

## North Korea's Gulag

South Korean President Lee Myung-bak deserves praise for one accomplishment above all others: He has put human rights in North Korea on the world's agenda. This certainly has hit a nerve in Pyongyang. The late Kim Jong Il cut off talks with the South, and now Kim Jong Eun has embarked on a campaign of abuse against President Lee that is vile even by that regime's standards.

A new report by South Korea's National Human Rights Commission provides further vindication. It documents the suffering of Pyongyang's roughly 200,000 political prisoners, held in a network of labor camps across the country. The report contains detailed and harrowing accounts from 200 former prisoners. The shocking nature of the crimes they witnessed should convince the Obama Administration that making any deal to provide aid that extends the life of such a regime is immoral.

The report is broadly similar in content to one the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea published in April. The North's totalitarian system imprisons people for seemingly trivial offenses, such as singing a South Korean song, and one person's perceived disloyalty can doom an entire family. Once in the camps, prisoners suffer from malnutrition, exposure and overwork. Then there are guards who enjoy torturing those under their control, or play sadistic games with them.

Some may question the significance of exposing all of this, given that everyone already knows North Korea is not the workers' paradise it claims to be. But it is important that the Human Rights Commission, an independent and well-respected body funded by Seoul to safeguard human rights in the South, has put so much evidence on record. The testimonies could form the basis for a Nuremberg-style trial after the North collapses.

That might help prisoners right away. More and more information about the outside world filters into the North, especially among the elite, so officials responsible for the labor camps should become aware of the danger of future prosecution. Knowing that their crimes are being recorded will serve as a deterrent to gratuitous cruelty.

*Zuma Press*

President of the Republic of Korea Lee Myung-bak.

Of course, the agony will only truly end when the Kim family is overthrown. And based on the experience of the last two decades, that is unlikely as long as they can play the game of nuclear blackmail to extract the resources they need from Seoul, Washington and other donors. Exposing the true nature of the regime should refute claims that change through engagement is possible and close the aid spigots.

It is encouraging that South Korean public opinion toward the North has undergone a dramatic shift in this direction over the last few years, largely as a result of the growing number of defectors. More than 23,000 now live in the South, and their stories and concern for the families left behind have led to pressure on Beijing to stop repatriating North Korean refugees caught in China.

Consider the news this week of Kim Young-hwan's arrest in Dalian, China, where he was trying to help North Korean defectors. Mr. Kim is a member of the "386 generation," South Koreans who were born in the 1960s and fought for democracy in the 1980s. Like many of his fellow student leaders, Mr. Kim once sympathized with North Korea but has become disillusioned. He and many other former supporters of Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Myoo-hyun's "sunshine policy" of engagement now work in NGOs that broadcast into the North or publicize the refugees' stories.

Reports like these deserve wide attention so that the rest of the world has the same epiphany. Sustaining Pyongyang with aid only extends the misery of those imprisoned in the North's gulag.

*A version of this article appeared May 18, 2012, on page A12 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: North Korea's Gulag.*