

Horrors of North Korea's Gulags

Peter Brookes | June 09, 2009

If there's a shred of good news in the sentencing of American journalists Euna Lee and Laura Ling to 12 years in a North Korean prison labor camp, it's that they'll probably never see the inside of one. That's because their plight is receiving significant media coverage here in the United States and across the globe.

While Pyongyang hasn't yet linked them to anything more than "hostile acts" against the state (another thankful development), they could be swept up in the vortex of big-power politics that includes the likes of nukes and long-range missiles. Of course, Lee and Ling most likely aren't guilty of anything more than getting lost somewhere along the Chinese-North Korean border. Indeed, their efforts to expose the horrors of North Korean life are to be commended. Eventually, the regime will let them go; the real questions are: When, and at what price?

Pyongyang could release them as a goodwill gesture to prime the pumps for some sort of dialogue with Washington. Indeed, the fact they were allowed to make an unprecedented phone call home, and are being held in a "guest house," are all positive. Or Pyongyang could use them as bargaining chips for such highly sought-after bennies as food aid, fuel or even an ego-stroking visit by an important US special envoy with an apology in hand. In the end, there will be some quid pro quo for their release.

Their (hopefully short-lived) detention won't be pleasant, but it could be a lot worse -- a lot.

Most North Koreans sentenced to prison camp go there not for re-education, but to perish. Defectors report tales of sadistic guards, meager food, disease and brutal forced labor in as many as six camps hidden across the country -- North Korea's gulags. These prisoners endure beatings, forced abortions, infanticide, rape, torture and public executions -- all while doing slave labor whose profits line the pockets of the elite. (Those imported foods and fineries don't come cheap.)

According to the State Department's 2008 Human Rights Report, "re-education through labor" also involves memorizing the speeches of North Korea's "Dear Leader" Kim Jong Il. The number of prisoners is unknown; the best guesses put it in the low hundreds of thousands. Some suggest that more than 500,000 people have perished in Pyongyang's Stalinist gulags since they were established in the early 1970s.

While life in the camps certainly isn't laughable, some of the "crimes" are. Offenses include getting caught watching a South Korean soap opera or saying something negative about the Dear Leader. Past State Department reports have cited the sitting on a newspaper, which included a picture of the Dear Leader or his father, Kim Il Sung, the "Great Leader," as a political offense. The authorities -- and their spies -- are everywhere.

And as such, our thoughts and prayers should not only be with Euna Lee, Laura Ling and their families for a safe and speedy return home, but also with the 20 million people of North Korea, who have suffered so long and so hard at the regime's hands.