

American Religious NGOs in North Korea: A Paradoxical Relationship

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The North Korean famine of the mid-1990s posed challenging ethical and humanitarian dilemmas for foreign aid workers who responded to the crisis. It also yielded a paradox: Despite the antipathy of the North Korean system to outside religious influence (revealed most clearly by the harsh treatment of North Korean refugees who had contact with churches or Christians while in China and were subsequently captured and returned to the North), it is primarily American NGOs with financial backing from religious organizations that have maintained development and exchange programs with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

The relationship between DPRK authorities and American religiously funded NGOs has continued despite recovery from the famine and the advent of an international diplomatic crisis surrounding North Korea's nuclear weapons development. Other NGO programs have largely dried up with the easing of the food crisis and the end of U.S. government humanitarian assistance to American NGOs working in the DPRK. In examining these religiously funded NGOs, this article will attempt to explore the motivations and measures for their success, the criteria under which they operate, and the nature of their interactions with the DPRK government on monitoring and transparency issues.

RESPONDING TO CRISIS

The result of a severe shortfall in grain production and a decline in the availability of concessionary imports, the famine of the mid-1990s stimulated an unprecedented appeal by the government of the DPRK for international humanitarian assistance. Chronic systemic shortfalls in the country's ability to feed its people were exacerbated by the end of Soviet subsidies and fertilizer inputs to the DPRK as a result of the USSR's collapse, a reduction in grain assistance from the People's Republic of China (PRC), crop failures caused by unsustainable agricultural

practices, failures in the DPRK's command economy, and damage from unprecedented natural disasters and flooding. The flooding in particular provided a pretext for North Korean authorities to seek international assistance in response to a humanitarian emergency without directly admitting responsibility for a major failure of its system. The international community answered this call, both through contributions by donor governments to the UN World Food Programme (WFP) and other international relief agencies and through private donations from humanitarian NGOs invited to work in North Korea for the first time.

But North Korea proved to be a quite different environment from that of most complex humanitarian emergencies. Although the economic system had collapsed, North Korea's political system remained intact and was intent on gaining resources to feed its people while minimizing the potentially harmful political influences that the DPRK leadership felt might result from greater foreign contact with North Koreans at a grassroots level. DPRK political authorities worked with international aid agencies to provide food inputs to its ration-based Public Distribution System (PDS), but strongly resisted international monitoring efforts designed to ensure that the food was being delivered to the end user. This led to the charge, as reported in the West, that an excessive amount of food was being siphoned off for the military rather than civilian use.

Among the conditions imposed by the North Korean authorities were a one-week notification process in advance of site visits, the insistence that agencies send non-Korean-speaking monitors, and a refusal to allow aid organizations to carry out independent nutritional surveys or to independently determine which institutions and individuals inside the DPRK faced the greatest needs. Use of the PDS to distribute aid reinforced DPRK leadership aid-provision preferences based on its own political priorities.

International and UN aid agencies chafed at the restrictions under which they operated, which were far different from what they usually encountered in humanitarian emergency situations—situations in which the collapse of political authority was a major feature of the crisis. By 1998 four European aid agencies (Médecins du Monde, Médecins Sans Frontières, Action Contre la Faim, and Oxfam International) chose to withdraw from the country, arguing that there was no “humanitarian space” for operation in the DPRK. Prompted by the withdrawals and accompanying assertions that humanitarian work could not be done inside North Korea, in 2001 other aid agencies forged a statement of humanitarian principles designed to further improve the “implementation of humanitarian

norms.”¹ Through ongoing negotiations with the North Korean authorities, individual organizations attempted to improve access to information, facilities, geographical regions, and beneficiary groups for the purposes of assessing needs and evaluating the impact of international assistance. They also attempted to negotiate better conditions for field workers outside Pyongyang.

The efforts of American NGOs were also hampered by severe political restrictions that were not faced to the same degree by their European or South Korean counterparts. North Korea was the target of strict economic sanctions under the U.S. Trading With the Enemy Act (TWEA), which had remained in place since the Korean War, limiting the amount and types of government support available to American NGOs. The North Korean side was especially wary that an American NGO presence in North Korea could be used as the leading edge of U.S. infiltration or intelligence-gathering efforts. Because of these restrictions, negotiations over the delivery of humanitarian aid to North Korea via NGO channels became a subject of political discussion at the government-to-government level, as a result of which food assistance also became tied to some degree to U.S. government concerns about North Korea’s nuclear development efforts. At the height of the food crisis in 1997 and 1998, the DPRK insisted on U.S. food assistance as a precondition for its participation in four-party talks on the nuclear issue, and as a *quid pro quo* the United States insisted on inspection of a suspect nuclear site near the village of Kumchang-ri.

As a result of these restrictions, the vast majority of American food assistance to North Korea was provided through the WFP. In order to enhance the involvement of American NGOs, a consortium of American NGOs called the Private Voluntary Organization Consortium (PVOC) was established to monitor the aid provided through the WFP and to provide potato seeds directly to North Korea with U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funds rather than going through the WFP. The consortium monitored over 300,000 tons of food assistance provided via the WFP between 1997 and 2000.² The potato seed project failed, however, primarily as a result of the political barriers to assistance in North Korea and the difficulties of forging and managing a multilateral consortium to work inside the country. The failure of the PVOC marked the end of a brief experiment by which U.S. government funding would be available to NGOs to do work directly in North Korea. Without such funding, the prospects for American NGOs to sustain such a program are extremely limited.

Apart from U.S. government-funded food assistance to North Korea, a few American NGOs, almost all of which are funded by religious organizations or private donations, also began work in North Korea as part of the international response to the nation's food crisis. For instance, four American NGOs that continue their operations in North Korea with religious funding but with differing backgrounds and motivations are the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), the Eugene Bell Foundation (EBF), Christian Friends of Korea (CFK), and Global Resource Services (GRS). While these NGOs were insignificant in providing major food assistance in response to the crisis, they instead established development projects in the fields of agriculture, education, and health that outlasted the efforts of other NGOs that focused on the immediate humanitarian need. Although these NGOs faced the same challenges and often worked with the same North Korean counterparts from the Flood Damage and Rehabilitation Committee (FDRC), their presence has proved to be sustainable in North Korea. All of these NGOs are still operating projects in the North despite the end of the food crisis and the ramping up of tensions over the North Korean nuclear program; and all of these programs continue with the awareness by DPRK counterparts that they are religiously backed, despite the hostility that the DPRK government has maintained toward religious practices among its citizens.

The AFSC, an arm of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), has maintained regular contact with North Korea since the late 1980s through the Korean Committee on Solidarity with the World's People (KCSWP), a quasi-governmental agency, and has pursued intensive agricultural development efforts within the DPRK since 1997. The AFSC program, which reports a budget of approximately \$350,000 per year for the past five years, has attempted to (1) support immediate production gains at selected farms, and (2) help farms to increase production with their own resources. The AFSC provides assistance to four large cooperative farms, and works with the North Korean Academy of Agricultural Science (AAS), the Organic Agriculture Development Association (OADDA), and the Research Center for Compound Microorganisms (CM Center) to promote sustainable farming methods in the DPRK, including the introduction of cover crops to provide nitrogen to depleted soils.³

Christian Friends of Korea (CFK) was established in 1995 to pursue "an opportunity for sustained ministry in North Korea following the visits there by

Dr. Billy Graham in 1992 and 1994” under the name of the Eugene Bell Centennial Foundation. CFK worked primarily in the areas of agriculture and health, including provision of tuberculosis-related medical supplies, food, agricultural supplies, and blankets. CFK’s work has been focused primarily in North and South Hwanghae provinces and the region surrounding Kaesong. CFK reports having donated nearly \$25 million worth of goods to North Korea by building “trust and strong relationships with the institutions, organizations, and individuals with whom we work.” The organization receives individual donations from American and Korean Christians, and is led by a group of retired missionaries to Korea.⁴

The Eugene Bell Foundation (EBF) and CFK have similar roots but formally separated in 1995. EBF is separately registered in South Korea and Washington and is focused primarily on the provision of support packages for tuberculosis clinics and hospitals. EBF receives charitable contributions from Korean and American churches and individuals, as well as an annual contribution to the Korean-registered Eugene Bell Foundation from the South Korean government. The Eugene Bell Foundation reports donations of over \$28 million between 1995 and 2005, and works primarily in Pyongyang, Nampo, and North and South Pyongyang provinces. EBF has gradually expanded from its focus on tuberculosis to other sectors of medical care, including provision of updated operating room supplies and supplies for maternal and infant care programs, such that in 2007 it has shipped medical supplies to over forty-five North Korean institutions.⁵

Established in response to North Korea’s humanitarian crisis in 1997, and funded primarily by Southern Baptist–related international ministries, Global Resource Services (GRS) was created as a professional development assistance organization on a nonreligious basis. Although GRS was initially established with a focus on humanitarian relief, its activities have expanded in the areas of agricultural development, including development assistance to improve agricultural practices, to enhance livestock breeding capacities, and to establish agricultural processing facilities to provide milk, tofu, and bread for distribution to local populations. GRS has also engaged in medical training in the areas of cardiology and laparoscopy, including the exchange of short-term medical delegations, the conduct of English-language training programs in Beijing, and the sponsorship of cultural exchanges between the United States and North Korea. GRS reports having managed over \$20 million in humanitarian projects through January of 2002.⁶

STRANGE PARTNERS?

Despite political hostilities and dramatically differing worldviews between DPRK counterparts and the leaders and supporters of American-based NGO partners, these NGOs have survived and have continued to grow in their cooperative activities with the DPRK. The obvious question is just why these particular activities have survived while some NGOs pulled out on ethical grounds and still others left as a result of the financial constraints imposed by the poor U.S.-DPRK bilateral relationship.

One overarching factor that has allowed certain NGOs to maintain their operations has been the focus on maintaining relationships through regular exchanges. The placing of personal relationships above political concerns, coupled with an independent revenue source, has allowed these religiously funded American NGOs to continue to operate in North Korea where other organizations have failed. As noted above, the AFSC program developed out of a prior relationship with the Committee on Solidarity with the World's People, while the EBF and CFK programs grew out of long-standing relationships across generations of American missionaries. GRS likewise made the building of personal relationships a central focus of its core programs and the foundation for the establishment of mutual respect and reconciliation. This, along with the fact that the funding base for each of these organizations came from private rather than public sources, has served to insulate their programs from official tensions over political issues.

Another distinguishing factor of these programs is that they were relatively quick to move past humanitarian aid, with its emphasis on monitoring and transparency, to development programs that required joint cooperation and the maintenance of annual visits, which in and of themselves could be justified on the basis of cooperation rather than on an adversarial basis. The ongoing needs of the local farms or hospitals with which these American NGOs had established relationships served both to justify repeated visits to the same places inside North Korea and to provide opportunities to verify that shipments had been received. The orientation of these projects as *joint* development projects, their multiyear support at an institutional level, and the type of cooperation necessary to sustain these projects have all served to mitigate adversarial approaches or demands for monitoring.

Still another reason for the success of these NGOs is that they tended to focus on particularly nonsensitive areas, or even to respond to specific requests made by the North Korean side, and they tried to justify the expansion of their projects or the development of new projects based on practical needs inside the country. In the course of working cooperatively on specific issues, it was possible for these NGOs to learn more about the working environment and traditional practices within Korea, whereas those efforts that have led with requests for feasibility studies or local surveys have generally been greeted with greater suspicion and/or disinterest by authorities. Having earned a reputation for delivering on promised assistance, these organizations came to be viewed by North Korean counterparts as reliable. Furthermore, especially in the early years of their operations, these NGOs honored North Korean sensitivities regarding media reports about the country, limiting outside publicity surrounding their efforts and containing negative observations regarding conditions on the ground.

In certain areas the focus on cooperation and relationship building has served to overcome some initial suspicions or to bend DPRK rules with regard to outside organizations. For instance, GRS, CFK, and EBF all employ fluent Korean speakers in primary roles, despite long-standing North Korean objections to such workers from international agencies. During the course of field visits and joint projects all the organizations have had extensive contacts with individual North Koreans, including tuberculosis patients, although the government still prefers to direct contact through institutional cooperation and not through programs that result in extensive interactions with patients or end users.

This is not to suggest that the government has relaxed its security toward these NGOs altogether. In each case it still assigns representatives to accompany the groups in-country, although the nature of the relationships is not necessarily adversarial, and in some cases they have developed quite cordially to the point where those with public security functions play positive roles in promoting, or providing political cover for improving, the effectiveness of the NGO programs. At the same time, there remains sensitivity to any Western curiosity directed at areas unrelated to the work at hand. And each organization takes responsibility for the behavior or public comments of any delegation member that may join the group in-country, given that the continued success of operations may be contingent upon meeting North Korean standards of “good behavior.” Needless to say, North Korean officials expect religious NGO representatives to leave their religion at the door and not try to propagate their beliefs inside North Korea,

even though the key interlocutors themselves are aware that the assistance by many donors to these organizations is religiously motivated. There are also clear limits on the growth of programs beyond the specific specialized areas where these NGOs are working; entry into a new area almost certainly requires high-level approval, which can take considerable time and effort through a process that is far from transparent.

Perhaps most interesting is that North Korean officials seem most comfortable with these NGOs as partners in development, suggesting that the government would welcome an expansion of NGO efforts to assist North Korea. Thus far, the content of the assistance desired remains heavily focused on “hardware,” or technical assistance, rather than “software,” or training, with a particularly vigilant watch kept on ideological correctness, given the suspicion with which North Korean authorities view religion as a subversive element. But if political tensions subside and restrictions on the types of activities that can take place in North Korea fall away, these organizations will already have a significant foot in the door, and will be well positioned to enlarge and expand their activities.

For instance, several of the NGOs listed above have been short-listed as possible conduits via which USAID might provide energy assistance under the latest six-party agreement on the denuclearization of North Korea. Certainly, these groups have the advantage of ongoing experience and relationships, and may be poised to play a disproportionate role in the next phase of dealing with North Korea. Whether such opportunities may raise new moral and ethical questions for religiously funded NGOs or the broader community will depend in part on how politics develops inside North Korea (that is, is it possible that work with religiously based NGO counterparts might become politicized?), and particularly on how the North Korean leadership positions itself in managing NGO-led external interactions based on its experience thus far. Time alone will tell.

NOTES

- ¹ Hazel Smith, *Hungry for Peace* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2005), p. 126.
- ² See L. Gordon Flake and Scott Snyder, *Paved With Good Intentions: The NGO Experience in North Korea* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003), pp. 23–36.
- ³ American Friends Service Committee website, www.afsc.org/asia/nkorea.htm; accessed July 22, 2007.
- ⁴ See Christian Friends of Korea website, www.cfk.org/about.htm; accessed July 22, 2007.
- ⁵ See Eugene Bell Foundation website, www.eugenebell.org/eng/about/about_01.html; accessed July 22, 2007.
- ⁶ See Global Resource Services website, www.mail.grsworld.org/; accessed July 22, 2007.