

The Washington Post  
January 9, 2015

## A regime too evil to comprehend



by [Anne Applebaum](#)

In the 1990s, a large group of prisoners was released from North Korea's secret labor camps. These were not criminals, nor were they even political enemies. On the contrary, they were, in [the words of a defector](#), the grandchildren and even great-grandchildren of "landlords, capitalists, collaborators with the Japanese colonial government, and other people with bad family background." The Soviet Union once arrested the wives and children of political prisoners, and [Russia recently sent](#) the brother of a dissident politician to prison. But North Korea kept generations of families living in camps for decades on end.

Some of them are still there. Even some of those who were apparently released 20 years ago never left: With no homes and no ties, and no knowledge of life outside the gulag, many decided to simply stay put. They were "free" — but had nowhere to live except the same prison barracks they had always known. Others do seem to have vanished, but not because they were released. The number of prisoners in North Korean camps is [thought to have dropped](#) in recent years, yet there is no evidence of anyone leaving. Instead, prisoners — possibly tens of thousands of them — may well have died of starvation.

This, then, is the nature of the regime that has been so much in the news lately: It imprisons whole families for generations. When food is short, it quietly allows thousands to die off. And it keeps such tight control over its camps that information about them is extremely hard to come by, even in a world of omnipresent telephones and instant messaging. Organizations such as the [Committee for Human Rights in North Korea](#) go to extraordinary lengths to follow what happens

inside the country using satellite photographs and information from defectors. But those who do escape over the Chinese border sometimes take years to get to South Korea, suffering beatings, rape and starvation along the way. By the time they arrive, their memories of prison camp can be years out of date.

Worse, their stories can be hard to absorb. It's not easy to relate to the defectors themselves. They are often shy, emotionally stunted and unable to adjust to life in South Korea or anywhere else. I once heard several North Korean ex-prisoners speak of their lives behind barbed wire at an event on Capitol Hill. The stories they told were appalling. But although the audience listened dutifully, it was clear it was waiting for some congressman to denounce the regime in more familiar language.

Perhaps that helps explain why their years of efforts have had less impact on public policy than the news that North Korean hackers may have broken into the computer system of Sony Pictures Entertainment, and may even have released some [gossip about Angelina Jolie](#), in revenge for the release of "The Interview," an unfunny comedy about the North Korean dictator. I don't mean to play down the danger of hacking — the next target could be a nuclear power plant. But it's still amazing that Sony Pictures' troubles, and North Korea's possible involvement, persuaded President Obama to impose [more sanctions](#) last week. Multiple reports of massive human rights abuses over many decades never had the same effect.

And perhaps they never can. There is something about the harshness and the evil nature of the North Korean regime that defies imagination: It's so bizarre that it makes us laugh rather than cry. Even the makers of "The Interview" were unable to conceive of the regime except in the crudest, slapstick form. Kim Jong Un, like his father Kim Jong Il, is easily made into a figure of fun, a joke of a Hollywood bad guy. We read eagerly about his exploits playing basketball, just as we read about his father's alleged obsession with Elvis Presley and [his fear of flying](#).

Yet under his rule people die of starvation and torture. They spend years in prison for nothing at all, and then their children spend years there, too. Instead of feeding its people, let alone its prisoners, the regime builds more weapons and aims them at Seoul. Against international protest, it tries to build nuclear weapons. It's so obsessive and so secretive that it recently banned Russian and Chinese films, in case they should have any undue influence. We can comprehend Sony Pictures, we can comprehend Angelina Jolie — but we can't comprehend all of that.