



NORTH KOREA

Journalism in the service of a totalitarian dictatorship

Fact-finding mission By Vincent Brossel

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"I was punished for six months, forced to work on a pig farm, for forgetting to write the last syllable of Kim Jong-il. Dozens of other journalists like me have been "revolutionized," that is to say re-educated, for making a mistake." So said a former North Korean TV journalist who is now a refugee in South Korea. The sole purpose of the North Korean news media – "Kim Jong-il's troops," as they are called in the warlike official terminology – is to serve the Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il personality cult.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea – North Korea – has been placed last in the Reporters Without Borders worldwide ranking of countries by respect for press freedom for the past three years. It is hard to see any ray of hope there. Nonetheless, amid an international crisis linked to Pyongyang's intransigence about its nuclear military programme, some observers see a cautious opening. Some international news media have even talked of a "Pyongyang spring." What does this mean for press freedom? Are the media, which are still controlled by the single party, benefiting from the economic reforms launched by Kim Jong-il and the policy of rapprochement with South Korea?

Reporters Without Borders sent a fact-finding mission to South Korea in September 2004 to seek information from former North Korean journalists, South Korean specialists and human rights organisations.



News media given over to the personality cult

At the journalism school of Kim Il-sung university in Pyongyang, students learn to adhere to the "permanent information plan," which establishes a strict hierarchy for the work of the media. There are four categories of reporting. The priority is publicising the greatness of Kim Il-sung and his son Kim Jong-il. Second place goes to demonstrating the superiority of North Korean socialism. Third is denouncing impe-

rialist and bourgeois corruption. Criticising the invasion instinct of the imperialists and Japanese comes fourth.

Journalists must organise their work on the basis of these criteria. "Once a month, the TV chairman organises a monthly press plan and distributes subjects to the different sections," said Jang Hae-sung, who was an editor with the State TV station, *Joon-gAng Bang Song* (Central Television) from 1976 to 1996. "For example, I would be assigned three reports on Kim Jong-il's greatness and two on the imperialist threat. For this, we had access to the TV archives. A large room where cassettes are filed away by such themes as "Kim Jong-il's greatness in agriculture" or "Kim Jong-il's greatness in industry." Obviously, there were secret archives as well, especially South Korean TV footage. We needed the television chairman's permission to use them."

The news media are required to adhere to other principles when referring to Kim Jong-il. They must ensure that his name is always followed by his three most splendid titles: "General Secretary of the Korean Workers' Party, Chairman of the National Defence Commission of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Supreme Commander of the People's Army of Korea."

It is forbidden to write an article about his presence in any part of the country before he has left it. For security's sake. The one exception was his historic meeting in June 2000 with South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, which was broadcast the same day, while the South Korean TV stations were allowed to cover the event live from Pyongyang.

Like his father before him, Kim Jong-il clearly delights in the media pomp. TV journalists have very strict instructions about the way to film the "Dear Leader." Kim Jong-il often writes editorials for the Workers' Party newspaper expounding his ideas about "juche" (self-reliance), the party's mission and capitalism's weak points. Official writers and poets bestow him with such obsequious metaphors as "the sole successor of the Great Leader," "the guiding star of juche," "the artisan of Kimilsungism" and "the supreme and unrivalled model for the disciples of Kimilsungism." At the same time, he has very little contact with the foreign press and rarely gives interviews. Among the very few to have had this privilege in the past 10 years are the Cuban daily *Granma*, the Russian news agency *Itar-tass* and the pro-Pyongyang American journalist Moon Myung-ja.



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In general, prominence is systematically given to everything concerning Kim Jong-il and Kim Il-sung, who became the “Eternal President” in 1998, four years after his death. For example, the day South Korea reported a major explosion in North Korea, the official North Korean news agency *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA) reported that Cuban deputy leader Raul Castro had sent Kim Jong-il a bouquet of flowers to congratulate him for the achievements of North Korean socialism. The regime also tries to convince the outside world of the greatness of the Kim dynasty, especially through its shortwave broadcasts on the *Voice of Korea*. In 1997, Pyongyang bought advertising space in the New York Times and the London-based *Sunday Times* to mark Kim Jong-il’s 55th birthday. And although the Internet is still embryonic in the north, the regime has invested in it to promote the great leaders, above all on the website www.uriminzokkiri.com.



This personality cult has a contradictory impact on the population. Few of the hundreds of refugees interviewed by Doctors Without Borders dare to criticise the late Kim Il-sung, who is still viewed as the “Father of the Nation” and as the leader who resisted the Japanese occupation and industrialised the country. On the other hand, Lee Joo-il, who arrived in Seoul at the end of the 1990s, said it was the personality cult excesses that made him critical: “The news media would run entire pages with letters from Africans saying they were enthusiastic students of Kim Il-sung’s life and ‘juche’ philosophy. But we would never find anything in the newspapers about what Euro-

peans and Americans thought of the regime. Why were only the small, poor countries interested in the results of North Korean socialism?”

Nonetheless, the personality cult has enabled Kim Jong-il to forge a young generation of managers around him who are completely devoted. “For them, Kim Il-sung is the Father of the Nation while Kim Jong-il saved the country after the terrible years of famine,” said Chung Chang-hyun from the South Korean daily *JoongAng Ilbo*. “These young officials went through the ordeal with him.”

The party control

Article 11 of the North Korean constitution is clear in its definition of the one-party state: “The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea must conduct all of its activities under the leadership of the Korean Workers’ Party.” Another article proclaims that, “the citizen enjoys press freedom.” But the very official Dictionary of History says: “The press disseminates and explains the policies of the party and the eminent comrade... Not only does it defend it firmly, but it helps to achieve the dictatorship of the proletariat and thereby the unity of the people and the unification of ideas.”

The single party is guided by “juche” (the quest for self-reliance and autonomy) and Kim Il-sung’s revolutionary ideology. The central committee or its political bureau is supposed to take the decisions. But in practice, it is Kim Jong-il at the head of the presidium (of which he is the sole member) who runs the country, like his father before him.

His immediate entourage consists of members of his family. By all appearances, he personally runs the feared state security police, the Kukka Anjon Bowibu, whose chief has never been identified since a 1982 purge in which its last known boss, Kim Pyong-ha, and several hundred aides ended up in concentration camps. The strength of Kim Jong-il’s grip is reinforced by the weakness of the other institutions. Congress, for example, which is defined in the constitution as the party’s main organ, has not met since 1980.

The party’s domination is visible at all levels in the media. **Kim In-goo**, a South Korean journalist who has specialised in North Korea, said: “The decision-making always leads back to the party. Journalists have to answer for their work to the party com-



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mittee at their news organisation. It is the Party Central Committee that selects journalists, and it is the Keom-yol Bou (Censorship Department) which controls the news. And obviously it is the party which imposes sanctions when a journalist makes a mistake."

The party also has its repressive apparatus, including the Central Inspection Commission and the Ministry for Protection of State Security, both of which have a presence within the news media, as they do throughout the country.

The editor of *Rodong Shinmun* (The Workers' Newspaper), Kim Li-ryong, has the rank of minister. The chairman of the *Korean Central News Agency* (KCNA), Choi Chil-nam, and those in charge of the state TV company *JoongAng Bang Song* (Central Television), including its chairman, Cha Sung-soo, are all senior Central Committee officials. The orders that Kim Jong-il issues to these three news organisations go through the Department of Propaganda and Publicity, while the Department of Press and Publishing is responsible for the other news media, especially the provincial ones. Kim Jong-il alone decides who runs the news media. "I've known four TV chairmen in the course of 20 years, and they all left when Kim Il-sung or his son decided they should go," said Jang Hae-sung.



The news media take their orders from the single party's propaganda apparatus, particularly as regards its hostility towards the United States. George W. Bush's election as president enabled the authorities to revive the anti-American feelings that are a hangover from the Korean war. The Pyongyang newspapers were filled with hostile slogans attacking the Republican administration while North Korean radio and TV commentators adopted an impassioned tone whe-

never referring to the United States.

Cho Myong-chul, a university professor who fled the country in 1994, said the anti-American and militaristic propaganda helped create a "new linguistic culture" in which for example, "I'll kill you like an American imperialist" became a common insult. At the same time, on Kim Jong-il's orders, direct propaganda attacks on Seoul became rarer in response to the "Sunshine Policy" launched by South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and pursued by his successor Roh Moo-hyun. The propaganda volleys were concentrated instead on the North Korean refugees (especially former officials), the South Korean army and South Korea's opposition conservative party.

The party promotes the dissemination of its news on the Internet. Some 30 official or affiliated websites based in Japan, China and the United States offer the regime's views. The official news agency's site, www.kcna.co.jp, posts a daily bulletin of what passes for news in North Korea.

When the Americans invaded Iraq in March 2003, on the other hand, the North Korean media were unusually discreet in their reactions. Contrary to their coverage during the first Gulf war in 1991, the newspapers limited themselves to carrying factual reports and refrained from any comment.

Regimented and indoctrinated

All journalists are party members. At university, they learn the principles of the «permanent information plan», which form the basis of their training. South Korean journalist Kim In-goo explained: "When they graduate at the end of their course at the school of journalism, a Central Committee delegation comes to interview them. A few weeks later, they are assigned to a news organisation."

The party also determines how their careers evolve. While they may not have significant material advantages – they are paid about a third more than the average functionary – some journalists enjoy the privilege of being able to travel within the country or sometimes even abroad.

Throughout their life, journalists must continue to receive ideological training. The former journalist **Kim Gil-sun** said: "We had to attend study conferences every Saturday from 9 am to 5 pm. Central Committee members taught us about the achievements of Kim Jong-il and Kim Il-sung, their leading



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speeches and the party's ideology. All North Koreans have to take these courses, which are accompanied by tests. Workers have an average of two hours of classes a week, but university graduates, especially journalists, are press-ganged into much longer hours because they are supposed to disseminate the ideology to the entire population. Our test results were obviously crucial for our careers. The party counted on the most disciplined journalists."

Journalists working for certain strategic publications are forced to reside in the same place. Kim Gil-sun, for example, spent 17 years living in a neighbourhood reserved for the staff of Jae 2 Jayon Kwahak Chulpansa (Second Natural Science Publishing House). Despite the unexciting name, this is a strategic press group that publishes weeklies and monthlies dealing with the arms industry and scientific advances, particularly in the nuclear domain. "We were all from Kim Il-sung university and most of us were the children of veterans or victims of the Korean war," she said. "We had virtually no contact with the outside... And Kim Jong-il named us as an elite troop." She and her family were evicted from their home and she was fired from her job for having a "dangerous conversation" about the late Sung Hae-rim, a mistress of Kim Jong-il. "I was lucky not to be sent to a camp. I fled three years later."

The regimentation produces very rigid journalists. This is not even disputed by the young South Koreans who produce the far-left magazine *Minjoong 21* (Korean Nation 21), which publishes articles written by journalists with the North Korean magazine *Tong-il Shin Bo*: "The first articles we received were unpublishable. It was all pure propaganda even when we asked them to talk about their daily life as North Koreans... We had to train them and edit their articles... The *Tong-il Shin Bo* journalists portray themselves as revolutionaries threatened by super-powers."

The party also expects journalists to promote the official history. North Korea's "big lies" are defended daily in the press. According to the propaganda, for example, the South attacked the North in June 1950 and the healthcare is free for all North Koreans.

Unrelenting prior censorship

The party's slogan for North Korean journalists is demanding: "Journalists must work in a scientific, fast and objective way."

In Jang Hae-sung's view, all the other guidelines prevent its implementation.

Before publishing a report, journalists must first send it to the head of their editorial section and then to their editor. Thereafter, it has to go to the person in charge of the "internal investigation section," who must stamp it with the word "internal." Then it must go through the "national investigation section" to the propaganda department, which must stamp it "national."



These strict controls ensure that news reports are always in line with Kim Jong-il's positions. Editors regularly receive memos setting out the guidelines determined by the Dear Leader. Sent from the propaganda department, they all begin: "Kim Jong-il said..." Journalists are then summoned by the editor, normally each Saturday, to hear the last guidelines to be followed. Jang Hae-sung recalls: "Our editor would read the memo, which would alternate between calling for a shriller or softer tone towards South Korea or the Americans."

The effect on news coverage is obvious. The TV news bulletins consist of one sequence of Kim Jong-il after another, visiting new factories or attending inaugurations, accompanied by lyrical praise of the greatness of father and son. Lee Joo-il, who has been a refugee in South Korea since 2001, recalls: "Like me, many of my friends found nothing of interest in the propaganda documentaries about Kim Jong-il... Furthermore, the footage of South Korean far-left protesters shown on governmental television as an example of the revolt against imperialism and capitalism just made us think that in the South they at least had the right to demonstrate."

The North Korean media carry relatively few reports about the army although it has more than a million members and swallows up a large part of the national budget. But army publishes newspapers – one of them



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called *Joson Inmingun* (The People's Army Daily) – which are read by soldiers. They glorify the armed forces and their service to Kim Jong-il.

“Revolutionized” and disappeared journalists

A high price can be paid for a typing error or misspeaking in North Korea. A state radio journalist was punished at the start of 2004 for mistakenly referring to a North Korean deputy minister as minister. He reportedly spent several months in a “revolutionization” camp. A TV journalist, Kim Kwan-hee, spent a year in one of these reeducation camps in 1986 for erroneously describing Park Chung-he, who headed an authoritarian regime in South Korea from 1961 to 1979, as a “democratic leader.”

“Revolutionization” camps are state factories or farms where functionaries, including journalists, are sent to work if they make mistakes. Jang Hae-sung, who was a TV journalist for 20 years, told Reporters Without Borders he was aware of at least 40 cases of journalists who were “revolutionized,” including himself.

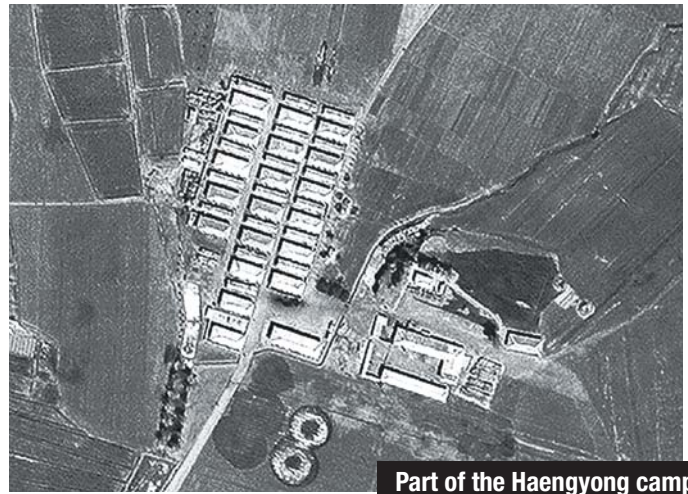
Journalists who make a mistake are summoned by the party committee in their news organisation and are interrogated. They must then go through a process of self-criticism in front of the committee or senior editors if the fault is deemed serious. It is up to the party to set the punishment, which can be between three months and two years in a camp. The journalists keep their posts during this time but are not paid, and go back to them afterwards.

“Reeducation camps are not prisons, they are isolated villages or districts with a work centre,” said Chung Chang-hyun of the South Korean newspaper *JoongAng Ilbo*. “On the other hand, persons accused of counter-revolutionary crimes or crimes against Kim Jong-il are sent to detention camps. At least three of these camps have been closed in recent years, but more than a 100,000 people are still being held.»

Jang Hae-sung explained some of the dangers of the trade: “When journalists make a trip to the provinces to prepare a report,

they often solicit a bribe or gift from the local party cell leaders in return for a good report. The local party leaders never refuse, but if they are discovered, they name the journalist in the course of their self-criticism, and then the reporter gets punished as well.”

The constant lying also poses dilemmas for journalists, Jang Hae-sung said. “Some colleagues were supposed to do a report about the quality of meat at a Pyongyang butcher’s. But when they arrived, the place had no meat. So they staged things to give the impression that the butcher’s was functioning normally. After the report was screened, residents complained to their party cell that it was a lie and that the shop had no meat. The



Part of the Haengyong camp

journalist was punished for the false report. But he would also have been punished if he had failed to do the report.”

Journalists have also been the victim of purges. After “juche” theoretician Hwan Jang-yop defected to the South, Kim Jong-il carried out a purge of the traitor’s entourage in 1997. The president of the party daily was removed in February. Other journalists and intellectuals close to Hwan Jang-yop disappeared. In all probability, they were sent with their families to political camps. At the same time, Kim Gil-sun recalls the case of one of her colleagues in the Jae 2 Jayon Kwahak Chulpansa press group who was sent to a detention camp in 1990 for daring to write a letter to Kim Jong-il calling for economical reforms to “save the country.”

Jang Hae-sung gets upset when he talks of **Song Keum Chul**: “I shared my office at the national TV station with this young journalist. One day he asked me if I thought it was true that Kim Jong-il was born close to



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the sacred mountain of Paekdu, as we used to repeat throughout the day on the air. He seemed to be aware that Kim Jong-il was in fact born in Russia. Some time later we discussed the start of the Korean war. He did not seem to be convinced by the version that it was the South that attacked us. I confirmed his suspicions. Later he was summoned by the secret police. He was suspected of organising a small group of critics. One day he disappeared. I never heard any more about him."

Jang was himself summoned for questioning by the political police three times. An officer, a former university colleague, warned him: "You have a week left." Fearing that Song would reveal their conversations under torture, Jang decided to leave in January 1996 and go to China, and then South Korea. "Song Keum Chul must have been sent to a concentration camp. Or perhaps he is dead. I have no idea." He said at least three other North Korean journalists disappeared between 1976 and 1996.

Control of the airwaves

For many North Koreans, the only way to sidestep the official propaganda is to tune into the Korean-language broadcasts of foreign radio stations. "You can buy radio sets in North Korea but they are pre-set to the government radio frequencies and cannot be changed," a refugee explained. The manager of the Seoul-based dissident radio station *FreeNK* said the political police's control of radio weakened during the mid-1990s at the time of the great famine. Today, more and more radio sets are getting into the country, especially to Pyongyang, from the People's Republic of China. But radio set smuggling may be reined in. A Japanese newspaper reported in September that an elite army unit had been transferred to the Chinese border to prevent refugees leaving. The military presence would supplement the video surveillance installed on the Chinese side of the border in Jilian province.

According to several refugees, some North Koreans register a radio set with the authorities and then buy an additional one. The number of radio listeners is believed to have increased significantly. Twenty per cent of North Korean homes are thought to own a radio set. Six out of 12 refugees polled in 2001 said they had listened to the *Radio Free Asia's* Korean-language programmes. In was just one in 12 in 1999. A poll of 200 North Korean refugees carried out by *Voice of America* showed that 87 per cent of the North Koreans arriving in the

South had listened to one of these stations before leaving.

The authorities do not make it easy for them to listen to the foreign stations. "The jamming was very loud," said journalist Kim Seong-min, a refugee who arrived in South Korea in 1999. "You could hear an enormous noise like a motor and you could hardly hear the news. It was only after 11 at night that the quality improved." Listening to foreign radio stations had been a "shock" for him, he said. The manager of *FreeNK* said, "I think many refugees decided to leave after listening to international and South Korean radio stations."

The South Korean stations KBS and *Keukdong* are said to be the most popular ones, followed by *VOA* and *RFA*. The head of Doctors Without Borders in Seoul, played down the impact of the foreign stations: "We've talked to hundreds of refugees. Many of them knew nothing about what was happening inside or outside the country. Hundreds of people from rural areas did not even know that the World Food Programme was distributing tons of food each month. (...) Most North Koreans are in a daily battle for survival. Access to news is not necessarily a priority. On the other hand, once they have succeeded in escaping, especially when they arrive in China, reality comes as a terrible shock. This is one of the reasons why 70 per cent of the refugees we look after are suffering from post-traumatic effects."



FreeNK office

The party launched a campaign to check radio sets at the end of 2003. The head of each party cell in neighbourhoods and villages received instructions to verify the seals on all radio sets. The campaign's impact is unknown but it was clearly designed to scare people. The North Korean authorities designated radio sets as "new enemies of the regime" on 13 June 2004, after human rights activists in South Korea, backed by Reporters Without Borders, announced their intention to send hundreds of transistor ra-

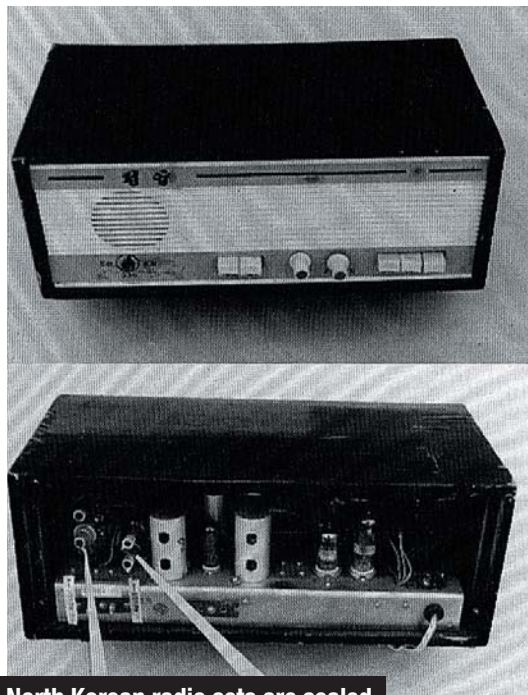


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dios by balloon into North Korea to enable the inhabitants to listen to foreign stations. The official daily *Rodong Shinmun* described this as an “American attempt to destabilise the government” and, using *Radio Free Asia* in particular, to serve “imperialist” interests in Asia. Possessing a radio set without permission is viewed as a “political crime” by the security services.

The punishment for a North Korean caught listening to any radio station other than the regime’s one is prison. It is impossible to know how many people have been or are detained for this “crime” but every refugee as heard of a case. The Bo An-Seoung (the political police) has the job of identifying such “criminals” with the help of the Kukka Anjon Bowibu (the Ministry for the Protection of State Security), which aims to have one informer for every 50 North Koreans. The security services have a post outside every apartment block and have at least three agents in each small town. “Those who listen to international radio stations do not even tell their neighbours or sometimes even their children for fear of being reported,” said Lee Joo-il.

On the other hand, North Koreans have no way of escaping the Sambangsong (Third Broadcasting), the network of loudspeakers installed by the regime in factories, offices and some homes to broadcast propaganda.



North Korean radio sets are sealed

A few dissident media

Voice of America and *Radio Free Asia* have had Korean-language programmes targeted at North Koreans for years. What was missing was a radio station run by members of the North Korean community living in the South. The creation of the Seoul-based *FreeNK* with radio programmes on its website, www.freenk.net, has filled the gap. But it was not easy. “We were shocked to hear South Korean demonstrators chanting slogans in support of the Pyongyang regime. It was our duty to inform South Koreans about reality in the North, and North Koreans about reality in the world,” said *FreeNK* manager **Kim Seong-min**. After raising money, a group of refugees succeeded in broadcasting their first news programmes on 16 February 2004, Kim Jong-il’s birthday.

Aside from technical problems, *FreeNK* has faced a campaign of verbal and physical threats by South Korean supporters of the Pyongyang regime. Anonymous calls and visits from menacing individuals forced the Reunification Institute to stop letting its premises be used as the station’s headquarters. The team, which meanwhile lost three of its members because they were scared by the threats, set up a new studio in Seoul where the journalists are permanently guarded by a South Korean policeman.

Manager Kim Seong-min, a former official writer with the North Korean army, refuses to let up. “We know that the North is putting pressure on the South for us to be closed down, but it is our duty to inform our people.” Today *FreeNK* produces one hour of programming a day, made available on its website which gets an average of 3,000 visits a day. Thanks to new financial support from South Korea and the United States, Kim Seong-min hopes to be able to start real radio wave broadcasting to the North in 2005.

Pressed by the communist regime during an official meeting in April 2004, the South Korean government appears not to have stood by the dissident radio station. And the pressure continues. Pro-Pyongyang demonstrations attacked the recording studio in June 2004. During another demonstration outside *FreeNK*’s premises in August by about 150 pro-Pyongyang students, the manager was hit despite the police protection. A leaflet distributed by a group that backs Pyongyang says the campaign is against “those who have betrayed their country and begun to run a so-called web-radio controlled and



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backed by the United States of America and the extreme-right wing power.”

During a meeting held in April by a similar group, direct threats were made against the North Korean dissident Hwan Jang-yop, who contributes to *FreeNK*: “Unless you want to die in the most shameful in miserable manner, Hwan Jang-yop, you must apologise for your crimes against the people and commit suicide now! ... Don’t forget that we are watching you all the time.” The *FreeNK* team told Reporters Without Borders that South Korean and Japanese journalists have been told that Kim Jong-il has personally given orders that the station’s staff should be killed.

None of the person interviewed by Reporters Without Borders had heard of any clandestine publications in North Korea. It is just known that Kim Jong-il gave orders in 1999 for closer monitoring of typewriters and photocopiers for fear that they could be used against the regime. But a North Korean doctor who is a refugee in South Korea has just launched a publication targeted at the refugee community. And an online newspaper, *Daily NK*, is due to be launched in December 2004 with a team of seven journalists.

“Foreign journalists are all liars”

Only three foreign news media have permanent bureaux in Pyongyang: the Chinese news agency *Xinhua*, the official Chinese newspaper *Renmin Ribao*, and the Russian news agency *Itar-tass*. All requests from South Korean and western news media have been rejected. “These journalists are purely decorative,” said Kim In-goo of the South Korean daily *Chosun Ilbo*. “During a ministerial summit between the two Koreas in 2000, a journalist from the *Xinhua* bureau came to see me to ask about the results of the ministerial meetings. He clearly had no local sources.”

Some North Korean officials do not hide their clear hostility toward the international press. “Foreign journalists are all liars,” responded foreign minister Paek Nam-soon in September 2004 when questioned by a British foreign office minister about a large explosion that had reportedly been detected by the United States and South Korea.

The Seoul-based Korea Press Foundation wanted to organise an exchange programme between journalists from the North and South in 2000. It also asked if South Korean correspondents could go and base them-

ves in the North. Pyongyang never approved the project. Despite the restrictions, the South Korean press follows developments in North Korea closely. At least two of the main dailies, *Chosun Ilbo* and *JoongAng Ilbo*, have research centres in North Korea. The journalists there monitor the official television, radio, newspapers and news agency every day.

North Korean permission for foreign press visits is very sporadic. Press pools are formed for official visits by foreign government delegations from South Korea, Japan or, more recently, Britain. A visit by former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright was accompanied by an unprecedented number of foreign news media including the US television news network CNN. The French news agency *Agence France-Presse* (AFP) has been allowed into North Korea only three times in the past three years. For day-to-day coverage of North Korea, AFP’s bureaux in Beijing and Seoul have to rely on the news reports put out by KCNA and the South Korean agency *Yonhap* and the few westerners living in Pyongyang. “And yet, dispatches about North Korea interest the Asian and American press and even the European press,” the AFP bureau chief in Seoul said.

The few South Korean and Japanese publications that support North Korea are made welcome. Yoo Byeong-mun of the far-left magazine *Minjoong 21* said: “When we go and report in Pyongyang, we are able to go to the markets and talk to people, even if we know that our guides choose the people and places. But you know, when North Korean journalists come to the South, they are parked in hotels and banned from going out.”

The Pyongyang authorities also give preference to South Korean publications that support the Sunshine Policy. Journalists from the conservative daily *Chosun Ilbo* have been denied access to the North several times, but reporters from the daily *Han-KyoReh ShinMun* were able to get visas with relative ease. Photo-journalist **Yim Jong-jin**, for example, has been able to go to the North six times in the past six years: “Of course, we asked for visas to go to tourist sites, but the aim of our reporting was to find out about the daily life of North Koreans. I think our guides realised that. Anyway, they were with us throughout the reporting trip and they slept in the same hotel.”

All foreign journalists are accompanied by one or two guides, usually North Korean journalists, whose task is to prevent them

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from straying from the programme established in advance with the authorities. In May 2002, foreign journalists were threatened in the following way by their guides: "Some have wanted to see forbidden things. We will see what you say in your news media and those who write or film the wrong things will not be allowed to come back." That year, French freelance photographer **Olivier Mirguet** was detained by three policemen while taking pictures on a Pyongyang street without his guides' permission.

The Chinese authorities also do not make it easy to cover the situation of North Korean refugees in China. South Korean photographer **Seok Jae-Hyun** spent more than 14 months in detention in China for covering an attempt to smuggle North Korean refugees out of the country. A Chinese court sentenced him to two years in prison for "trafficking in human beings" but he confirmed to Reporters Without Borders that: "From the outset, the police and the authorities did not like the fact that I was a photographer or the aim of my report. And through me, they wanted to intimidate all the South Korean reporters working on the North Korean refugee story."

Freelance video reporter **Oh Young-Phil** spent nearly 16 months in a Chinese prison for filming another refugee smuggling operation for the TV channel *Tokyo Broadcasting System*. Held from March 2003 until July 2004, he was forced to spend eight hours a day making artificial flowers. And the prison authorities refused him the right to send letters or receive family visits. Seok Jae-Hyun and Oh Young-Phil want to continue covering the situation of North Korean refugees.

China's censorship of the sensitive North Korea story recently took a casualty in the ranks of its own reformist press. The Chinese diplomatic bimonthly *Zhanlue Yu Guanli* (Strategy and Management) was closed in September 2004 after publishing an article by economist Wang Zhongwen in its August issue criticising the North Korean regime.

Conclusions

The "mind-numbing propaganda" referred to by French historian Pierre Rigoulot is one of the leading weapons of North Korea's totalitarian regime. Few countries in the world have experienced such a level of information control and manipulation.

The news media in Turkmenistan and Cuba are given over to a personality cult and to legitimising the regime, but what other country sends a state journalist to a re-education camp for six months for omitting a syllable from a name or saying minister instead of deputy minister? What other country's media would have carried no reports at all about a famine that caused the death of two million out of a total population of 22 million? What other regime forces some 200,000 concentration camp prisoners to re-educate themselves by reading the editorials of the official press?

A special feature of North Korean totalitarianism is its unique ideology, Kimilsun-gism and "juche." It is the task of the regimented press to explain this ideology to the population. The media also have a key role in the deification of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. There are the songs, the thousands of billboards with slogans glorifying father and son, the 30,000 statues around the country, the badges on every jacket and the hundreds of books extolling the greatness of the Kims. But there are also North Korea's journalists who, under a permanent threat of terrible sanctions, are disciplined propagandists.

It is certainly hard to discern any significant changes as regards press freedom in North Korea. Kim In-goo of *Chosun Ilbo* is adamant: "Nothing has change in the media during the past five years. News reporting has the same format and the same rigid style... You might think the party cannot afford to overhaul the media, but at the same time it is investing in satellite TV broadcasting." Chung Chang-hyun of *JoongAng Ilbo* has a slightly different take: "The *KCNA* used the term reform in an editorial in March 2003. It was not a mistake because the journalist was not punished... You see or read more and more reports praising the policy of improving living conditions for North Koreans." As early as 1 July 2001, a presenter on the official TV station said, without any kind of comment, that North Korean socialism would be "better with the reform project."



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NORTH KOREA

Journalism in the service of a totalitarian dictatorship

Chung Chang-hyun explains further: "The media received instructions to talk about Kaesun, improvement, and not Kaehuk, reform. If the word reform became current in the society, there is danger that the regime would be challenged... Once again, the media are there to protect Kim Jong-il's regime. North Korea's officials, for example, talk of Kaehuk when they are addressing the outside world, but it is the word Kaesun that is used in the press.

Pyongyang refuses to discuss human rights openly with the international community. In 2003, the government gave this response to the reports presented to the UN Commission on Human Rights: "There exists no human rights issue in DPRK as all its people form a big family and live in harmony helping and leading one another forward under the man-centred socialist system.» But some officials reportedly agreed to discuss human rights with British foreign office minister Bill Rammell during his visit to Pyongyang in September 2004. The outcome of this discussion is unknown.

North Korea gets more aid than any other country in the world. The industrialised countries send millions of tons of food and medicine each year through the UN's World Food Programme without any certainty that it reaches the neediest sectors of the population. But this aid is not conditioned on any advances in basic freedoms. There is an urgent need for the international community to demand concrete improvements in North Korea. Reporters Without Borders calls on the European Union to couple its humanitarian aid with demands for a significant improvement in freedom of expression.

The organisation proposes that the European Union should provide material support to the North Korean refugees who are trying to provide news and information to their compatriots, especially by means of radio programmes. Reporters Without Borders also hopes that the next report of the UN special rapporteur for North Korea will mention the problem of press freedom.

Finally, there is an urgent need for the United Nations to intercede with the People's Republic of China so that Chinese and foreign journalists may freely report on the situation of North Korean refugees in that country. The international community must focus on the need for respect for the right of North Koreans to diverse news and information.