

REFUGEE SURVEYS SHED LIGHT ON SOCIAL CHANGES IN NORTH KOREA



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HONOLULU (March 25, 2011) -- Since the collapse of North Korea's centralized state economy during the country's devastating famines in the 1990s, many ordinary North Koreans have turned to an underground market system as a means to survive, according to economist Marcus Noland, co-author of the recently published book "Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea," based on large-scale surveys of North Korean refugees in China and South Korea.

As a result, more North Koreans have gained some access to foreign media, and more seem to be privately blaming the regime's policies for the nation's woes, Noland said in a talk at the East-West Center in Honolulu, where he is a nonresident Senior Fellow. (Click [here](#) to watch a video of Noland's talk.)

"The expansion of the market, the exposure of more and more North Koreans to the outside world through a variety of channels, and new ways of doing business and organizing their lives will hopefully place greater constraints on the ability of the regime to operate," he said.

But at the same time, the government's harsh law enforcement system appears to have been increasingly used to terrorize – and extract bribes from – citizens engaging in private economic activity, said Noland, who is also Deputy Director of the Peterson Institute of International Economics in Washington, D.C. "It's a regime that is utterly unaccountable and has an extraordinary capacity for inflicting misery on its own people," he said.

In Noland's [book](#), co-authored with UC San Diego professor Stephen Haggard, the results of thousands of refugee interviews shed new light on powerful social changes underway in North Korea, such as attitudes about social status, government and the prospects of reunification with the South. Noland and Haggard have also launched a [blog](#) on North Korea issues.

The refugee interviews suggest that many North Koreans believe those who seek official positions are less interested in ideology or patriotism than in securing a platform to enrich themselves, Noland said.

Strict laws against market activity make virtually everyone in North Korea subject to criminal charges, he said, and police have complete discretion to arrest and incarcerate them. At the same time, the surveys indicate that abuse is rampant in North Korean penal institutions at all levels, from the long-term prisons for political dissidents and others to the "labor training centers" where so-called "economic criminals" are held for shorter periods.

"Even people incarcerated in these lowest-level institutions were likely to have witnessed things like people being beaten to death, people being starved, and people being tortured," Noland said. Most had been incarcerated with no legal proceedings whatsoever, he added.

"You have a system in which basically the police can come and grab you," he said. "They can take you and your family and put you in a place where you know horrible things happen. Well, that is an incredible instrument for extortion. And there's consistent testimony in these surveys that people quite naturally are willing to pay bribes to prevent themselves and their families from becoming entangled in the system."

The wave of refugees from North Korea is a "first-order humanitarian crisis," and many—perhaps most—are likely suffering from stress disorders as a result of their experiences, he said.

Noland acknowledged that it is not surprising that people who have fled North Korea would have largely negative views about the government and conditions there. But after a detailed statistical analysis, he said, "we cannot reject the hypothesis that in fact these views accurately represent the views of the remaining population, and we think they deserve to be taken seriously."

Noland has written extensively on the economies of Japan, Korea and China, as well as the problems of North Korea and the prospects for Korean unification. He emphasized that the limited market economy that has developed in North Korea following the rapid collapse of the state's centrally planned economy should not be considered capitalism.

"It's not capitalism," he said. "It's markets, but there are essentially no institutions, and no regulatory framework to govern. The state really provides no benefits. People are simply living on whatever they can get from the market."

The poor health of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il presents a possible succession crisis, said Noland, whose earlier book, "Avoiding the Apocalypse: The Future of the Two Koreas," was awarded the prestigious Ohira Memorial Award. At the same time, he said, political indoctrination by the state is weakening as more people gain access to non-government sources of information, including foreign media.

"The regime's meta-narrative that ascribes all the country's challenges to hostile foreign forces is increasingly disbelieved," he said. "That said, this remains a highly atomized society with low levels of trust."

There also appears to be a complete absence of civil society institutions that could channel discontent into effective action, he said.

"In effect, the market is becoming not only a means of addressing people's material needs, but it's becoming a kind of semi-autonomous zone of social communication beyond the control of the government," Noland said. "And in that sense, the state may be right to fear the market, because the market is the place where people can talk and eventually might engage in political organizing."