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By Gavan McCormack

On 13 June 2005, the doors of the White House Oval Office opened to admit a young (37 year-old) Korean man named Kang Chol-Hwan, a refugee from North Korea and perhaps the first person from North Korea for the president to meet. Kang was slightly overwhelmed by the warmth of his welcome, not only from President George W. Bush but also Vice-President Dick Cheney and National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley. Just three days earlier, in the same room, Bush had hosted a visit by South Korean president Roh Moo-Hyun. The welcome for Kang, the refugee, was by all accounts much warmer than that for the head of state, and at forty minutes lasted about as long.

Kang may have been virtually unknown outside Korea prior to his White House reception, but in South Korea he has become a representative of the community of Talpukja, or "those who have fled the North." He was invited to the White House because Bush had just read his book, co-authored with Pierre Rigoulot, The Aquariums of Pyongyang-Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag (New York, Basic Books, 2001). He so much liked it that he had not only recommended it to his close advisers but told Kang he wanted "all Americans" to read it.

Appearing on Japanese television some weeks after meeting the president, Kang recounted Bush's question: if the two were to change places, what would Kang adopt as basic US policy on North Korea? Kang replied that he thought priority should be given to human rights over nuclear matters since, he said, that was what the people of North Korea most cared about. Bush, he said, responded with enthusiastic agreement. About a month after the White House visit, Kang's call for a hard-line approach to North Korea was featured in the Wall Street Journal (14 July).

It was in itself a trivial episode, but it suggested that, when the Beijing "Six-Sided" talks on North Korea begin again, as now seems likely, in the last week of July, any simple "deal" to exchange North Korean nuclear weapons for guarantees of security and diplomatic and economic normalization will be difficult to negotiate. The president's enthusiastic welcome for Kang suggests he wants not merely to disarm North Korea but to transform it by the introduction of "democracy" and "human rights;" in short his ultimate goal, as he put it in his State of the Union address in February, is "ending tyranny in our world."

Kang was born into a well-to-do "Korean-in-Japan" family in Kyoto headed by grandmother, a committed communist, and grandfather, a successful capitalist with some gangster connections who had grown rich in postwar Japan on running something described as a "gambling saloon," presumably a pachinko parlor, opposite the main railway station. Despite having bartered some of that wealth into education and improved social status, the family was, nevertheless, insecure. Japanese citizens during the imperial period from 1910, Koreans had been deprived of that citizenship in the wake of the war, suddenly becoming foreigners, deprived of various rights, discriminated against.

During the 1960s North Korea looked a more attractive option to some, and a steady flow of such "Koreans in Japan" decided to "return" to it, despite the fact that the family origin for almost all was in South Korea. They "returned," in other words, to a country they did not know, to join in construction of the North Korean "fatherland" which they imagined as a socialist paradise, free of the misery and discrimination they experienced in Japan. The Kang family packed everything, even their late model Volvo (which at that time indicated quite extraordinary wealth), and sailed for North Korea as part of this movement.

In North Korea, Chol-Hwan's grandmother became a deputy to the Supreme People's Assembly. For a time the family retained a great deal of privilege, as well as their Volvo, and lived near the embassy quarter. Chol-Hwan was born in Pyongyang around 1968. His childhood and early boyhood seem to have been happy enough and he writes warmly of his primary school teachers at "The School of the People" in the Pyongyang of the early 1970s. In 1977, however, his capitalist grandfather disappeared, apparently arrested for treason, and shortly afterwards the whole family (with the exception of his mother) was sent to the countryside. Chol-hwan was then 9 years of age. Yodok was to

be his home for 10 years.

It was, says Chol-Hwan a little guiltily, “by no means the toughest camp.” Mostly, it accommodated returnees from Japan, while other camps housed “members of landowning families, capitalists, US or South Korean agents, Christians, or members of purged Party circles deemed noxious to the state,” most likely between 150,000 and 200,000 people in all.

Chol-Hwan spent his boyhood at Yodok, first in a school, though one that seemed to practice routine brutality and have few pretences to education, then in various work gangs. His energies were devoted to surviving: stealing food from the camp kitchens or fields, searching out wild berries or hunting and catching snakes, fish, frogs, or rabbits, raising rats to supplement the starvation rations. It was a hard and unrelenting life, occasionally terrifying - he says he witnessed 15 public executions - although there were also times that uplifted his boyish spirit: the encounter with a bear in the mountains, his shared feast with friends on a snake. The wondrous scenery also gave him joy. In his later years in the camp, by then a teenager, he found himself at various times the camp custodian of rabbits, bees, or sheep, and hunter for wild ginseng. His uncle became manager of the camp distillery and seems to have wielded considerable power. Eventually, inexplicably, the family was released, and after some years surviving on his wits, trading on the black market and on moneys sent him from Japan, Chol-Hwan escaped, first to China and then to South Korea.

The story is scarcely a classic but, written more than a decade after his escape, it was one of the first North Korean refugee biographies to be published in the West (first in French, then in English) and it offers a plain, grim, moving story of prison camp life through the eyes of a child and boy. Kang’s co-author, Frenchman Pierre Rigoulot, had been a contributing editor to the Black Book of Communism (first published in France in 1997), and it was perhaps his contribution to tailor Kang’s story so that North Korea is presented as one more example of the monstrous perversion of communism. Kang and Rigoulot make no attempt to locate North Korea in the context of the trauma and tragedy of Korean history, the half century of Japanese colonialism, the externally imposed division, the terrible civil war turned by external intervention into a catastrophe, and the prolonged Cold War that continues on the peninsula to this day.

In South Korea Kang has become a journalist and a severe critic of the South Korean government policy of accommodation (“Sunshine”) towards the North. Late in 2004, he was one of the organizers of an exhibition in Seoul under the title “North Korean Holocaust.” By hosting him just days after his meeting with South Korean president Roh, Bush was sending an unmistakable signal to the government in South Korea. For both Kang and Bush, the Pyongyang regime is evil, there can be no compromise with it, and “sunshine” is tantamount to appeasement.

By an odd coincidence, in the same year of publication of Kang’s book, 2001, another Korean gulag story was published, also in New York. By an even stranger coincidence it too tells the story of a Korean-in-Japan family, also from Kyoto. Its author, however, Suh Sung, endured not 10 but 19 years of horror, in South rather than North Korea, under even worse conditions including torture, before being released just a little after Chol-Hwan, in 1990 (Suh Sung, Unbroken Spirits: Nineteen Years in South Korea’s Gulag, New York, Rowman and Littlefield, 2001). Author Suh, now a professor at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, was convicted on apparently trumped-up political charges in 1971, tortured, and not released from prison till 1990. His book was written a decade later, published first in Japanese and Korean, then in English.

The Kang and Suh families in postwar Kyoto were on opposite sides of a Cold War fence that divided communities in Japan as well as internationally, Kang’s was affiliated with North Korea and Suh’s with South Korea. When Kang arrived in Seoul, which seemed to him the epitome of freedom, Suh was still in his gulag, gaining his release only after the US-supported military regime there was brought to an end by massive popular protest.

The picture presented by Suh of his long imprisonment in South Korea is almost the reverse image of Kang’s picture of North Korea. Where Kang attributed the brutality and oppression of his gulag to “communism,” Suh attributes his to anti-communism. One is blind to the gulags of the South, the other is blind to those of the North; both illuminate the horrors of daily life in their respective gulags, but tell us little of the structure in which both systems evolved.

When Kang Chol-Hwan got to Seoul around 1989 he found freedom, coca-cola - his first swallow was so wonderful that it cured his cold - and a job. South Korea had just gone through a huge transformation (1987) tantamount to a democratic revolution that brought the succession of military dictatorships to an end, yet he seems to have been unaware of it. Suh Sung was still in prison, not released till the following year. Freedom was a fresh shoot in South Korea, but for Kang, enjoying his coke, simply being non- and anti-communist meant being free.

It is unlikely that Suh’s story will find its way on to the presidential bookshelves, and doubtful anyway that President Bush would want to read much of it. Kang’s simplistic tale of good and evil, freedom and communism, much better suits his preconceptions than any complex historical insight into the Korean division. Suh’s book would be much more difficult for him to understand, not only because it tells of political prisons and immense suffering under a US-installed “Free World” regime, but also because the repression described there is now a thing of the past. With the presidential blessing, publishers will no doubt take steps to make Kang’s book available to “all Americans.”

Bush’s understanding of Korea is probably widely shared in Washington. When both houses of Congress unanimously adopted the North Korean Human Rights Law in July 2004, they were thinking along those lines. Under the banner of “human rights” and “democracy,” US propaganda against the North Korean regime is now being stepped up, radio receivers secretly infiltrated into the country, and funding substantially increased for organizations, many of them of a fundamentalist religious hue, to work with refugees, spread the gospel (creating 10,000 underground churches, as the General League of Korean Christians put it as far back as 1997), and undermine the regime.

Kang’s book focuses necessary attention on the North Korean refugee problem. There are basically two approaches to it. The one favored by Kang assumes the impossibility of human rights concerns being addressed under the existing regime and therefore calls for steps designed to maximize the flow of refugees with a view to precipitating an “East German” type regime collapse. This is essentially the view held by the prominent defector, Hwang Jang-Yop, formerly right-hand man of Kim Il Sung and architect of the North Korean “Juche” ideology, who defected to South Korea in 1997 and was welcomed in Washington in 2003 (though not by the White House), and it is the basic view underpinning the Human Rights Law.

For most of those who live in the surrounding region, however, especially the governments in Seoul, Beijing, and Moscow, such a collapse offers the nightmare prospect of millions fleeing on foot or by boat from a disaster zone or becoming dependent on international relief organizations as the economy and society spirals into chaos and die-hard North Korean military groups engage in violent resistance, with or without nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction.

The alternative is to strive to "normalize" North Korea, negotiating to address its security concerns and persuade it to renounce its nuclear ambitions in exchange for diplomatic, political and economic recognition and assistance packages aimed at integrating it within a booming Northeast Asian region. The refugee problem is large, but not of massive proportions: about 6,000 Talpukja in South Korea (where they have proved extremely difficult to assimilate and most live precariously on welfare), and somewhere between 300,000 and 500,000 in China, especially Northeast China which is just a river crossing away, where they are treated as illegal immigrants, extremely insecure and liable to arrest and repatriation. Most of these have fled from severe economic conditions, especially famine, that have prevailed in certain parts of the country for a decade, and only a small proportion for political rather than economic reasons (two out of a sample of 63 in a 2004 study by Refugee International).

The North Korean economic collapse of the 1990s occurred for a complex of political, economic and ecological conditions, for only some of which the regime could be held directly responsible, and despite the severe sanctions under which the country still labors the reforms adopted in the last few years seem to have arrested the decline. Most observers believe the transition to market mechanisms is now probably irreversible, although a real revival of the country is impossible so long as sanctions, isolation, and military confrontation with the US, persist.

The preferred solution in this view is precisely the opposite of the Kang, Bush, and Congressional view. It is to depoliticize the humanitarian crisis, to persuade the Chinese government to guarantee the rights of refugees, including by the grant of provisional residence status, and North Korea to guarantee non-punishment of those who wish to return (along the lines of the "Orderly Repatriation Program" under which 72,000 refugees returned to Vietnam between 1990 and 1995), within the frame of a comprehensive settlement of the many North Korea-related problems on the table of the Beijing Conference. [This discussion benefits from reading an unpublished paper by Chung Byung-ho of Hanyang University.] South Korea would, in this view, play the key role, and the aim would be a "soft landing" for North Korea. Reconstruction of the country through the ending of sanctions against it and its admission to international financial and economic cooperation institutions would open the way, first, to solving the basic problem of physical survival, and then those of political and social rights. The Koreans themselves will have to play the central role in this process. The rhetoric of "human rights," presently strongest among neo-conservative ideologues and fundamentalist Christians in Washington and Seoul, should not be allowed to disguise the likelihood of the disastrous consequences such policies would entail for those it would pretend to aid.

It is good that President Bush has read at least one book on Korea, by a Korean, even if one cannot help wishing he had read two. The one he read can only confirm his simplistic view of the Korean problem, while the one he did not read might have helped him to realize that human rights abuses on the Korean peninsula are rooted at a deeper level than the confrontation between communism and anti-communism, and that the original sin from which half a century and more of militarization, confrontation and denial of human rights have flowed is none other than division itself. The abolition of the gulag in South Korea owed nothing to foreign intervention, and it is likely to be the same for North Korea. What has maintained the dictatorship in the North for so long has been above all the uncompromising hostility of its enemies, allowing the regime to capitalize on national pride and determination to remain independent. Rather than more intervention – to bring about "regime change" – what Korea needs is to be left alone to redress the long-continuing trauma caused by the massive interventions of the past. Since the South-North summit of June 2000, the Korean people have been making substantial progress in precisely this direction.

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