

# CHANGING THE NARRATIVE:

THE PEOPLE OF NORTH KOREA



**LIBERTY  
IN  
NORTH  
KOREA**

*“Today I owe it to my daughter to tell my story. Hee-Mang is like a lighthouse to me. She gives me light and a reason for why I need to keep living and working hard for freedom. I hold onto the dream that one day we will live together again.”*

—JO EUN, A NORTH KOREAN REFUGEE





he crimes against humanity occurring in North Korea are unparalleled in the contemporary world. They include murder, enslavement, torture, imprisonment, rape,

forced abortions, and other sexual violence. Persecution on political, religious, racial, and gender grounds, along with forcible transfer of populations, enforced disappearance, and knowingly causing prolonged starvation, are also commonplace.

Modern-day North Korean political prison camps resemble 20<sup>th</sup> century Nazi concentration camps. Repatriated refugees are subjected to torture, forced labor detention, and, in some cases, sexual violence.

The question that arises is this: So why isn't much of the outside world aware of the challenges the North Korean people face?

The answer is simple: our stories of North Korea primarily revolve around Kim Jong-un and nuclear weapons. Instead of seeing the faces and hearing the stories of the people of North Korea, we often see the entire country as a mysterious and dangerous enemy. The reality, beneath the political surface, is 25 million people who face one of the world's most brutal regimes. The unspeakable atrocities being committed against the North Korean people serve as the ultimate means to terrorize them into submission. The regime refuses to acknowledge the existence of political prison camps, and even claims there are no human rights issues inside the country (at the same time not allowing any kind of human rights monitors inside). They have constructed a completely different and self-serving concept of human rights. On a human level, what does life look like in North Korea? We've heard stories from some of the over 30,000 North Korean refugees who have escaped, and have stunning accounts of their lives inside the country's borders. The following are just a few of the struggles they face on a daily basis as North Korean citizens.



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## Living Conditions and Challenges in North Korea

**No Freedom of Movement.** It's illegal for North Koreans to leave their country without the regime's permission. The regime attempts to restrict the people's movement, even inside their own country. If citizens wish to travel to another part of the country, they must have a specific purpose, and obtain permission from their work unit. The regime has also forcibly relocated hundreds of thousands of North Koreans to less favorable parts of the country as a form of punishment and political persecution.

**No Freedom of Speech.** Reported criticism of the regime, or North Korean leadership, is enough to make one's entire family 'disappear' from society to a political prison camp. There is no free media inside the country. The only opinion allowed to be voiced is the regime's.

**No Freedom of Information.** Knowing that outside information poses a threat to their propaganda and ideology (and, ultimately, its control over the people), the regime has invested massive resources in maintaining an information blockade. It currently has a monopoly over information and ideas. It's illegal to own a tunable radio in North Korea. There's no Internet access, other than for a few hand-picked and monitored officials. North Korean landlines and mobile phones cannot make international calls.

**Forced Worship of the Leadership.** The regime forces people to participate in the maintenance of personality cults around the Kim leaders who have ruled the country for over 60 years. Propaganda begins in nursery school. A large portion of the



curriculum for all students—even at university—is dedicated to memorizing the history of the Kim family. State media provides a constant stream of myths about the Kims and lauds the sacrifices they supposedly make for the people. Millions of labor-hours that could be used developing the economy have to be spent idolizing the leaders instead.

**No Religious Freedom.** Organized religion is seen as a potential threat to the regime. Nothing apart from token churches, built as a façade for foreign visitors, is allowed. Thousands of Buddhists and Christians have been purged and persecuted throughout the nation’s history. People caught practicing or spreading religion in secret are punished extremely harshly, including by public execution or being sent to political prison camps.

**Chronic Food Shortages.** The regime’s refusal to effectively reform its failed agricultural policies, combined with susceptibility to adverse climate conditions, and an inability to purchase necessary agricultural inputs or food imports, means that the North Korean people have faced food shortages ever since the 1990s. Millions of malnourished children and babies, pregnant women, and nursing mothers bear the brunt of the shortages today. This has left an entire generation of North Koreans with stunted growth and a higher susceptibility to health problems.

**Dismal Public Health.** The regime claims that it provides universal health care to its people. In reality, the majority of the public health care system collapsed in the 1990s. Only prioritized hospitals in areas such as Pyongyang kept functioning. Elsewhere, health services and medicine are only available to those who can afford it. Ordinary North Koreans are afflicted by easily-preventable poverty-related diseases, such as tuberculosis and cataracts.

**Songbun Political Apartheid System.** The North Korean regime has invested an incredible amount of time and resources creating the Songbun system, a form of political apartheid that ascribes you with a level of perceived political loyalty

based on your family background. Your particular Songbun level (there are 51) can restrict your life opportunities, including where you can live, educational opportunities, Party membership, military service, occupation, and treatment by the criminal justice system. Any perceived political infractions by your family will lead to your Songbun being demoted.

**Political Prison Camps.** Five political prison camps hold an estimated 80,000 to 120,000 people. Some of the camps are the size of cities. They have existed five times as long as Nazi concentration camps, and twice as long as Soviet Gulags. Many imprisoned in these camps weren’t guilty of any crime, but were related to someone who supposedly committed a political crime. Often, prisoners have no idea what that crime was. Children born in the camps are raised as prisoners, because their ‘blood is guilty’. Forced labor, brutal beatings, and death are commonplace. The regime denies the existence of these camps, but multiple survivor testimonies have been corroborated by former guards, as well as satellite images.

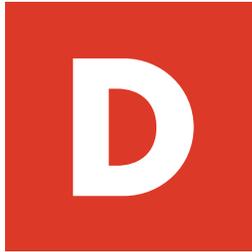
**Collective Punishment.** In North Korea, if your relative is persecuted for “anti-state” or “anti-socialist” crimes, then you and three generations of your family can be punished for it, as well. The aim of this policy is to remove from society the whole family unit, preventing any dissent from emerging in the future. Collective punishment is also meant to deter martyrs who might sacrifice themselves for a political cause, but would not want to sacrifice their entire family.

**Public Executions.** The North Korean regime publicly executes citizens who have been accused of a variety of crimes, including petty theft. Whole communities, including children, are brought out to watch these executions, which are designed to instill fear amongst the people and discourage doing anything that could be perceived to be against the regime’s wishes.

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## The Resilience of the North Korean People



Despite the challenges, the North Korean people are shaking up the status quo. They're changing their country at the grassroots level and it's eroding the regime's control.

When the government could no longer provide them with adequate food, health care, and other basic life necessities, the people took matters into their own hands. Soon after the collapse of the public distribution system (or the state-socialist economy), the North Korean people turned to market activities, and black markets and private markets began to crop up. These illegal outposts provided citizens with a place to barter, buy and sell food, supplies, and even gain access to information about the outside world.

North Korean refugees are also risking their lives to escape their country. They're fleeing into China but China is not safe. The Chinese government arrests and forcibly repatriates North Korean refugees. If sent back, refugees can face extremely harsh punishments for leaving the country, including torture, forced labor, forced abortions, and internment in political prison camps. Even if refugees manage to evade the authorities in China, their status forces them to work in invisible industries and leaves them vulnerable to exploitation by sex traffickers and unscrupulous employers. Many North Korean refugees do not have the resources or connections to seek safety in another country on their own.

The journey to freedom is long and dangerous. Refugees must travel over 3,000 miles through China to reach countries in Southeast Asia where they can seek asylum. Here is the story of Jo Eun, a North Korean refugee who risked her life to reach freedom.

# JO EUN'S STORY >





The Tumen River starts on the slopes of Mount Paektu. Its icy waters twist and turn for hundreds of miles before slipping off the Korean peninsula and into the East Sea. In the summer, the reeds along

the river grow taller than me and yellow and white wildflowers blossom along the banks.

I was born next to the Tumen. I grew up playing on its rocky shore, splashing and swimming in its waters. In the winter, my friends and I would race up and down on ice skates. For my mom's birthday, we would catch fish and cook them under the shade of a tree. I have many fond memories of the Tumen.

But I want to tell you about the times I tried to cross it. Because those times nearly cost me my life. The Tumen is more than a river. It's a razor that cuts its way between North Korea and China. It's a meandering border of shallow water that you can wade across in minutes. And in the winter, you can slide across its ice even faster. Just like I did for the final time last year.

I decided to cross the Tumen for the first time 8 years ago. I did it for my daughter. Her name is Hee-Mang which means hope in Korean. As a baby she was so calm and happy. I would adore her sweet smile and when I held her it melted away the pain and heartache of life in North Korea.

When she started saying "mommy" and took her first steps I was ecstatic. Her laughter was precious and her eyes beamed with life. But I was always worried that I couldn't be a good mother. I wanted to give Hee-Mang a better life than I had. I knew of friends who had defected to South Korea. They sent money back and their families seemed to be much better off. So I decided to leave North Korea to make money and eventually bring Hee-Mang to freedom.

The first time I tried to cross the Tumen I didn't get far. The broker I hired to help me escape worked for the secret police. They dragged me out of my hiding spot and sent me off to a detention center.

**That's where I first learned how much freedom would actually cost.**

It was March and a pregnant woman arrived after being arrested in China. The courtyard of the detention center was covered in snow and ice. The guard forced her to walk around on her hands and knees in the snow for hours. He mocked her, saying that you got pregnant with the baby of a dog so you have to walk like a dog. Then he'd pry open her mouth and spit in it. If any of us cried or pleaded for him to show mercy, he'd force us to do the same.

When we weren't crammed into our cells, sleeping on a filthy floor, we were forced to work. From 5am to 11pm we'd go into the mountains to gather firewood. The labor left your hands raw with blisters and the cold bit at your fingers and toes.



We were only fed a quarter of an ear of corn per meal. It was never enough and the hunger clawed at our stomachs. People grew so hungry that the guards had to drag them from the toilets so they wouldn't eat their own feces. Some mornings I woke up to find one of my cellmates stiff and lifeless. We'd march off to gather firewood and their pale body just laid there, their cheeks hollowed out from the hunger.

One afternoon, I decided to escape. I walked over to an unlocked window, flung myself out the opening, and started running. For 4 days I trekked through the wilderness until I reached my hometown. But from the hill above my parent's house I could see the security agents waiting for me. I had no place to go and I was terrified of being caught. I wanted to see Hee-Mang again but it was too dangerous.

So I returned to the Tumen River. It was summer now – when the rains come up from the south and the river swells into a rage. It was pouring the night I crossed and the current swept me downstream. I waded out on the other side and into China. A Chinese family gave me food and dry clothes and when I told them I needed to go to South Korea, they connected me with a broker.

I moved south through China with a group of 12 other North Korean refugees. We were nearly to Southeast Asia when we stopped to spend the night in a small motel. There were two young boys with us. They were 9 and 10 and they were running around the motel yelling in Korean. The receptionist must have overheard them.

I was on the fourth floor when I heard police sirens outside. I raced to the window but it was bolted shut with metal bars. The Chinese police barged into the room and handcuffed all of us.

There was a teenage girl with us whose mom was waiting for her in South Korea. She wailed and pleaded with the Chinese police: "Please please, can I just go to be with my mom. She's going to be so worried about me. I just need my

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mom." She cried out over and over. As a mother I felt terrible for her. I just wanted to tell her that it would be alright. But we all knew that was a lie.

We were returned to North Korea.

The secret police demanded the women strip naked and they searched our genitals for anything we might have hidden, slapping and whipping us and calling us whores the entire time. My interrogator wanted me to confess to trying to defect to South Korea. I begged her to understand my situation but instead she grabbed my head and slammed it against a nail in the wall. I remember thinking as she took a fistful of my hair "Is this my fate? Is this how I'll die? The tears mixed with the blood pouring out of the gash in my forehead.

I couldn't let go of the thought of Hee-Mang growing up without a mom. I wanted to be a good mother, I wanted to give her everything she deserved. I knew I couldn't die here. Everyone in my group but me was sent to a political prison camp, even those two little boys. But because I refused to confess to trying to defect, I avoided that fate and was instead transferred to another prison where I was forced to work 18 hours a day in a gold mine to earn money for the regime.

They worked us so hard and fed us so little. But I had a daughter waiting for me. And now more than ever, I wanted her to live in freedom. Life in prison was so difficult that I considered killing myself many times. There is a saying in North Korea "Women are weak, but mothers are strong". Being Hee-Mang's mother gave me the strength to withstand the pain. For two years, I endured the back-breaking work hoping for the day I would reunite with Hee-Mang.

3 years after I was released I stood next to the Tumen again, staring north and dreaming of freedom. This time I had Hee-Mang with me. She was 4 years old now and I wanted her to have a

## JO EUN'S STORY

happy, fulfilling life. I wanted her to see the world and learn about other cultures. There was nothing for her in North Korea except pain and misery. So I scooped her up from her bed and carried her out of the house.

I put her on my back, her head nestled on my shoulder, and waded into the river. I was almost to the middle of the river when her foot touched the water. Hee-Mang woke up and whimpered "Oh it's cold."

That's all it took.

The border guards heard her and raced down to the water. I waded faster and faster with Hee-Mang's little arms wrapped tightly around my neck. I lunged with each step trying desperately to get away. Then I felt a hand grab my hair. Hee-Mang started screaming as I tried to fight them off. But when they ripped her from me, I had no choice. I surrendered.

They dragged us back to shore and started kicking me and stomping on my head. And then they kicked my daughter. My precious, beautiful, Hee-Mang. An innocent 4-year old girl. She was sobbing in pain and her cries for mommy were muffled by the blood spilling out from her mouth.

I jumped on top of her to cover her little body from the soldiers' boots. I pleaded with them to beat me instead. She didn't know what was going on. It wasn't her fault. "It was me, I did this! Punish me, not her!" I screamed.

Last year I crossed the Tumen for the final time. I could see my breath as I shuffled across the ice on my hands and knees. I crawled up the other bank into China, bent back the barbed wire, and ran for the van that was waiting for me on the other side. From the van, I looked back at North Korea and wondered if I'd ever come back or see Hee-Mang again.

This time I connected with someone that knew a group helping North Korean refugees reach safety. The group turned out to

be Liberty in North Korea and they helped me move quickly out of the border region and then we headed south. I couldn't eat or sleep until we made it out of China because I was so scared of getting caught. Every time the bus stopped, I was certain that the police had found me again.

But soon I found myself crossing the border into Southeast Asia. When LiNK's field staffer told me I was finally safe I was overwhelmed. I had endured so much to make it this far – hard labor, imprisonment, and torture. And even though I was overjoyed to make it to freedom, I was deeply saddened that Hee-Mang wasn't with me.

I left her with my family because I couldn't bear the thought of her getting caught again and sent to a political prison camp. I question that decision every day.

Today I owe it to my daughter to tell my story. Hee-Mang is like a lighthouse to me. She gives me light and a reason for why I need to keep living and working hard for freedom. I hold onto the dream that one day we will live together again.

Before I left last year I bought us matching watches. It's just a cheap watch, but to me it has more value than any jewel. When I miss her, I wear it and I have hope that each minute that passes is one minute closer to the day I will see her again.

I wouldn't be telling this story today without the support of people like you. Thank you for helping me escape and finally reach freedom. Your willingness to help North Koreans even though you do not know our names or see our faces, is unbelievable. Your generosity has changed my life and the lives of so many others.

But most of all, you give me hope that one day I will be able to return to the Tumen River and walk hand in hand with Hee-Mang. And we will no longer have to be afraid. Because we will be together.

**And we will be free.**

Thank you.

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# THE VISION OF LiNK:

## LIBERTY IN NORTH KOREA



We believe that the North Korean people will achieve their liberty in our lifetime. This report shows some of the tremendous challenges the North Korean people must overcome in order

to live free and full lives. While the international media focuses on Kim Jong-un, nuclear weapons, and even Dennis Rodman's bizarre visits, we want to bring attention to the 25 million North Korean people who are facing a brutal regime.

We're working with the North Korean people by rescuing refugees like Jo Eun, empowering North Koreans in their new lives of freedom, and changing the narrative on North Korea.

### RESCUING REFUGEES

We have already helped over 1,000 North Korean refugees reach freedom through our secret rescue routes! These rescue routes are like a modern-day underground railroad that starts in Northern China and ends once a North Korean refugee resettles in South Korea or the United States. Our free passage model ensures that refugees reach safety without cost or condition and that they are treated with dignity and respect throughout the risky journey. Rescues are only possible because of our incredible donors who fund this life-saving work.

### EMPOWERING RESETTLED REFUGEES

We work with North Korean refugees to support a smooth transition into their new lives of freedom.

We've created a community they can rely on during the challenges that come with starting over in South Korea, and we provide resources and programs that cultivate empowerment, self-efficacy, and a sense of belonging.

When refugees have the tools to succeed, they become pioneers of freedom to their families and friends back inside North Korea.

### CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

North Korea is more than Kim Jong-un and nuclear weapons – it's home to 25 million people. But for decades the North Korean regime has dominated the narrative, preventing the North Korean people from raising their voices and sharing their stories with the world. We're working with North Korean refugees to change that. As more North Koreans share their stories, it helps humanize the North Korean people and mobilizes more international support. We also create documentaries, short videos, presentations, online content, campaigns, and other creative communication materials to educate the global community on the challenges facing the North Korean people and their potential to drive change.

The people of North Korea are resilient, resourceful, and full of potential. We have a unique opportunity to work alongside them to accelerate change in the most isolated country in the world. Get involved today and together we can rescue more refugees, we can empower more resettled North Koreans to be agents of change, and we can change the narrative to focus on the people.



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# WHAT YOU CAN DO

You can stand in solidarity with the North Korean people. Here are ways that you can help support the North Korean people as they achieve their liberty.

## DONATE HERE

Your generous donation will make rescues possible and impact the lives of the North Korean people. 100% of your gift goes to programs that support the North Korean people.

## LEARN MORE

There are hours of content and hundreds of pages of information regarding North Korea. To learn more about anything you read in this report, head to our site and visit the "Learn" tab.

## FUNDRAISE

North Korean refugees just want to be free. You can help make that possible. Build a team or join a team to get your community involved.

## JOIN A RESCUE TEAM

Join hundreds of Rescue Teams around the world funding rescues for North Korean refugees. Or start one in your own community!

## REQUEST A SPEAKER

Bring a LiNK representative to your school or community to provide an engaging, multi-media presentation, as well as opportunities for the audience to get involved.

# JOIN US!

**LIBERTY IN OUR LIFETIME**



**[LIBERTYINNORTHKOREA.ORG](http://LIBERTYINNORTHKOREA.ORG)**