



VOLUME II

# Engaging North Korea

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM AFSC'S 65 YEARS OF HUMANITARIAN  
ENGAGEMENT ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA



American Friends  
Service Committee

WRITTEN BY

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ABOUT AFSC

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) is a Quaker organization that promotes lasting peace with justice, as a practical expression of faith in action. Drawing on continuing spiritual insights and working with people of many backgrounds, we nurture the seeds of change and respect for human life that transform social relations and systems.

AFSC has a century of experience building peace in communities worldwide. Founded in the crucible of World War I by Quakers who aimed to serve both humanity and country while being faithful to their commitment to nonviolence, AFSC has worked throughout the world in conflict zones, in areas affected by natural disasters, and in oppressed communities to address the root causes of war and violence.

AFSC's global legacy includes securing the safety of over 20,000 individuals and families fleeing Nazi Germany, working for the release of over 4,000 Japanese-Americans from U.S. internment camps, supporting the dismantlement of apartheid in South Africa, publishing Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letters from Birmingham City Jail," being among the first organizations to respond to famine in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK/North Korea) in the mid-1990s, and much more.

In 1947, AFSC and the British Friends Service Council were co-recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize for their role in implementing key reconstruction efforts after World War II. Through this history, AFSC has learned that peace and security are achieved when human needs are met, conflicting parties recognize the security concerns of their adversaries, and policymakers operate with objectives of shared security as opposed to objectives of national grand strategies. Real peace is more than the absence of war. Rather, we need to change the culture, situations, and systems that lead to violence.

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# Introduction

**A**s tensions between the U.S. and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK/North Korea) approach new heights, the new U.S. administration is beginning to prioritize the conflict in Korea in its foreign policy agenda. However, the Trump administration's approach to the DPRK has yet to be fully determined or articulated. Some officials have referred to the administration's policy as "maximum pressure and engagement," but how and when the U.S. would pressure and/or engage with the DPRK remains unclear. The administration has repeatedly stressed that it would prefer to resolve issues through diplomatic means, but officials have also made overtures toward military action.

Use of force by the U.S. against the DPRK could elicit overwhelming retaliatory strikes on Seoul, jeopardizing millions of lives. Yet diplomacy appears to be at an impasse, as well. Mistrust between the two countries has been exacerbated by several diplomatic breakdowns over the past six decades. Prolonged periods of isolation with no direct communication have created a deadlock that is reaching critically dangerous heights. Avenues for communication are urgently needed to de-escalate tensions and begin dialogue.

American nonprofit organizations addressing humanitarian, cultural, scientific, and other concerns of mutual interest have established some of the most consistently successful partnerships between Americans and North Koreans, and many have operated through some of the worst moments in U.S.-North Korean relations. Scaling their best practices to the government-to-government level could represent the best chance of success for political dialogue.

This report presents AFSC's reflections on its work in Korea over the last 65 years and shares the critical humanitarian issues we see as opportunities for dialogue between the U.S. and DPRK.

Many observers have noted that whenever the U.S. has engaged the DPRK in dialogue over the last several decades, the DPRK has scaled back or refrained all together from conducting missile tests. It follows that an effective strategy for de-escalating the tensions we see today would be to open dialogue on an issue where progress is possible—and keep those communications channels open.

Dialogue over humanitarian concerns, followed by operations to address those concerns, often pave the way for political progress. That was the case between the U.S. and Laos, for example, when servicemen and women were repatriated and efforts to clear unexploded ordinance helped usher along a

normalization of relations between the two countries. If the U.S. can identify some humanitarian concerns of interest to both the U.S. and the DPRK and establish avenues for making progress on those concerns, there is a good chance that tensions between the U.S. and DPRK—and the threat of nuclear war in the region—will subside.

AFSC has identified four humanitarian issues where progress appears possible in this moment. Two of these concerns date back to the time of the Korean War and thus represent root causes of long-standing tensions. The others represent opportunities to build good will and address humanitarian suffering in the DPRK. They are:

1. the reunification of Korean and Korean-American families;
2. the repatriation of the remains of U.S. servicemen left in the DPRK following the Korean War;
3. people-to-people exchange programs;
4. and, humanitarian aid projects designed to meet basic needs for North Korean people.

We urge policymakers to prioritize these issues and to establish the consistent communication and coordination necessary to address them—apart from denuclearization, reunification, or other political concerns. In this way dialogue can be established and progress made, establishing the foundations for improved political relations.

## **American Friends Service Committee in Korea**

AFSC has a long history of involvement in Korea dating back to 1953. Following the signing of the armistice agreement ceasing hostilities but not officially ending the Korean War, AFSC responded to U.N. calls for refugee assistance and began working to improve conditions for refugees in Kunsan, Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea), where over 33,000 displaced Koreans resided. AFSC provided food, medicine, and bedding in addition to reconstructing a hospital that had been destroyed during an aerial bombardment.<sup>1</sup>

Other efforts at reconstruction were recognized by AFSC as an urgent priority due to the sheer devastation caused by the heavy bombings throughout the Korean War. Estimates by the U.S. Air Force indicate that the U.S. dropped more bombs on Korea in three years than it had dropped on the entire Pacific theater throughout World War II. The damage to Korea (particularly to the DPRK) in the Korean War was significantly greater than the damage to Japan in WWII, where 60 cities had been destroyed and two

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1 Hunt, Frank. "I Was a Staff Member." Peace Works: Century of Action. American Friends Service Committee, 02 June 2016. Web. 13 May 2017

atomic bombs were dropped.<sup>2</sup> AFSC responded to this devastation with a “Houses for Korea” campaign, providing materials and training Koreans in reconstruction efforts.



Kunsan, South Korea, 1953:  
Pat Hunt hands out aprons to  
displaced Koreans. Photo: AFSC  
Archives

As AFSC’s program progressed, schools were started in South Korean refugee camps, and staff began providing agricultural tools and supplies as well as equipment and training for livelihoods, such as sewing machines and assistance to war widows opening tailoring shops.<sup>3</sup> AFSC’s refugee assistance program was closed according to plan in 1958 as conditions improved.<sup>4</sup>

AFSC, however, returned to Korea in 1980, this time to the north, when it became the first U.S. public affairs organization to enter the DPRK. Official AFSC reports from the first delegation reveal the nature of the visit:

*AFSC’s concern for the Korean peninsula stems particularly from the suffering caused by the Korean War in which the United States was a major combatant. In the past, we have been involved in South Korea through postwar relief projects, work camps, and ongoing investigation and interpretation of the continuing United States involvement. AFSC has for a number of years sought an opportunity to visit North Korea, recognizing that the problems faced by the Korean people cannot be resolved in one part of the country alone. Out of concern for divided families which make up 20% of the population and in regard to the wishes of the vast majority of the population, both north and south, AFSC is supportive of efforts to reunify the divided country. As long as*

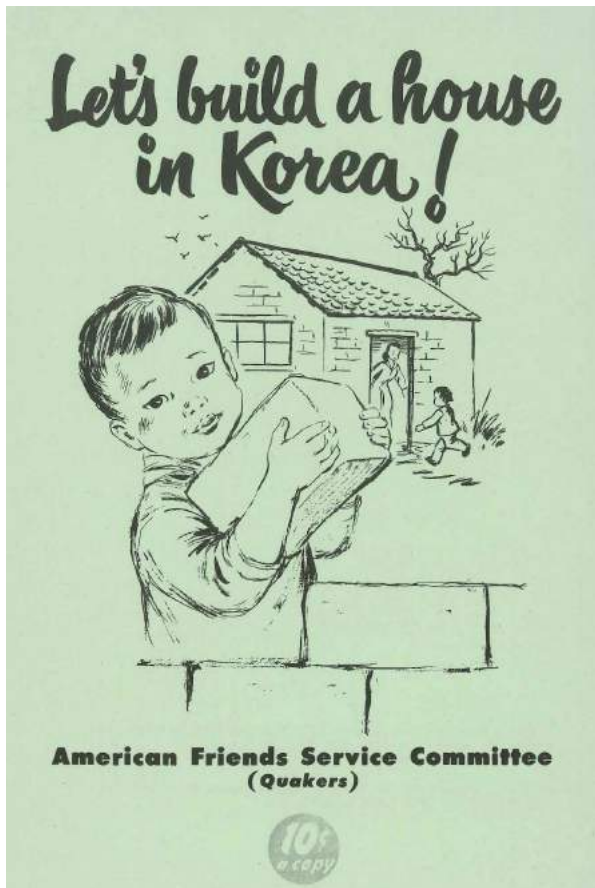
2 Armstrong, Charles. “The Destruction and Reconstruction of North Korea, 1950–1960 北朝鮮の破壊と再建、1950–1960年.” *The Asia Pacific Journal*, 16 Mar. 2009. Web. 13 May 2017.

3 “Friends Service Unit in Korea: 1952–57.” *Quakers in the World*. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 May 2017.

4 Hunt, Frank. “I Was a Staff Member.” *Peace Works: Century of Action*. American Friends Service Committee, 02 June 2016. Web. 13 May 2017

*the country is divided, with one million troops confronting each other across a narrow demilitarized zone, not only Koreans are faced with the prospective devastation of another war, but regional and world peace might be threatened as well.*

*The purposes of our delegation were fourfold. We wanted to help contribute to reduction of tensions, both between the United States and North Korea and between North Korea and South Korea. We hoped to encourage reciprocal visits between North Koreans and Americans, as a first step toward exchanges at an official level. We sought to improve our own understanding of North Korean society through direct personal contact so that AFSC could more effectively carry out educational work in the United States. In particular we were eager to understand more fully North Korea's various proposals for tension reduction including their suggested confederation as a step toward a reunified Korea.<sup>5</sup>*



1953 AFSC publication to raise money for the "Houses for Korea" campaign.

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5 Easter, David, Easter, Maud, Thierman, Steve. "Report of the American Friends Service Committee Delegation to North Korea." American Friends Service Committee, 02-13 September, 1980.





Kunsan, South Korea, 1953: A displaced Korean child stands in front of a Friends Service Unit vehicle. *Photo: AFSC Archives*



Pyongyang, DPRK, 1980: Maud Easter chats with her North Korean host on the first U.S. public affairs delegation to the DPRK. *Photo: AFSC Archives*



Pyongyang, DPRK, 1980: AFSC staff meet with their North Korean hosts on the first U.S. public affairs delegation to the DPRK. *Photo: AFSC Archives*

After the initial delegation in 1980, AFSC continued exchanges both by sending peace delegations to the DPRK and by hosting North Koreans in the U.S. Then, in 1995, AFSC's continued engagement in Korea led it to be one of the first international organizations to call for humanitarian aid in response to famine conditions in the north. At the time, more than two million children were at risk and facing severe malnourishment, prompting AFSC to raise funds for food aid and to send a letter to Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, calling on the Clinton administration to "establish a policy of providing food assistance ... irrespective of our diplomatic agenda." Quaker International Affairs Representative Edward Reed pleaded with policymakers, stating, "[w]e must not let Cold War barriers prevent us from responding to humanitarian suffering."<sup>6</sup>

As conditions worsened in the years following, AFSC continued to raise funds and sent over \$200,000 in relief as well as continued exchanges with delegations from the Korean Committee for Solidarity with the World's People (KCSWP)—AFSC's partner in the country from 1980 to the present.<sup>7</sup> During the height of the famine AFSC's executive director, Kara Newell, remarked to the press, "It is a powerful act of the human spirit in such times of crisis in the world, that donations from many people can combine to help people in other countries, even amidst political disagreement and tensions."<sup>8</sup> Newell's comments illuminated the power and importance of human needs and the ability for human security to transcend political limitations.



Philadelphia, 1990: AFSC hosts a North Korean delegation in the U.S. Photo: AFSC Archives

6 "AFSC Renews Efforts to Raise Funds for North Korean Food Relief." ReliefWeb, 01 Apr. 1997. Web. 13 May 2017.

7 U.S. Korea North Political and Economic Relations Handbook. N.p.: International Business Publications, 2005. Web.

8 "New Flooding Increases Need for Contributions to Avert Famine in North Korea." Updates. ReliefWeb, 06 Aug. 1996. Web. 13 May 2017

Following the famine, AFSC partnered with KCSWP to begin agricultural assistance projects to address food security at its core. AFSC's current program works with four cooperative farms, the Academy of Agricultural Sciences, and Kye Ungsang College of Agriculture of Kim Il Sung University to raise productivity and implement sustainable agricultural practices. AFSC also organizes additional education and training opportunities for North Korean individuals, institutions, and government agencies on issues of practical concern to Koreans, promoting exchange with other countries.



Philadelphia, 1995: AFSC Executive Director, Kara Newell, receives a delegation from the Korean Committee for Solidarity with the World's People (KCSWP). Photo: AFSC/Terry Foss



Philadelphia, 1995: AFSC leadership host a KCSWP delegation to exchange thoughts on international relations, human needs, and furthering dialogue between the U.S. and DPRK. Photo: AFSC/Terry Foss



DPRK: AFSC visits a cooperative farm with KCSWP. Photo: AFSC

The success of AFSC's current projects is due in part to the strength of partnership it has built working with KCSWP for 37 years, as well as the trust built sharing pragmatic, sustainable agricultural practices that are field-tested on partner co-operative farms. Examples of successful contributions to agricultural security by AFSC's program include a project on greenhouse management and a project on rice seedling cultivation in plastic trays.

AFSC has provided its partners with training in greenhouse management through annual exchange tours to China so that participants may observe Chinese practices in greenhouse cultivation. Farm managers reported that these trips have been some of the most valuable experiences in working with AFSC as they are able to immediately apply lessons learned in China to their greenhouses in the DPRK.

Since greenhouses are not subject to state quotas, the produce harvested from the greenhouses can be used to generate extra income. Accordingly, farm managers report that as a result of these exchanges farmers have become increasingly adept at anticipating and meeting local market demands for fresh vegetables.

AFSC's partners have also had considerable success in using plastic trays for seedling preparation. Used in the cultivation and transplant of seedlings, plastic trays can increase yields in crops such as rice and corn by up to 10 percent. Plastic trays were first introduced to AFSC's partners in 2007 on a study tour to China. Since the initial exchange on which the farm managers became familiar with the technology, the practice has been encouraged nationwide. AFSC continues to support this project and its spread throughout the DPRK.



DPRK, 2016: A man holds a plastic tray on a roadside billboard in the DPRK. Trays were first introduced to AFSC's partners in 2007. Photo: AFSC

AFSC's history and work with KCSWP is perhaps the most continuous example of a successful relationship between U.S. and North Korean organizations. The partnership has been at the forefront of identifying some of the most urgent human needs in the DPRK and has helped to address those needs despite political turmoil and tense international relations. Lessons learned from AFSC's archival documents and ongoing program offer abundant evidence that human needs lie at the heart of global security, as these issues can often be addressed despite political impasses and offer means of engagement that may precede diplomatic breakthroughs.

AFSC and KCSWP's partnership remains unique among U.S. and North Korean organizations, but it shows that progress is possible. Other humanitarian issues that have not yet gained traction—such as reunification of families and repatriation of servicemen's remains—represent real opportunities to build foundations for political dialogue between the U.S. and DPRK.

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# Humanitarian concerns between the U.S. and DPRK

## **Divided Korean and Korean-American families**

Following the Korean War, Korea was divided between North and South at the point the two armies had ultimately converged when the armistice was signed. Tragically, over 10 million families were permanently separated from each other when that happened. More than 100,000 of those divided family members relocated to the United States and have not seen their loved ones for decades. The matter remains critically urgent, as families are aging and the probability of locating relatives is diminishing over time.<sup>9</sup> Estimates using comparable data from South Korean and U.S. records indicate that as many as 3,000 divided Korean family members could still be alive in the U.S. today.

While South and North Korea have carried out 20 rounds of family reunifications since 2000, allowing families to visit for a brief time, Korean-Americans have not been able to participate. Despite a national security law in the Republic of Korea (South Korea), which prohibits direct people-to-people contact without prior governmental approval, formal mechanisms between North and South Korea have allowed for the exchanges of 11,476 letters since 1990. Informal systems have also arisen to connect families, although they often rely on methods outside the law and come at great financial and personal risk for the families involved.<sup>10</sup>

The difference for Korean-Americans wishing to reunite with their families is partly the lack of any formal mechanisms to help establish contact. While the U.S. does not prohibit people-to-people contact, it does strongly discourage U.S. citizens from visiting the DPRK and currently offers no assistance to families seeking to reunite with their loved ones.

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9 Noh, Jeane. "Korean Americans Urge Trump to Allow Reunions with Relatives in North Korea." *Top News/Voice*. UPI, 27 Feb. 2017. Web. 13 May 2017.

10 "Torn Apart: The Human Rights Dimension of the Involuntary Separation of Korean Families" Country Reports. UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Dec. 2016.



A Korean family reunites. Photo: Divided Families Foundation

Under international humanitarian law and under Article 26 of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, the U.S. is obligated to “facilitate enquiries made by members of families dispersed owing war.” The U.S. is also a signatory to Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions, which stipulates under Article 74 that “the Parties to the conflict shall facilitate in every possible way the reunion of families separated.” Despite these obligations, most families in the U.S. have not been able to reunite or exchange correspondence with loved ones in the DPRK.<sup>11</sup>

Sadly, the humanitarian issue of divided families has been consistently neglected or inappropriately tied to political processes for decades. As noted by a recent report by the U.N. Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights, “involuntary separation in the Koreas is not only an inevitable consequence of a war situation, but also the result of structural forms of exclusion, impunity and disempowerment that the conflict has brought to the fore.” The most recent effort at addressing the issue was carried out by Secretary Hillary Clinton and Ambassador Robert King in 2011. Despite having a roster of divided families ready to participate in the program, talks were indefinitely postponed after the failure of a political agreement known as the ‘Leap Day’ deal.

Shortly following the breakdown of this agreement, President Obama instituted a policy of ‘strategic patience,’ which effectively ended any direct engagement between the U.S. and the DPRK—amounting to a de facto politicization of humanitarian affairs and a failure to fulfill obligations under international humanitarian law. Reportedly, all the family members on the 2011 roster have died since the last dialogue on the issue, but others remain hopeful for an opportunity to reunite with their loved ones before they pass away.<sup>12</sup>

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11 Ibid.

12 Noh, Jeane. “Korean Americans Urge Trump to Allow Reunions with Relatives in North Korea.” *Top News/Voice*. UPI, 27 Feb. 2017. Web. 13 May 2017.

AFSC has recognized since its entry into Korea in 1953 that divided Korean families represent a deep and painful wound that is part of the unhealed legacy of war on the Peninsula. In fact, AFSC’s interest in establishing contact with officials from the DPRK was, in part, out of concern for the millions of divided families. However, even after all this time, the issue has yet to be prioritized by the U.S. in relations with the DPRK. No formal mechanism has been established between the U.S. and DPRK in the over 60 years since the end of the war, and the U.S. has not formally declared this a humanitarian issue—one in which the U.S. will pursue regardless of progress on political affairs.

Family reunifications should be pursued for the sake of the families, but they also hold potential to dramatically impact public perception and introduce new hope for disrupting entrenched and militarized narratives around the conflict. That said, AFSC cautions policymakers against overly propagandizing reunifications or allowing the events to be co-opted by the media or public figures. During the most recent family reunification between the South and North in 2015, some participants noted that the media frenzy generated by the event and the heavy presence of officials and guards distracted from the two precious hours the families were allowed to spend together.<sup>13</sup>

While there do not appear to be legal or policy obstacles to facilitating family reunions, clarification of U.S. and U.N. policy is needed to help resolve legal ambiguity. Family reunifications do not necessarily violate sanctions measures, and guidance issued by the Treasury Department (Office of Foreign Assets Control/OFAC) may allow for reunifications under the larger permission for “international exchanges.”<sup>14</sup> Adding clear and categorical exemptions for family reunifications to new and existing sanctions regulations would help to encourage progress on this issue and bring those policies more in line with international humanitarian law.

In addition, concerted efforts to facilitate reunions are needed, and policymakers need to prioritize the issue. Diplomats must take the next step and commit to discussing the issue outside of the political dialogue. Depolitized and dedicated efforts on issues such as divided families provide necessary human security assurances—ultimately creating the conditions for sincere political dialogue. Neutral third parties such as the International Red Cross could provide the means necessary to maintain consistent communication on these issues and possibly to facilitate reunions.

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13 “Torn Apart: The Human Rights Dimension of the Involuntary Separation of Korean Families” Country Reports. UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Dec. 2016.

14 “General License No. 5: Certain Services in Support of Nongovernmental Organizations’ Activities Authorized (March 16, 2016).” North Korea Sanctions. U.S. Department of Treasury, 16 Mar. 2016. Web. 13 May 2017.



## Missing U.S. servicemen and their families



Repatriation ceremony.  
Photo: Gloria J. Barry

After the signing of the armistice agreement and the cessation of hostilities, the U.S. estimated that over 8,000 U.S. servicemen were missing. Most were presumed dead after suffering one of the many possible fates soldiers are exposed to in combat. While initially the U.S. pursued the whereabouts of the missing servicemen, the Cold War prevented any meaningful exchanges in knowledge or cooperation on the matter.

The fall of Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union marked a turning point for relations and renewed hope for the issue of missing servicemen. Seeing an opportunity to be reunited with their loved ones (living or dead), the families of the missing servicemen organized and pressured the U.S. to address its obligation to account for its missing. The efforts by these families did not go unrecognized, as Congress dedicated funds to account for the missing servicemen and repatriate their remains. Operations began in countries all over the world including the DPRK, and advancements in DNA identification technology made repatriation a reality for some families and very real possibility for others.

Unfortunately, these operations owed their success to the brief window left in the wake of the Cold War and were later brought to a halt by impasses in political dialogue. The Coalition of Families of Korea and Cold War POWs/MIAs (a nonprofit organization of families of missing U.S. servicemen) describes the politicization of the issue as the “Great Step Backward,” stating on its website:

*Over time, however, this humanitarian commitment became increasingly politicized. Joint U.S./North Korean search and recovery efforts were suspended in an effort to pressure North Korea to return to Six Party Talks. Access to Russian archives was allowed to wither and*

*virtually fade away. Despite Presidential executive orders calling for transparency, classified files, half a century old, remained cloaked in mystery. Live sighting reports continued to haunt the families, as if the men themselves, ephemeral, walk among us. Our nation's humanitarian promise for the fullest possible accounting of its missing soldiers became, instead, an opportunity lost to political agendas.<sup>15</sup>*

Joint operations between the U.S. and DPRK to identify missing U.S. servicemen were conducted from 1996 to 2005, recovering 229 remains. The issue was revisited under the Obama administration but, like the issue of divided Korean families, negotiations over missing U.S. servicemen were complicated by politics.

In 2011, the U.S. and DPRK agreed to resume joint field operations; however, the start date for the operations was set for March 1, 2012—the same day that marked the beginning of joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises. As the DPRK views these exercises as provocative, the operations were unable to resume due, in large part, to the oversight of negotiators and the inability of U.S. policymakers to mindfully separate humanitarian operations from political obstacles. Later, Obama's policy of strategic patience effectively ruled out the possibility of pursuing any joint recovery operations.

Periodically, reports emerge that the DPRK continues to preserve the remains of U.S. servicemen and move the remains to safe locations when necessary. In March 2016, the Associated Press gained access to a dam construction site where North Koreans had discovered the remains of U.S. servicemen. Despite personal anger toward the U.S. for the destruction caused during the war, North Koreans gathered the remains for storage by the DPRK government and for their potential return to the U.S.<sup>16</sup>

Months after the AP published their coverage from the DPRK, an unofficial delegation sponsored by the Richardson Center for Global Engagement with the approval from the White House visited Pyongyang to discuss the issue along with other humanitarian concerns. Included in the delegation was Rick Downes, the president of the Coalition of Families of Korean and Cold War POW/MIAs, whose father, Lt. Hal Downes (MIA 1952), is one of the missing U.S. servicemen. After the delegation, Downes' reflections offer a glimpse at the human cost of neglecting this issue:

*“After decades of hope and pursuit, I was physically closer to my dad than at any other time since he said goodbye. I was the son returning for his father. As we lifted off on the return, I was able to again look down on those fields, those hills, with small farming villages scattered*

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15 “The Korean War.” Coalition of Families of Korean & Cold War PowMIAs. N.p., n.d. Web. 13 May 2017.

16 Press, Associated. “US Remains in N. Korea Lost in Political Limbo.” Boston Herald. N.p., 24 Mar. 2016. Web. 13 May 2017.

*among them. I said the obvious: I would be back. I don't know if I will, but being that close, at least once, brought a change within me. Some measure of closure, I suppose. A small part of me healed. Strangely enough, I feel that a small part of my dad healed too."*

While progress from the delegation has yet to be ultimately determined, the unofficial nature of the visit points to a chronic shortcoming in U.S.-DPRK relations—lack of formal mechanisms for pursuing humanitarian issues. Like the divided Korean families, families of U.S. servicemen are still actively searching for their loved ones, but find themselves obstructed by politics.

Equipment from the last joint recovery operations is still stationed in South Korea and can be used to restart operations at any moment. This issue also continues to have bipartisan support in Congress. In 2016, Congress passed the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016, which included categorical carveouts for operations relating to the recovery of U.S. servicemen remains.

Like the ongoing division of living Korean and Korean-American families, the issue of missing U.S. servicemen is damaging not only to the individual families affected, but also to larger aspects of human security affecting relations between the two countries. Focused attention on these issues represents a viable avenue for policymakers to open channels of communication and establish the history of cooperation necessary for developing political solutions.

## **People-to-people connections**

Since AFSC's entry into the DPRK in 1980, exchanges and delegations between AFSC and KCSWP have been routine practices for the organizations. Far from being photo ops, itineraries from the earliest to present-day exchanges show meeting after meeting on everything from current U.S.-DPRK relations to conservation agricultural techniques to frank discussions on humanitarian crises, lessons on U.S. NGOs, the history of the U.S. and DPRK, and much more. These exchanges have been the cornerstone of the relationship between AFSC and KCSWP and laid the groundwork for frank and honest discussions on, at times, extremely complicated subjects.

The strong relationship built between AFSC and KCSWP through exchanges and consistent communication have allowed the two organizations to (almost inadvertently) be at the forefront of responding to humanitarian needs. On at least two separate occasions, AFSC and KCSWP were among the first responders to disaster. The first such disaster came in the mid-1990s, when AFSC and KCSWP sought relief for victims of widespread famine. The second

such disaster came in response to severe flooding in the DPRK in 2007, when AFSC teamed up with KCSWP to send reconstruction supplies.<sup>17</sup>

While AFSC had never intentionally sought to provide humanitarian relief, the connections established through exchanges allowed AFSC and KCSWP to identify urgent humanitarian issues and act on the opportunity to help meet needs in the wake of crises. This type of ongoing connectivity is particularly important when communities are most vulnerable, such as during natural disasters.



AFSC and KCSWP have carried out exchanges from 1980 to present day. The partnership is one of the oldest between a U.S. and a North Korean organization. Photos: AFSC/Randy Ireson

17 "2007 Flooding: Humanitarian Responses." Database of DPRK Policy Documents. The National Committee on North Korea, 16 Nov. 2011. Web. 13 May 2017.



DPRK, 2013: AFSC and KCSWP cooperate to implement conservation agricultural techniques. *Photo: AFSC*



Pyongyang, DPRK, 1980: The first exchange between a U.S. Public Affairs organization (AFSC) and a North Korean organization (KCSWP) involved discussions on many topics and allowed for a more robust relationship and understanding. *Photo: AFSC Archives*



Pyongyang, DPRK, 1980: The first exchange between a U.S. Public Affairs organization (AFSC) and a North Korean organization (KCSWP) allowed for moments critical to relationship-building and only achievable during face-to-face interactions. *Photo: AFSC Archives*

While exchange programs are often labeled by foreign policy analysts as “soft-power” approaches, the misconception that exchanges or relationship-building is somehow “soft” is an extremely damaging concept and serves to mask yet another critical gap in U.S.-DPRK relations—people-to-people connections. In AFSC’s experience, people-to-people connections are not “soft” extensions of diplomacy—they are, in fact, the hardwiring necessary to create human security assurances, foster political cooperation, and offer the foundation for local, regional, and ultimately global security.

Historically, people-to-people exchanges have often preceded diplomatic breakthroughs, and the U.S. has been particularly adept at using exchanges in recent decades. The U.S. maintained science exchange programs with the USSR through some of the worst moments in the two countries’ relations, offering a lifeline in the midst of a potential catastrophe. Later, the Reagan administration increased exchanges in the years preceding the fall of the Soviet Union. Ping-pong diplomacy famously opened the door for Richard Nixon to normalize relations with China. More recently, George W. Bush began exchange programs with Iran alongside the discussions that ultimately led to the Iran deal,<sup>18</sup> and President Barack Obama relied heavily on exchange programs to increase the chances for a détente with Cuba.<sup>19</sup>

While there are no discernable legal or logistical obstacles, the DPRK remains one of the only countries with which the U.S. government does not conduct exchange programs. Yet, \$2 million in congressional authorizations included in the North Korea Human Rights Act of 2004 and its subsequent reauthorizations allow for “appropriate educational and cultural exchange programs with North Korean participants, to the extent not otherwise prohibited by law.” These funds are almost exclusively directed to activities such as radio broadcasting and efforts to introduce outside information into the DPRK. In AFSC’s experience, however, these activities cannot replace the “hardwiring” of people-to-people connections that are necessary to transform a conflict.

In 2016, AFSC recognized that in the absence of any previous experience, U.S. policymakers were hesitant to explore the option of government-sponsored exchange programs with the DPRK. In an effort to alleviate many of the concerns raised by policymakers and practitioners, AFSC conducted a feasibility assessment of official exchanges between the U.S. and DPRK. Published as the first volume of “Engaging North Korea,” the assessment included discussions with over two dozen U.S. and North Korean international exchange practitioners and concluded that exchanges, while not likely to be easy at first, are both possible and a critical first step in relations.

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People-to-people connections are not ‘soft’ extensions of diplomacy—they are, in fact, the hardwiring necessary to create human security assurances, foster political cooperation, and offer the foundation for local, regional, and ultimately global security.

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18 Ramin Asgard and Barbara Slavin, “US-Iran Cultural Engagement: A Cost Effective Boon to US National Security,” The Atlantic Council, Iran Task Force, 2013.

19 “Remarks by President Obama at an Entrepreneurship and Opportunity Event, Havana, Cuba,” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, March 21, 2016.

Notably, the assessment found that exchanges did not require the reversal or lifting of sanctions, nor did they require additional legislation. Existing State Department international exchange programs such as the International Visitor Leadership Program provide established methods and a ready instrument to implement such exchanges with the DPRK. However, the Obama administration's policy of "strategic patience" and embargo on engagement meant that the State Department was effectively unable to use funds for exchange programs.

While this humanitarian issue differs from those of family reunification and repatriation of servicemen's remains because there are no direct "victims" to address, the gap is nonetheless significant and urgent. AFSC has informally noted a decrease in private exchanges and overall connections between people in the U.S. and North Koreans since around 2005 to 2006, and the reduction in people-to-people connections is reflected in the inability of diplomats to sustain discussions, offer solutions, address humanitarian concerns, and take serious steps toward global security.

*(For more information on the people-to-people exchanges between the U.S. and DPRK, please see: "Engaging North Korea: Building Toward Dialogue with U.S. Government-Sponsored People-to-People Exchange Programs," available at: [afsc.org/document/engaging-north-korea](http://afsc.org/document/engaging-north-korea).)*

## **Humanitarian needs**

AFSC's role in the DPRK has evolved over the decades to fit the circumstances and needs of its partner organization. Today, our programs seek to address long-term human security issues by working to improve agricultural production and food security. According to a recent World Food Program Report, approximately 10.5 million people (41% of the total population) are undernourished in the DPRK. The report goes on to state:

*"There are many complex, intertwined reasons for the high rates of undernutrition in DPRK, including challenges in producing sufficient food. The majority of the country is mountainous, only 17 per cent of land is good for cultivation. Agriculture also remains dependent on traditional farming methods. Food production is hampered by a lack of agricultural inputs, such as quality seeds, proper fertilizer and equipment. In addition, changing weather patterns have left DPRK vulnerable to droughts and floods, which have affected agricultural production. While official Government harvest data for 2016 has not yet been released, FAO estimates that rice production in 2016 increased*

*by 23 per cent compared to the previous year when there was drought, but remains below the previous three-year average.*<sup>20</sup>

The most recent disaster caused by Typhoon Lionrock in August 2016 underscores the vulnerability of the DPRK to natural disasters and the challenges in responding to the very real humanitarian needs there.

After the typhoon struck the northeastern region of the DPRK, tens of thousands of dwellings and public buildings collapsed, transportation networks were disrupted, and cultivated lands were destroyed or submerged. DPRK media called the floods the worst natural disaster in 70 years and asked for help from international agencies, inviting aid officials to join an assessment mission. According to a Flood Emergency Response Plan released in September 2016, U.N. agencies and international NGOs estimated that up to 600,000 people were in need of some sort of ongoing assistance in terms of shelter, food and agriculture, health, nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene, and education.<sup>21</sup>

By October of 2016 (two months after the storm), however, only about 25% of flood relief funding had been secured.<sup>22</sup> Increasingly, agencies working in the DPRK have difficulty raising money to support their programs, as donors are reluctant to be associated with even emergency humanitarian relief efforts in the DPRK. Desperately needed food rations and supplies diverted to flood victims have further reduced resources intended for ongoing programs. One UNICEF official, struggling to raise money to buy vaccines for children, noted that “The sudden and large-scale disaster has put a significant strain on our existing resources in the DPR Korea, which were already underfunded.”<sup>23</sup>

Over the past decade, funding for agencies working in the DPRK has decreased from US\$300 million in 2004, to \$US40 million in 2015, and regular humanitarian support is provided by only a small number of donors.<sup>24</sup> Without sustainable, sufficient funding, critical needs of some of the most vulnerable populations are not being met.

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20 “DPR Korea Needs and Priorities March 2017.” UN Resident Coordinator for DPR Korea. N.p., 21 Mar. 2017. Web.

21 “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea: Flood Emergency Response Plan (September 2016–February 2017).” UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UN Country Team in DPRK, UN Resident Coordinator for DPR Korea, 19 Sept. 2016.

22 McCurry, Justin. “Aid Agencies in Call for North Korea Funding after Devastating Floods.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 07 Oct. 2016. Web. 13 May 2017.

23 Ferrie, Jared. “Sanctions Make Delivering Aid Hard in North Korea.” *Aid and Policy*. IRIN, 16 Sept. 2016 n.d. Web.

24 “DPR Korea Needs and Priorities March 2017.” UN Resident Coordinator for DPR Korea. N.p., 21 Mar. 2017. Web.





Floods in the late summer of 2012 devastated South Hamgyong province in the DPRK leaving over 62,000 families homeless. *Photos: Devrig Velly EU/ECHO European Commission DG ECHO*

Even when programs are funded, it is well-known among the humanitarian community that, although aid is exempt from U.S. and U.N. sanctions regulations, increased U.N. sanctions on the DPRK have created obstacles and practical problems for the international assistance community working there. Since 2013 banking channels have been disrupted, and tightened financial restrictions after the fourth nuclear test earlier this year have made money transfers into the DPRK extremely difficult. Agencies are unable to get cash into the country, making it hard to deliver much-needed aid.

Sanctions are also indirectly contributing to difficulties in raising money for international aid operations, since “[f]actors such as disruptions to fund transfers, as well as lengthy procurement processes and slow delivery of

equipment and supplies has influenced donor’s [sic] attitudes and decisions”<sup>25</sup> towards supporting work in the DPRK.

Despite progress in some areas, persistent humanitarian needs in the DPRK remain. The 2016 U.N. humanitarian country team report<sup>26</sup> estimated that 18 million North Koreans, or about three quarters of the population, is in need of some form of humanitarian assistance, yet the situation in the DPRK is “largely forgotten on the global agenda.”<sup>27</sup>

Food security remains a core problem in the DPRK. Surveys suggest that as many as 80% of households have inadequate food consumption, and over 40% of the population is undernourished.<sup>28</sup> Malnutrition is an ongoing public health concern, particularly among women and young children. Chronic malnutrition affects almost 30% of children under five,<sup>29</sup> and 50% of mothers do not have minimum diversity in their diets.<sup>30</sup>

Another key area is basic health. While significant progress has been made with some indicators, such as life expectancy and infant mortality rates, health service delivery remains inadequate, particularly in the provision of essential drugs and basic equipment.<sup>31</sup> An estimated 20% of the population also does not have access to clean water and adequate sanitation services, contributing to the incidence of public health issues, particularly among rural women and children.

Agriculture and medicine are two areas in which the DPRK government has been willing to accept assistance from the U.S., and U.S. NGOs have had success operating projects focused on food security and public health. As these projects are in line with mandated government priorities, they generally are less affected by political tensions and are more likely to address critical needs at the individual or community level.

Humanitarian and development needs in the DPRK such as food security and health care assistance are, perhaps, more well-known than other gaps in human security mentioned above. However, despite the widespread knowledge of the need for assistance in the DPRK, the issue is inherently politicized, and policies with political aims, such as sanctions, obstruct humanitarian supply chains.

Nevertheless, public and private humanitarian projects have had tremendous success and have provided critical assistance to millions of North Koreans

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25 “DPR Korea Needs and Priorities March 2017.” UN Resident Coordinator for DPR Korea. N.p., 21 Mar. 2017. Web.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

over the past two decades. Part of this success has come from dedicated mechanisms such as the World Food Program and UNICEF, which have served as channels for countries to provide aid.

Just before leaving office, President Obama sent close to \$1 million in aid to the DPRK through UNICEF following Typhoon Lionrock. The aid was largely seen as a move to “prime the pumps” for diplomacy for the next administration, an acknowledgment that the path from current tensions to global security lies in addressing humanitarian concerns.<sup>32</sup>

Recently, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated before the U.N. Security Council that the U.S. would be willing to resume aid contributions “once the D.P.R.K. begins to dismantle its nuclear weapons and missile technology programs.”<sup>33</sup> This, however, continues to overtly politicize humanitarian issues. Should the Trump administration pursue the same strategy of “strategic patience” as the Obama administration, gaps in human security will continue to undermine political efforts to establish global security frameworks.

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32 Sung-won, Baik. “US Humanitarian Aid Goes to North Korea Despite Nuclear Tensions.” USA. VOA, 25 Jan. 2017. Web. 13 May 2017.

33 Tillerson, Rex W. “Remarks at the United Nations Security Council Ministerial Session on D.P.R.K.” Remarks. U.S. Department of State, 28 Apr. 2017. Web. 13 May 2017.

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# Concluding reflections

The conflict in Korea is one of the longest running conflicts that AFSC has witnessed in its 100 years of existence. Indeed, the Korean War is one of the longest running conflicts in the modern era. Thus, the history surrounding the conflict is deep, and the politics interwoven into the division are dense. Amidst uncertain times and heightened military tensions, Korea presents one of the biggest regional and global security challenges for policymakers today.

U.S. and international policies over the last decade, which favored economic sanctions at the expense of engagement, have intensified an already profound gap in human security. A failure by policymakers to recognize and earnestly prioritize humanitarian obligations leaves personal wounds untended, maintains a sense of insecurity among the U.S. population at large, and perpetuates the possibility of war. Ultimately, this approach neglects the humanitarian assurances that help pave the way for political dialogue.

Over the last six decades, hostilities have reached an almost seasonal regularity—waxing and waning with annual military exercises, national holidays, and the occasional warm spells in relations. This entrenched pattern has continued for so long that it has become ingrained in political discourse—confining policymakers to a narrow view of the conflict and a small set of diplomatic and policy options.

The continual neglect of humanitarian issues is a direct consequence of policymakers prioritizing political solutions without first providing the necessary human security assurances that precede genuine political dialogue. Without these assurances, peace, in and of itself, becomes politicized, because any attempts at dialogue by the opposing party are quickly dismissed as insincere.

In 2013, AFSC and its sibling organization, the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL), developed a vision for foreign policy built on principles of “shared security.” Linking security at the individual and community level with security among nations, the concept of shared security redefines traditional national security paradigms by recognizing that global security depends on solutions that take all parties’ needs into account.

In the case of the DPRK, AFSC has recognized that one fundamental cause for the conflict’s perpetual nature is a prolonged neglect of humanitarian concerns. The issues of family reunification, repatriation of servicemen’s remains, people-to-people exchanges, and humanitarian aid represent some of the most urgent

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humanitarian needs—and some of the most practical, basic diplomatic steps to de-escalate tensions. Policymakers must prioritize these issues by:

- 1.** Clarifying their legal status when necessary, as with family reunifications.
- 2.** Establishing dedicated mechanisms for issues currently being neglected, such as the role played by UNICEF or WFP in providing direct humanitarian aid.
- 3.** Addressing humanitarian issues separately from political discussions on issues such as denuclearization, reunifications, etc. and prioritizing humanitarian issues in diplomatic talks.

As AFSC celebrates 100 years of building shared security, we hope these insights and reflections from AFSC's experience in Korea are not just taken to heart by policymakers, but pursued with fresh energy to transform the conflict in Korea.

“If you want to make peace  
with your enemy, you have  
to work with your enemy.  
Then he becomes your  
partner.”

—Nelson Mandela