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Another sign of North Korea's insecurity

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Two American journalists, Euna Lee and Laura Ling, who were arrested on March 17, 2009 on the Sino-North Korean border, appeared before the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) Central Court. They were sentenced to 12 years in a labour camp for illegally crossing borders and for espionage activity.

What prompted such a harsh sentence, and what does Pyongyang want the International community to make of all this?

Over the past 12 months, the DPRK authorities have shown remarkable consistency. In its quest to return the country to complete isolation, Pyongyang is willing to take any action, including the most stringent.

Rigid policies are aimed not only at their own people but foreign citizens as well. Back in 2005, the country was demonstrating 'friendliness' by opening its borders to tourists from the United States.

In 2007, North Korea went even further, allowing South Korean tourists to cross the demilitarised zone (DMZ) in their own cars.

However, 2008 saw a dramatic policy reverse.

Areas of inter-Korean cooperation started closing down, "unreliable" tourists were mercilessly refused visas or deported, and those who chose unconventional ways to enter the country, were incarcerated or even killed.

On July 11, 2008 a North Korean soldier shot dead a South Korean housewife Pak Wan Ja, who allegedly tried to "infiltrate a security zone" adjacent to the jointly managed Geumgangsan tourist resort on the eastern coast of Korea.

South Korea immediately suspended the entry of tourists to the ill-fated zone of cooperation. North

Korea refused to apologise and neglected Seoul's invitation to conduct a joint investigation into the incident. Since then, the Geumgangsan resort remains deserted with most of the staff (South Korean and Chinese citizens) deported.

On March 30, 2009 a 40-year-old South Korean businessman named Yu (the full name is suppressed) was arrested by the North Korean authorities in Gaeseong Industrial Park, another area of inter-Korean cooperation located north of the DMZ.

He was accused of "anti-North Korean propaganda" and "inducing a DPRK citizen to defect to South Korea". No details related to this matter have so far been released. North Korea stubbornly refuses to discuss the issue at any bi-lateral negotiations. In the meantime, Yu remains in custody somewhere in the DPRK without consular access or contact with relatives.

The third similar incident was the arrest of the two US journalists. Korean-American Euna Lee (Lee Seung-Eun) and Chinese-American Laura Ling decided to make a documentary about North Korean refugees, people smugglers, and the repressive regime.

Their employer was California-based Current TV, founded by the former US Vice-President Al Gore. This project was probably inspired by Laura's elder sister, a well-known TV reporter Lisa Ling. In 2006, together with Australian cameramen Brian Green, Lisa Ling accompanied an eye surgeon from Nepal, Dr. Sanduk Riut, who was practicing in North Korea.

Laura Ling was going to repeat the feat of her elder sister, together with her Korean-speaking companion, Euna Lee. They first visited South Korea, where they interviewed the specialists working in close contact with North Korean refugees (including Dr. Andrei Lankov of the Australian National University).

It was at that time that the crew's activities started grabbing people's attention. It is speculation but perhaps someone in Seoul, with connections in the North Korean government, communicated information about the filming project to Pyongyang.

Lee and Ling's next stop was Northeastern China - a haven of illegal immigrants from North Korea. We know that the journalists travelled in the company of Californian cameraman and producer Mitchell Koss and a Chinese fixer. After visiting the city of Yanji, the group went to the Sino-Korean border area to film North Korean refugees and Chinese smugglers crossing the river.

What happened next remains a mystery.

Only the Chinese guide and the cameraman Mitchell Koss managed to escape. Koss evaded the North Korean chase only to fall into the hands of the Chinese border guards. After a short detention, Koss returned to the United States but he refuses to talk to the media about the incident. Apart from the Chinese guide, Koss is the only witness who can give an accurate account of what really happened that fateful night.

In any case, the DPRK decided to use the situation to their advantage.

To ensure the survival of the regime amid the growing demand for basic freedoms and semi-private economic activities, spurred by the quasi reform of July 2002, Pyongyang took the firm decision to sever all of its citizens' contacts with the outside world.

Initially, everything was done to stop the influx of foreign and South Korean tourists to the Geumgangsan tourist resort. Then, Gaeseong Industrial Complex came under attack. Now, Pyongyang is sending a strong message - anyone who tries to combine travel with investigative journalism will be severely punished.

What will now await the detained reporters?

Western journalists in the DPRK have always been treated with distrust. The status of American journalists is hardly different from enemy spies. Since the DPRK is now heading for a major retreat back to Military Communism, Ling and Lee can only lament that they were caught in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Around 10 years ago, an American man swam across the border river and was arrested by the North Koreans. He was given a milder sentence and a few months later his parents were invited to pay the "penalty" of \$USD100,000 for the early release of their son.

The current case does not leave the impression that it can be easily settled by a mere 'ransom'. The journalists have already been found guilty of a serious crime against the state. For their early release Pyongyang will probably make an unrealistic demand of Washington (like U.S. troop withdrawal from South Korea or a public apology from President Obama). Thus, no immediate solution should be expected.

The prolonged detention of U.S. journalists will not help North Korea's public image. Even Tehran considered it wise to resolve a similar situation and sent the indicted American journalist Roxana Saber home.

But North Korea's calculations and logic are quite different. Its leadership is driven and motivated only by the instinct of self-preservation. To achieve this goal, they would not hesitate to commit murder, kidnap or torture.

If the cruel punishment can repel photographers and filmmakers from the DPRK borders - this measure is deemed effective.

If the killing of a South Korean housewife can halt ideological contamination of North Korea - it has to be done.

If an investor's arrest and prolonged detention can intimidate potential troublemakers - it means the regime's on the right track.

North Korea believes they are sending a message to the world. Indeed, for those who still operate within the Cold War mentality and measure a state's strength by the number of lives sacrificed, such an approach may seem just and appropriate.

But for the free and democratic world it is obvious that the Pyongyang rulers are simply trying to turn back the clock and delay the bitter moment when they themselves are brought to justice for the crimes of the past.

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- **Aquila :**

13 Jun 2009 11:22:25am

The behaviour of North Korea to the world particularly the US is not unusual given the deceit and

downright lies that it was exposed to at the end of WW2. The US made many promises to the people of northern Korea for the sterling efforts it did to assist in the defeat the Japanese and to buffer the Russians. Not one of the promises was met by the US so is its behaviour so surprising?

Reply Alert moderator

■ **Gorlassar :**

14 Jun 2009 8:18:44am

And, umm, what chance have the Americans had to fulfill those promises - thanks to the Chinese? Would YOU cross the Chinese? I don't think so.

Reply Alert moderator

■ **granny :**

14 Jun 2009 4:26:51pm

At the end of WW2, China was far from the power it is today.

Reply Alert moderator

■ **DocMercury :**

16 Jun 2009 9:21:15am

Germany and Japan and Italy were doing less well than London too.

Happens when everywhere looks like Dresden.

Reply Alert moderator

● **Red Baron :**

12 Jun 2009 8:41:27am

Has anyone considered the Nth. Koreans are terrified of Americans? After all the only human to descend into complete depravity and use the atomic bomb on innocent civilians was an American.

Reply Alert moderator

■ **Eliot Ramsey :**

12 Jun 2009 10:37:55am

The Japanese killed 20 million Chinese civilians during World War Two. They slaughtered millions of Koreans, too.

The current regime in North Korea was itself installed by Stalin when Russia declared war on Japan in the days AFTER Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

So, the Kim dynasty in North Korea is itself a direct result of the atomic bombs dropped on Japan, and Stalin's eagerness to exploit the Japanese defeat.

They don't call the hereditary dictatorship in North Korea 'Stalinist' for nothing. And they love atomic weapons.