

The Mystery of North Korea

by David McReynolds

Earlier this month Doug Hostetter sent me an invitation to a slide show and report at the Church Mission to the UN on his recent trip to North Korea (the DPRK - Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea). Doug, as some of you will know, was a key figure during the Vietnam Peace movement, and works with the Mennonites. I found the report fascinating and, even before the recent troubles broke out, I planned to write a summary of what I heard. That is even more urgent now, since North and South Korea seem once more on the edge of war.

Our own media has not been helpful in this situation. In March of this year a South Korean naval vessel, the Cheonan, sank with the death of 46 people. The US and most of its Western allies charged that North Korea sank the boat. That has been reported in our media as a statement of fact. It may be. But both Russia and China (and some independent experts) argued that the facts actually suggested the sinking may have been an accident caused by South Korea. In the same way, the current tragic shelling by North Korea of a tiny South Korean island just off the coast of North Korea has been treated as if the first shots came from North Korea. However, if you read the fuller news accounts with care you will find that South Korea fired the first shots – not onto the territory of North Korea, but into an area of the ocean claimed of North Korea. It was following that barrage from the South that the tragic attack on the island village occurred.

This is not to excuse North Korea, but to try to understand it. Doug's slide show and talk were helpful - and also confirmed the accounts I'd read some time ago in the *New Yorker*. The sad thing about Doug's presentation was that only a handful of people - fewer than six - had turned up. But it was a presentation as revealing as it was urgently needed.

Doug is a good photographer and he presented excellent photos of monuments - a great many monuments - and buildings. He presented photographs of wonderful wide highways. What was missing were people. Doug said that in one case when he had been driven down an eight lane highway he could not see a single vehicle in either direction. The shortage of electricity is so grave that at night the countryside is dark, as well as - for the most part - the cities. His guides told him the eight lane highways were designed as landing strips in case a war broke out and the airfields were bombed. He also noted tall pillars on both side of some of the highways - pillars which seemed to have no function, not even as monuments. He was told these were designed to be toppled over onto the highway to block enemy tanks. (I don't want to leave the impression the only slides were of monuments and highways - there were some truly awe-inspiring slides of orphans doing remarkably well choreographed dances. Doug told me that his Chinese friends had said that while China was good at that sort of thing, the North Koreans were tops in the field. Think of the military exercises of tens of thousands where not a beat is missed).

The monuments reminded me of the one I'd seen in Baghdad in 1991 (Doug had been on that trip also) - a truly beautiful monument to the dead from the Iran/Iraq War (a war Iraq had started, and which had cost the lives of close to a million Iranians and Iraqis - a war, let it be noted, which the US fully, if quietly, supported). The strange thing about that monument was that aside from our small group of Americans, and three nuns from some other tour group, there were no Iraqis there. I had the feeling that the absence of visitors was a kind of passive protest against Saddam by a population which was otherwise totally cowed into submission.

North Koreans do not seem that cowed. In the *New Yorker* articles I had read, the refugees (who flee into China across the Northern border) were not political or religious dissidents but were fleeing because living conditions were so hard, and seemed uneasy to have left their homeland. Doug reported that at one public event when the "great leader", Kim Jong Il, arrived, the troops and the audience remained in place without moving even though he was nearly half an hour late, and then broke into tears as he drove away, giving the crowd a salute. Doug said the tears seemed genuine.

Doug reported no sense of unease among his "minders", no sense of irony, or awareness of the contrast between the opulence of the five star tourist hotels in Pyongyang and the abject poverty of the general population.

We, who live in a culture which is, relatively speaking, free, where you will not be arrested if you change the channel from Fox News to PBS, and where we circulate a wide (and often wild) range of views on the internet, may not understand what it can be like in a nation where the state controls all media, where you can't change the TV channel, where no opposition groups would even presume to organize. We know how dreadful the rule of Joseph Stalin was, how many Soviet citizens died at his hand, how fearful the intellectuals were - but we may not remember that when Stalin died, the vast crowds of people attending his funeral were so great that many people were killed in the crush.

Of course, in states that are truly totalitarian, as the DPRK is, it is not possible to judge when consent is given freely, and when it is given fearfully. There is the old not-very-funny-joke about the reason Stalin's speeches were applauded so long after he had finished -- no one dared to be the first to stop clapping.

My first encounter with North Koreans was in the 1970's when I was in Japan for a peace conference and was invited to a reception at the Embassy of the DPRK in Tokyo. At that time I still drank (far more than was good for me, which is another story). The Koreans were serving their national distilled liquor - an absolutely foul tasting drink which had a ginseng root in each bottle. I found that while everyone else took a polite sip and put their drinks down, that I could (and did) get gloriously drunk, picking up and finishing the drinks others had left. The remarkable thing was that the next morning I had no hangover at all - perhaps ginseng has real merit!

I would later encounter North Koreans in two other situations, of which more in a moment. (I should mention that the Korean War has a special meaning to me, since the section of the Socialist Party I belong to opposed the US actions, one of our members was imprisoned for draft refusal and I was also arrested for refusing military service at that time, but the case was missed on technical grounds).

First, let's go back to what we have almost entirely forgotten - the Korean War, which lasted from 1950 to 1953. In fact, let's step back even farther, to grasp the complications of the Korean situation. There is, historically, no "North" and "South" Korea. Korea is a single nation, with a single language. In 1910 it was occupied by Japan, a brutal occupation that lasted until Japan's defeat in 1945.

Hard feelings toward Japan are felt by all Koreans, North and South.

After the defeat of Japan, the US installed the Korean aristocrat, Syngman Rhee in the American-controlled area south of the 38th parallel. (North of the 38th parallel was under Soviet control pending the promised free elections). Rhee had been part of the opposition to Japanese rule and was forced to flee Korea long before World War II -he had been safely in residence in the US during the war. His regime proved to be a bloody dictatorship. It is reliably estimated that between 100,000 and 200,000 Koreans were murdered by Rhee's government for their political views.

When the promised elections failed to materialize, North Korea then became a state in its own right, headed by Kim Il Sung, the first head of the DPRK.

I accept that North Korea invaded South Korea in 1950, but that history is blurry, since both sides had made repeated raids and threats and one needs to look at that period closely. In any event the war which we have forgotten left a terrible mark on all of Korea. It is believed that two to three million Koreans died in the war (as well as a large number of Chinese, as China entered the war on the side of North Korea). North Korea seized a large part of South Korea (including the capital, Seoul) before US forces drove them North, so far North that China, fearful that the US would cross the border, entered the war.

If we have forgotten the war, it is because it marked the fiery beginning of the Cold War, which had, informally, started in 1947, when the Soviet Union dropped the "Iron Curtain" across Eastern Europe. Those of you reading this, if you were born after 1950, would have no memory of it at all. It was a war the US called a "UN Police Action". It cost us 33,606 lives. The McCarthy period came at the same time - the Korean War fitted very nicely into a period of coerced complacency in this country.

It was during this period that the Communist Party leaders in the US were sent to prison and the Party virtually outlawed. It is a dim period in our minds, the war we didn't lose but didn't win, the period of political fear at home which most Americans never experienced. It was also a war about which, with the release of documents in the past few years, we have learned that thousands of civilians were murdered during the war, by both the North Koreans, when they went South, and by the South Koreans as they went North - and by US military forces. These murders exceed any we know about in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Following the end of the war in 1953 the South had massive investment from the US, its economy made a rapid recovery, eventually developing a trade union movement and civil society strong enough that Rhee was forced to flee for his life, ending his days in exile in Hawaii. In recent years South Korea has been a democracy. Because the memory of the North Korean invasion and the pain of the Korean War has not been forgotten, the South, while wishing for a reunification, remains worried about the intentions of North Korea.

North Korea had no foreign help. In 1953 the Soviet Union and China were in no position to invest in its recovery. One result of this period of slow recovery was that in addition to Marxism/Leninism, the North Koreans developed the ideology of "Juche", which can't be fully

translated into English (one of those things which make a visit to wikipedia helpful) but which means something like "self-reliance" or "self help". North Koreans take enormous pride in their country which, despite the darkness of their cities at night, and the hunger reported throughout the country, has developed nuclear weapons and has one of the most powerful military machines in the world. The only ally North Korea has is China.

There are certainly bizarre aspects to the DPRK - in addition to supplying advanced arms to Iran, it has engaged in kidnappings and is alleged to deal in counterfeiting and drug smuggling to gain dollars. But, in fairness, the United States has done many of the same things - certainly it is a far greater arms dealer, and in both the Vietnam War and in Afghanistan it has been directly involved in drug smuggling.

It is more important to examine the reasons for the tensions and what hopes might exist to ease them. Count me among those who believe the United States wants the tensions to continue, that it wants to isolate the DPRK, does not want a peace treaty that would formally end the war that ran from 1950 to 1953, and that it counts on South Korea and Japan as two important pawns in its effort to contain China.

Western commentators often talk about the danger of "rewarding North Korea's bad behavior", but what is the reward North Korea seeks? Yes, it needs food. Historically the Northern part of Korea dealt in industry and the Southern part dealt in agriculture. But it also wants to open a window to the world, and it hopes for eventual reunification with the South. (My impression is that both North and South Koreans long for reunification). One may feel, as I do, that the DPRK is a failed state, that, far from being a "workers' state", it is a militarized bureaucracy which has resulted in one of the lowest living standards in the world. But the question is what can be done to ease the tensions, and calling the DPRK names isn't going to help. When George Bush referred to Kim Il Sung as a "pigmy", and included the DPRK in his "axis of evil", surely any reasonable person would conclude that the Bush Administration had no interest in a peaceful settlement.

Worse, I find it very hard to tell North Korea that it must give up its nuclear weapons when it has before it the example of the US invasion of Iraq simply because Saddam might be developing them. US policy has created a situation where the North Korean military sees little incentive to surrender those weapons.

Here let me bring in two odd examples of contacts with North Korea and what I deduced from those contacts. In 1997 I had a call from a staff member of the American Friends Service Committee. She had a delegation of three North Korean trade unionists who wanted to know how to make contact with the American Labor Party. I said I would meet with them, which I did. I told them I could take them to the Socialist Party office (I did that and have a snap shot of the group under fading posters of Debs and Thomas) and could take them to the Communist Party office (which they didn't seem interested in). They were sure there was a Labor Party. It is possible they meant the somewhat abortive efforts of the late Tony Mazzocchi, who had started efforts toward a Labor Party in 1998, but this was a year after my Korean trade unionists had come and gone. No, I am convinced from my discussions with them that they were certain an advanced industrial state such as the US had to have a "Labour Party" similar to the mass social

democratic parties in Great Britain, France, and the Nordic countries. They could not believe the best the workers could do was settle for the Democratic Party.

I was as baffled by their interest in the non-existent Labor Party as by the fact they had arrived with so little preparation. During the Vietnam War I learned that Hanoi was extremely well briefed on US politics - even on the internal struggles within the peace movement. It seemed to me that the trade unionists from the DPRK were "flying blind". The trip cost money. Clearly the small delegation had to be highly trusted - but would also be exposed to the chaotic politics of the US.

One can't put down this strange visit as an accident. About the same time, a year or two earlier or later, I was at a meeting in Norway of the International Peace Bureau. This is a loose coalition of peace and social-democratic groups, emphatically not under the wing of either Moscow (which had fielded its own World Peace Council in the 1950's) or the various pro-Western groups who had a toe in the peace movement. The IPB included both the Japanese Communist and Socialist peace groups, and the War Resisters League in the US. But there were two observers from the DPRK. Again, it costs a lot of money to travel from Pyongyang to Norway. And why visit a conference of the IPB?

My assumptions are two-fold. First, the DPRK suffers from the problems of a state which has just one supreme leader, and where the range of exposure to the West is limited. They do not begin to have the sense of the rest of the world which the Vietnamese had. The limits of their thinking is reflected in the awful propaganda which they send out. During the Stalin period the Soviet material was almost unreadable (I always felt sorry for the Kremlinologists who had to wade through those documents) but the material from Pyongyang is worse.

Second, and almost in contradiction to the first point, I think the DPRK would like to break out of the diplomatic "shell" created not only by itself, but also by South Korea and the US. *Those of us whose belief system is genuinely independent of the US government need to explore every crack in the wall.*

The kind of work which the Mennonites do is extremely important. It is not political in the usual sense. The Mennonites are called by their belief in Jesus to minister to the poor, to aid those who suffer, and to do so without attempting to impose their own belief system. The delegation Doug Hostetter was on had not gone to the DPRK to preach the gospel but to do something much more revolutionary – to live it.

There has been a remarkable joint statement issued this week by Christians in North and South Korea appealing for scaling down the rhetoric. There are other similar efforts being made by citizens groups in other countries. There is nothing stopping some of us in New York City from visiting the DPRK Mission to the UN.

Korea, North and South, has suffered enough, Both Koreas, having experienced war, are deathly fearful of another one. The danger is that this fear, and the mutual militarization of the two sides, and the fact the US has a vested interest in these tensions, should make us very skeptical of much of the current reporting and eager to do some research on our own.