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North Korea, Human Rights

Improving Human Rights Through NGO Access Expansion

North Korea is a country in northeastern Asia. It shares land borders with China to the north and South Korea. It is currently in a state of tension with its southern neighbor, having never officially ended the hostilities between itself and South Korea. Its 2023 population estimate is 26,072,217. Most of this population is ethnic Korean, with a small community of Chinese and a very small number of ethnic Japanese. (CIA.org, 2023)

The country's primary language is Korean, with Russian and Chinese being the other two common languages. Religious freedoms are almost nonexistent in the country, with only state-sponsored religious groups being allowed to prop up the illusion of religious freedom inside the country. The religions that still exist in the country are Buddhism, Confucianism, Chondogyo, and Christianity. (CIA.org, 2023)

The country has an age structure that consists of 20.24% of the population being under 15 years old, 69.19% being from ages 15 to 64, and 10.6% being 65 or older. This means that there is a high amount of people able to work for the economy compared to the amount unable to work, which is also known as the dependency ratio. North Korea has a total dependency rate of 43.5 to 1, with the elderly dependency ratio being 16.3 to one and the youth dependency ratio being 27.2 to 1. (CIA.org, 2023)

The average age of a person in North Korea is 34.6 years for men and women combined, 33.2 years for men, and 36.2 years for women. The population growth rate of the country is 0.44% per year. Contributing to this is its birth rate of 140.6 births per every 1000 people. Its death rate of 9.66 deaths per 1000 population helps to keep the growth rate from rising exponentially, as does its net migration rate of -0.04 people per 1000 population. (CIA.org, 2023)

The population tends to stick to the lowlands and plains of the country, with most people living in the western part of the country. In addition, 63.2% of the population lives in an urban setting. The population has a sex ratio of 1.06 males to 1 female at birth, 1.04:1 from 0-14 years old, 0.99:1 from 15-64 years of age, and 1.65:1 for people 65 and older. This results in an overall sex ratio of 0.95 males to 1 female. There is also a 2.2% infant mortality rate overall, with male birth having a higher infant mortality rate of 2.49% compared to women, who have an infant mortality rate of 1.89%. (CIA.org, 2023)

The average family size is around 4.4 people per household. (Haub, 2010) The North Korean diet is very heavy on grains such as rice and corn, with grain making up 63% of their calorie intake. (National Geographic, 2023)

The rate of completion of primary education in the country is 97%, and the completion rate for secondary education is 95.5%. (UNICEF, 2023) The country has a serious lack of access to proper healthcare, as only 10% of people buy medicine from hospitals or clinics. The rest either buy it off the streets or rely on traditional remedies for a cure. In addition, 30.1% of patients received no treatment or diagnosis when it was needed for their case, which means that any medical issues that they had had the potential for a greater impact on their lives. Drug and substance abuse rates are high, with 53.7% of people reporting that they practice self-medication with some form of narcotic. (Lee et al, 2020)

In North Korea, some barriers prevent people from accessing food markets and being able to obtain adequate nutrition. One report stated that in 2 of the northern provinces, 30% of farmers were too weak to be able to work their lands properly. (Watanabe, 2023) This means that the production of food for the country is greatly affected by hunger and that the weaker the farmers are, the less food they can produce to feed the country. In addition, North Korea's agricultural sector is very heavily dependent on chemical

fertilizers. The country imported over 250,000 tons of chemical fertilizers in 2018 and was still begging farmers to find ways to make use of organic fertilizer options. The North Korean agricultural industry also has a mechanization rate of about 30-40%, which means that farmers are not able to reach a level of productivity on par with other countries around it, limiting the amount of food able to be grown at one time. (Ward, 2023)

The typical farm size in North Korea is around 1.6 hectares, but most of the farms are in fact under 1 hectare in size. On these farms, farmers raise several different crops and livestock. They grow rice, corn, potatoes, soybeans, fruits, and nuts on their farms, and raise chickens, cattle, and swine. (OECD, 2019)

Some barriers currently prevent North Korean Agriculture from improving its overall productivity. First, as mentioned above, it is very heavily dependent on chemical fertilizers to boost yields, meaning that any significant improvement in yields would require an enormous amount of expenditure on fertilizers. Second, past attempts to increase the total area of arable land available have backfired on the country, leaving parts of it more vulnerable to flood damage and have ruined the very land that has been attempted to be reclaimed. (Ward, 2023)

There are several major barriers facing the typical North Korean family. One type of barrier is that of improvement to agricultural productivity. The first problem that makes up this barrier is that the government's attempts to increase the amount of land available for production have destroyed the land they were trying to gain. When the country tried to reclaim land in the mountains and get land back from the seas, they only increased the damage that floods could do to the country and increased pollution in the rivers. (Ward, 2023) The second problem that creates this barrier is that the farmers have no control over what they can plant. The crops for the season are decided by the Ministry of Agriculture. (Ward, 2023) This means that the farmers cannot adapt their crops to what grows best in their region, leading to crops being grown in areas where they are not productive. The third problem that creates this barrier is the country does not have sufficient fertilizer production facilities. The country imported over 250,000 tons of fertilizer in 2018. (Ward, 2023) This means that improving agricultural yields through increased application of fertilizers would be cost-prohibitive for the government.

The second barrier facing the typical North Korean family impedes employment at a living wage. The average hourly pay for a North Korean worker is \$0.25 an hour in the Kaesong Industrial Complex, which amounts to around \$67.40 a month when working around 55 hours a week. (hrw.org, 2006) One kilo of rice costs about \$1, while corn is \$0.50 per kilo. (Lankov, 2022) The average North Korean worker can only buy a few kilos of food with their month's salary.

The third barrier is that they cannot easily access food markets or adequate nutrition. North Korea is currently trying to become food secure as a nation by trying to adopt a policy of self-sufficiency. (Williams & Ragnone, 2023) This is not feasible to feed the nation, as the country's soils are very acidic. (Hui, 2021) This means that the plants grown in the soils will have many of the nutrients needed, nutrients less available, and some nutrients will be present in toxic amounts. (Agriculture Victoria, 2023)

The factor that was chosen for this report was that of Human Rights. This factor has many impacts on the daily lives of the average North Korean family. Firstly, the people live in fear of their government. They are prevented from speaking out against their government or its policies because they know that if one person speaks out, the whole family could be punished collectively, even being taken to work or prison camps. (Human Rights Watch, 2021) Next, the North Korean people have highly restricted access to information from the outside world. The government restricts and controls all forms of media and information, including radio, television, and news outlets. (Kirby et al, 2014, para. 29) The only forms of media the people can access are directly controlled by the government. Additionally, all of the phone lines

are tapped and monitored constantly. This has only gotten worse in recent years, as the North Korean government has used the pandemic as an excuse to tighten its grip on the nation.

Freedom of religion is also very limited in the country. Christianity is not tolerated by the government at all. The government persecutes Christians because the religion runs counter to the political ideologies that the regime espouses, and because it can provide a place for criticism and political organizations that are not controlled by the state. (Kirby et al, 2014, para. 31)

One of the main human rights violations is that of the Songbun system. This system is used to classify the country's people into varying loyalty "classes" that can determine how they live their lives. This is mainly determined by their family's loyalty to the government and the history of that loyalty. (Robertson, 2020) The things this system is used to control include, but aren't limited to: where people live, who they can marry, what jobs they can have, and where they can travel. (Kirby et al, 2014, para. 33) This violates the freedoms of movement and residence and is a form of discrimination.

The present status of Human rights in North Korea is very poor. The non-governmental organization Freedom House gave North Korea a 0 out of 40 for political rights and a 3 out of 60 for civil liberties. (Freedom House, 2023) The report stated that the people do not elect governmental officials. They also said that the people cannot express political opinions or have any say in how they are governed. The current trend in the country for this topic is one of worsening abuses. The government has used the pandemic as an excuse to tighten its borders and restrict people's movements, and this trend is likely to continue as North Korea's government tries to maintain its grip and control over the people.

Improvements in this factor area would be beneficial to the country as a whole, and also to the people specifically. If North Korea's human rights record were to improve, it could result in the lifting of many sanctions that have been placed on it because of human rights violations. This would mean that many foreign products could make their way into the country, improving the quality of life of the country's inhabitants. Improvement in human rights would also result in other nations being more amiable to trade with North Korea, leading to an economic growth of the country, and bringing prosperity to the lower classes.

There are some major issues that have the potential to impact this factor. The biggest one is the recent pandemic. This gives the regime an excuse to restrict travel and communication. It also allows the government to crack down on any perceived "infractions" by its people, leading to greater opportunities for human rights abuses. The other is that of international relations. The world's tensions with North Korea on account of its growing nuclear arsenal and capabilities cause there to be a reluctance to interact with the country and less of a capability to investigate any abuses in the area. These tensions can also make the North Korean dictatorship stricter in its filtering of information to its people.

The solution that I am proposing to the human rights abuses being perpetrated inside of North Korea is to expand the number of non-governmental organizations within North Korea, as well as expand their access to the country and eliminate management of these organizations by the country's government. Numerous NGOs already operate within North Korea, including ones from Europe, South Korea, the US, and Canada. (Congressional Research Service, 2011)

The problem with the current operations of NGOs in North Korea is that the North Korean government and military often divert the aid that is sent in for their use, preventing it from reaching the populace who need it most. (Savage et al, 2002) These aid shipments supply the North Korean regime with supplies that are used to strengthen its military and control over its population, allowing it to perpetuate its record of abuses.

Expanding NGO access and freedom within the country of North Korea would help improve the human rights situation within North Korea in two key ways. First, the population would no longer be in such danger of starvation, as more supplies would get through to them. This would remedy the breach of human rights that is people being denied access to the food necessary for survival and nutrition. Secondly, the North Korean regime would have fewer resources flowing in to support it, leading to the potential reduction of abuses due to lack of funding to carry such abuses out. This would improve the situation within North Korea by reducing the amount of human rights violations having to be policed for, meaning more resources could be devoted to the persecution of each violation, hopefully improving the outcome of justice for the victims of these abuses.

In conclusion, North Korea is a country with one of the worst human rights records in the world. This is exacerbated by the tensions between North Korea and many other countries around the world. Improvement in the access and freedom of NGO operations inside of the country would greatly benefit the human rights situation, leading to an improvement in the quality of life for North Korean citizens. This is why the writer recommends improving access and freedom of action for NGOs in North Korea.

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