped. Four, relatives sending money directly would monitor it better than global humanitarian agencies can track where their aid goes.

Stephen Linton of the Eugene Bell Foundation pointed out at a Cato Institute event in 2010 that countries tend to adopt North Korea's tactics. "South Korea tries to approach North Korea the way North Korea approaches South Korea, by funneling everything through government ministries, by strangling in a sense or denying its private sector full participation," Linton said.

My friend's proposal isn't as dramatic as bombing or starving North Korea, I know. Critics may dismiss North Korean refugees they disagree with as being too personally involved (but then, they denounced Suri for not being personally involved). Critics may say \$7 million sent most recently isn't enough, but that would be even truer when the money is funneled through the regime. But my friend's proposal would send money to North Koreans, rather than to a government that breaks up families, runs modern

gulags and executes people for seeking freedom.