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## The Lede



Bloggng the News With Robert Mackey

June 9, 2009, 11:18 am

## Life in North Korea's Gulags

By [ROBERT MACKEY](#)

The fact that two American journalists, Laura Ling and Euna Lee, have been sentenced to 12 years of hard labor in North Korea has focused attention on the network of brutal labor camps in that country which the State Department says hold an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 political prisoners.

Like many aspects of life in North Korea, relatively little is known about what life is like in the labor camps. In her [introduction to a report](#) on the camps by the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, Anne Applebaum, an expert on the Soviet gulags, wrote that the testimony of former prisoners suggests that “the North Korean camps were built according to a Stalinist model” and “continue to be run that way.” Ms. Applebaum’s brief summary of the conditions is harrowing:

As in Stalin’s time, North Koreans are arrested for trumped-up political “crimes,” such as reading a foreign newspaper, singing a South Korean pop song, or “insulting the authority” of the North Korean leadership. As in Stalin’s time, North Korean prisoners — even children — are given ludicrous and impossible work “quotas” to fulfill and are subjected to brutal, irrational punishments. And, as in Stalin’s time, North Korea’s leadership doesn’t want anyone to know any of these details, since such revelations not only will damage their foreign reputation but also put their own regime at risk.

The complete text of the report, “[The Hidden Gulag: Exposing North Korea’s Prison Camps](#),” assembled by David Hawk, is available online and includes testimonies from former prisoners and satellite photographs of camp sites.

A [State Department report](#) released in February, just a few weeks before Ms. Ling and Ms. Lee were arrested while filming a report for Current TV along North Korea’s border with China, said that throughout 2008: “Reeducation through labor, primarily through sentences at forced labor camps, was a common punishment and consisted of tasks such as logging, mining, or tending crops under harsh conditions. Reeducation involved memorizing speeches by Kim Jong-il.”

Another source of information on the camps is “The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag,” a memoir by Kang Chol-hwan, a North Korean defector. The New Yorker’s [Philip Gourevitch wrote](#) in 2003 that Mr. Kang, who was sent to the Yodok prison camp with his family when he was nine years old, “describes with something of Primo Levi’s quiet authority how the brutality of the gulag is the ultimate refinement of the North Korean system.”

Given how rare glimpses of life in the labor camps is, Mr. Kang’s account has been studied at the highest levels of government in the United States. In 2005 James Brooke wrote in [a profile of Mr. Kang](#) for The Times that after President George W. Bush read his book, “at the urging of former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger,” he was invited to the White House “for a 40-minute meeting with Mr. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and the national security adviser, Stephen J. Hadley.”

Mr. Brooke explained that the camp Mr. Kang grew up in “was run as a business enterprise, with gold mines, cornfields and logging operations operating entirely on unpaid prison labor.” Mr. Kang’s account of life there includes a description of public executions where prisoners were forced to hurl rocks at corpses, and yell, “Down with the traitors of the people!” As Mr. Brooke wrote, “Following the beliefs of the North Korean authorities that political deviance is hereditary, entire families were routinely incarcerated, and still are, recent defectors say.”

Video obtained by a Japanese television station and posted on YouTube, reportedly showing prisoners at the same camp where Mr. Kang was imprisoned, allows us to see what the perimeter of the camp looks like, but seems to underscore that we can only imagine what life is like inside the barbed wire for so many North Korean political prisoners.

That said, there are, apparently, even worse fates in North Korea than being sent to do hard labor and endure “re-education.” In 2007, my colleague [Choe Sang-Hun explained](#), in an article about a North Korean named Shin Dong Hyok, who had escaped from the prison camp he was born in, that there are camps where prisoners have no hope of ever being released:

Since 1992, about a dozen former North Korean prison camp inmates have fled to South Korea. But most were held in the “revolutionizing zone” at Camp No. 15 in Yodok in eastern North Korea. This means that the emphasis was on “re-educating” the prisoners. If they survived long enough to complete their sentences, they were released.

Shin is the first North Korean who came south who is known to have escaped from a prison camp. Moreover, he was confined to a “total-control zone.”

According to a report released in June by the government-run Korea Institute for National Unification in Seoul: “Prisoners sent to a total-control zone can never come out. They are put to work in mines or logging camps until they die. Thus the authorities don’t even bother to give them ideological education. They only teach them skills necessary for mining and farming.”

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1. June 9, 2009 11:36 am [Link](#)

Unfortunately, North Korea doesn't have oil, so the US will stand idly by and let these prisons continue.

— *Andrew*

2. June 9, 2009 11:58 am [Link](#)

And this is a country that now has the Atomic bomb. Yet, the USA invaded Iraq at the mere suggestion it had weapons of mass destruction.

I think if North Korea was sitting on vast oil fields, Bush would never have allowed this tyrannical country to develop the bomb. Now it's too late and once again, the USA is looking powerless to do anything, except put them back on the terror list.

— *Jon Braeley*

3. June 9, 2009 12:06 pm [Link](#)

I hope Obama sends Al Gore to North Korea to straighten this out and save those two women from the horrific fate that is awaiting them.

It'll be an educational experience for Gore. He told the audience at the 2000 convention, "I believe in a drug free America."

I'm sure they don't have any pot smokers left alive in North Korea.

Al Gore will be able to witness for himself in North Korea what kind of government policies it would take to make America drug free.

Maybe Gore will come back from North Korea with such a love of American freedom that he will never again spout authoritarian nonsense from a Democratic convention stage.

– *Patricia*

4. 4. June 9, 2009 12:07 pm [Link](#)

That video is actually from a documentary entitled Undercover in the Secret State, which was broadcast on the BBC a while ago. The full video of the film is posted to youtube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qyy3GmI5byE&feature=PlayList&p=02CB9EE8E3195A5C&index=0&playnext=1>

Two other great books to read on the subject:

Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader (Bradley K. Martin)

&

Rogue Regime: The Looming Threat of North Korea (Jasper Becker).

**LEDE BLOG REPLY: That documentary you link to looks very interesting, though it is a co-production of CNN and Britain's Channel 4, not the BBC — and I couldn't find this footage in it during a quick scan. If you saw it, can you please tell us what the time code of this excerpt is?**

– *jeff*

5. 5. June 9, 2009 12:16 pm [Link](#)

The two American journalists will not be sent to a hard labor camp. The North Koreans would never expose such a place to foreigners, let alone Americans. They likely will sit in a sanitized jail while negotiations take place.

– *Dustin*

6. 6. June 9, 2009 12:21 pm [Link](#)

I have been reading Anne Applebaum's Pulitzer Prize winning book "Gulag" and found it horrifying to contemplate finding oneself in such desperate situation with no hope of escape.

Forget Habeus Corpus or any legal niceties; you stay there and suffer until you die.

That having been said, I find it absurd that we still have ground troops in Korea. South Korea has over twice the population of the North and is far more prosperous and able to afford its own defense. The U.S. can supply air and naval support if needed, but having our troops scattered about in over 130 countries is a prime reason our economy is in such trouble.

– *Phil Z*

7. 7. June 9, 2009 12:21 pm [Link](#)

I wonder if the same people outside the US who wring their hands about Guantanamo Bay will be equally outspoken about this.

– *Colin*

8. 8. June 9, 2009 12:29 pm [Link](#)

2 to 3 million people died of starvation and hunger-related illnesses, from 1994-1998, according to the United States Institute of Peace, under Kim Jong-IL's tyranny:

<http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr990802.html>

What a shame that the media, who so diligently explore the 1940s Holocaust (excluding, eg, the Gypsies), have failed to do likewise for Asian genocides or democides under Mao, Stalin, Kim Jung-IL, Pol Pot, etc, with estimated death tolls in excess of 100 million persons (including Europeans under Stalin).

– *Anonymous in NYC*

9. 9. June 9, 2009 12:59 pm [Link](#)

This is one of the reasons I don't buy the meme that China will not lean on the North for fear of a collapse that would flood China with refugees. The Chinese are smart and if they learned anything from Tiananmen, it is that it is better to loosen controls on the people before they do it for themselves. And look where China is today.

So if a refugee flood is what they want to prevent, keeping a regime like this in power must surely be counterproductive. They should work now to make the North Koreans want to stay where they are.

That will also reduce the incentive for Japan to rewrite its pacifist constitution which, thanks to the US, has left China as the top dog in the area.

And it's about time the South Koreans realized reunification is not gonna happen however much they wish to emulate Germany. If it ever does happen, it will not be due to a sunshine policy but a nightmare that will see the disappearance of either the North or the South along with a major portion of the population. Kim Jong Il is working hard to make it come true.

– *yot*

10. 10. June 9, 2009 1:32 pm [Link](#)

it should here be remembered that the US has a huge population of prison inmates without any hope of ever being released, so perhaps the differences are smaller than many would wish

– *Peter Franken*

11. 11. June 9, 2009 2:15 pm [Link](#)

This is absolutely dreadful! It amazes me how every time we hear about these genocidal happenings around the world (Rwanda, Darfur and NK) the world community just stands by idly and does nothing. It was the famous 1997 North Korean defector, Hwang Jang-yop, who said that as monstrous as Hitler's Germany was in the 1940s, it is nothing compared to Kim Jong-Il's Korea. These camps are worst than the Nazi camps and they have existed for far longer and have killed millions more. Yet, still no one does anything because this madman Kim has nuclear arms. How did we ever let this lunatic get the bomb?! How does a country that has no working economy and starves its own people possibly afford nuclear technology?! It's all just mind-boggling! People think Iran is bad, North Korea is so much scarier. I pray that President Obama does something to bring back the two American journalists captured over there before they have to suffer any of the atrocities mentioned in this article.

– *Maria Zambrano*

12. 12. June 9, 2009 3:30 pm [Link](#)

I am thankful for a new administration that subscribes to adult, nuanced diplomacy to work for international security and prosperity. North Korea's Stalinist antics have always been a reminder of

how we might come off if we colored the world in black and white. But sending Americans to a North Korean death camp is too far. A new American sensitivity and sensibility is nothing but Chamberlain redux without some inviolable principles.

The previous administration seriously compromised the standing of the United States in the world not by sticking to their principles, but by not picking their battles. If I had a say, North Korea is a festering sore I would no longer ignore above all others.

– *Glenn Bartholomew*

13. June 9, 2009 3:49 pm [Link](#)

To a comment below: I don't see how we can be sure the two Americans will not be sent to hard labor camps. It shouldn't make much difference to the N. Koreans if the journalists are sent to these camps, or to "sanitized" cells, during negotiations, since they have professed publicly that the labor is "hard". Could "hard labor" be interpreted as anything that doesn't violate the basic rights and dignity of prisoners, given the capricious and hostile behavior of this regime? Everyone please google the Korean Central News Agency, read articles published on significant dates (Such as Obama's inauguration, etc.) and notice the way the N. Koreans describe these events, if at all.

– *Miguel*

14. June 9, 2009 4:37 pm [Link](#)

Peter Franken,

Yeah, you know I was thinking the same thing. Especially as a Black man, I'm sort of bothered when I see people show so much outrage when they see these things done elsewhere, but a lot of those people don't care a bit that a similar experience is still being forced upon entire US populations just because other segments of the US irrationally fear them or just deem them "undesirable." Man, if people only knew just how easy it was to end up in prison for some ridiculous amount of time as a Black man. People here just assume that everybody in prison here is a horrible person, therefore whatever happens to them is "deserved" in some twisted sense. But those guys in Korea are "political prisoners," therefore they're basically innocent and it's an outrage that they're going through this.

With that being said (and as much as we need some real change in this country concerning how we treat minorities), it doesn't really matter here. First, one can't make the assumption that people showing (posting) their outraging aren't equally bothered by the US prison system. Second, even if they don't care a bit about the situation in the US, it doesn't make them wrong to point out that the other guy who's doing it is a horrible person. It makes them hypocrites, but not necessarily incorrect in their accusation about the North Koreans.

And yes, those Gulags sound pretty freaking bad.

– *Aaron*

15. June 9, 2009 4:41 pm [Link](#)

I am still reading various articles about Laura Ling and Euna Lee. I'm curious to know what the next step is from the Obama administration. Some articles are pushing for Obama to do more than just say he is "deeply concerned". What is the next step? With each hour that passes, Ms Ling and Ms Lee may be in danger of rape, abuse and other mistreatments. Each minute counts. There is more news about the health reform and education cuts. I'd like to see the govt deal with what is urgent at the moment. Freeing your American citizens should be one of them.

-A concerned Canadian in LA.

– *more4jc77*

16. 16. June 9, 2009 5:02 pm [Link](#)

No one's mentioned the fact that Lisa Ling made a documentary called "Inside North Korea," where she manipulated and lied to the North Korean authorities. I wouldn't be surprised if that had something to do with the extra harsh sentence!

**LEDE BLOG REPLY: Lisa Ling, who made that documentary, is Laura Ling's sister.**

— *Dustin*

17. 17. June 9, 2009 5:31 pm [Link](#)

The key phrase comes from Ms. Applebaum: "As in Stalin's time". Stalin died in 1953. Kim Jong-il just "decreed" that his younger son will succeed him, as opposed to his prior choice of the older son. Possible crack in the wall? Who knows.

To Peter Franken: I think that's a bit of a stretch. I feel Aaron has a better take on any "comparison" between the US and North Korea prison systems.

— *NYER*

18. 18. June 9, 2009 5:39 pm [Link](#)

First of all the US is not the world police and should stick to certain rules of international law. Therefore it is not the easy solution, that they just go in and free the people and all is good. Secondly, other criteria need to be taken into account. The fact, that North Korea has conducted recent testing of nuclear explosives, plus their missile testing, shows that they are not too reluctant to actually make use of what they have. Additionally, their feelings towards the US are anything but affectionate, and they also have made it one of their highest priority to uphold the regime. But even if that wouldn't be the case, an invasion would lead to a break-down of the regime, and flood China and South Korea with millions of refugees, who they don't have the capacities to deal with. So at the end of the day, no matter how cruel this might sound, this is not the best scenario. As for the arrest of the two journalists, they most likely are abused for matters of negotiation and we can only hope the best.

— *Alex*

19. 19. June 9, 2009 7:41 pm [Link](#)

"it should here be remembered that the US has a huge population of prison inmates without any hope of ever being released, so perhaps the differences are smaller than many would wish" — Peter Franken

Sir, you cannot be serious. Even if you for some reason are, just how does that excuse or diminish North Korea's actions?

— *David*

20. 20. June 9, 2009 8:00 pm [Link](#)

In reply to the Lede reply above...

You're right, actually the youtube clips threw me because they use footage from the documentary I was referring to by Kim Jung Eun (or vice versa, I'm not sure). It was part of the Dispatches series from Channel4

([http://www.channel4.com/news/microsites/U/undercover\\_in\\_the\\_secret\\_state/index.html](http://www.channel4.com/news/microsites/U/undercover_in_the_secret_state/index.html)). The youtube clips are different though, not narrated by Eun and some different footage.

Interestingly, when that footage appears in the Dispatches film, Eun discusses that the prisoners

shown are being forced to shovel and move human excrement — which isn't explained in this other Japanese tv version.

I found the whole version on the PirateBay, actually.

...

— *jeff*

21. 21. June 10, 2009 12:06 am [Link](#)

In response to Alex, thanks for your thoughts. Yes, the issues you present are true — one of the solutions is to send an envoy in, perhaps Al Gore to negotiate...

— *more4jc77*

22. 22. June 10, 2009 11:14 am [Link](#)

In the early 90's many saw that these terrible events would come to fruition: an insane leader with weapons within simple shooting distance of Seoul and major Japanese cities. At that time, the S.Koreans were experiencing an economic boom that enriched them all and NOONE was going to rock the boat.

Good luck to them, they played the fools and now must dance. The smartest thing to do would be to move everyone out of Seoul and rage an assault on N.Korea to shake the heavens. If they get a NUCLEAR weapon, then everyone in that area is doomed. At least after an ATOMIC weapon, people could move back within their lifetimes.

Too bad the S.Koreans care more about handbags and eyelids than a demon of their our creation. Lets see how we can bail them out, again.

— *Patrick Ruzkowski*

23. 23. June 10, 2009 11:22 am [Link](#)

What do you expect us to do about it Andrew? Go to war against a 1 million strong NK army and effectively destroy the entire peninsula?

— *Andy*

24. 24. June 10, 2009 12:44 pm [Link](#)

Why not turn to China for help? Only China can influence N.Korea.

— *Long*

25. 25. June 10, 2009 2:12 pm [Link](#)

The two Asian-American reporters are responsible for crossing the border of an independent state without permission. Its judgement made was based upon the law of that country. Furthermore, the United States does not have any extraterritoriality there.

Who are right? Those reporters? or Some Americans pushing N.K. to release them?

Without respect to nuclear campaign, North Korea is only taking a legal procedure about the intruders, even though it is legally unreasonable.

— *Kyu Don*

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Robert Mackey is The Lede's editor and main blogger. [Read more.](#)

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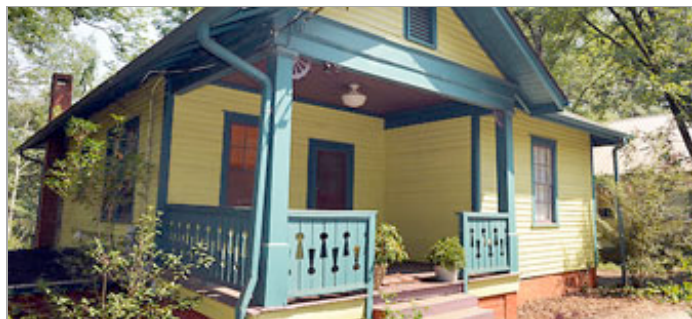
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