



Inside North Korea's Gulag

BY DAVID TRACEY

High in the mountains north of Pyongyang, North Korea, lies a vast colony ringed by electrified barbed wire and patrolled by guards carrying machine guns. This is Yoduk No. 15, a prison camp for some 50,000 men, women and children. Often their only crime was speaking out against the communist regime, or being related to those who have.

Western analysts believe that up to 200,000 political prisoners are being held in North Korea, in conditions that recall the grimmest Siberian camps under Stalin. Here are the harrowing stories of two of these prisoners.

KANG CHOL-HWAN was born into a loyal communist family that had once lived in the large Korean community in Kyoto, Japan. His grandfather had been a supporter of Kim Il-sung, North Korea's "Great Leader" since 1945. At the Communist Korean Workers' Party's behest in 1961, the grandfather returned with his family to North Korea and an important government post.

Within months, however, he was complaining to friends that North Korea was not the country he had expected. He was shocked to see so much poverty, which he eventually

came to blame on the government's stifling grip on the economy. One morning in July 1977, when Kang was nine, his grandfather left for work and never returned.

A few weeks later, seven plainclothes security guards stormed into Kang's house. "Your grandfather betrayed the fatherland," one of them stated. "You must be punished."

Kang's parents and grandmother sobbed as they were forced to pack their belongings into two army trucks. The family was driven off to Yoduk No. 15, but Kang's mother was left behind—"spared" because her own father was regarded as a revolutionary hero. That was the last Kang ever saw of her.

As a boy growing up in Nampo, North Korea, Ahn Hyok was a gifted athlete. At 12 he won a national table-tennis tournament, which gained him admittance to the prestigious Central Physical Culture and Sports School. It was a proud moment for his father, a prominent local Party member. Ahn's achievement would enhance the family's image of loyalty to Kim Il-sung.

Ahn's teachers drilled propaganda into him and his schoolmates. North Korea was a "paradise on earth," they said. Ahn might have believed it, too, except for an experience he had in December 1985, when he was 16. On a trip to the Chinese border with classmates, he met some ethnic Koreans from China who told him they

could travel freely within their country. Ahn wondered if these Koreans actually lived better than his countrymen. *I'll find out only if I get to visit China someday*, he told himself.

The opportunity arose two weeks later when he went skating on a secluded stretch of the Yalu River that borders China. On impulse, Ahn glided over to the unguarded Chinese side. He hiked until he reached a village of ethnic Koreans.

Ahn found that Chinese Koreans did live better than people in his own country. Not only could they move about without special permits, but they had relatively well-stocked shops and money to buy the goods. Some families were willing to take care of him in exchange for doing chores, so Ahn stayed for about six months.

Eventually, though, he stowed away on a boat crossing to the Korean side. He assumed his family's standing with the Party would protect him from trouble with border police. Instead, he was arrested on suspicion of being a spy.

During daily interrogation sessions at a secret office of the State Security Department in Pyongyang, Ahn swore his innocence. His accusers forced him to sit motionless on the floor of a boxlike cell with his head bowed. Any movement, even to scratch lice, resulted in a beating. If he spent too long at the toilet, a hole in the floor, his head was shoved into it as punishment. He was never allowed to meet with his family.

After 17 grueling months Ahn could take no more and decided to

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kill himself. Since cutting his wrists was impossible under the constant surveillance, he shoved a sharp piece of aluminum into his gums to make them bleed. He collapsed two days later and was taken to the hospital.

"Why are you so stupid?" the security supervisor asked angrily. "You come from a good family, and your father is a solid member of the Party. Why try to kill yourself?"

"I didn't do anything wrong," Ahn pleaded. "All I want to do is go home and see my parents."

Within days the official returned. "You're very lucky," he said. "We're going to give you another chance, but only because of your father. Why can't you be like him and work for the revolution?"

"I will from now on," Ahn promised, assuming he'd won his freedom at last. "Thank you."

At five the next morning the relieved teen-ager was brought outside to an army jeep. Ahn grew increasingly worried as the jeep entered an unfamiliar mountain region. At last they stopped before a gate topped with barbed wire. "So I wasn't forgiven after all?" Ahn asked a guard.

"You expected to be?" The soldier said with a sneer.

WHEN NINE-YEAR-OLD Kang Chol-hwan and his family entered the prison camp that summer day in 1977, they were shown to a tiny dirt-floored room they were to share with three other families. It was in one of the "Ideological Indoctrination" villages in the camp, so-called

because prisoners there receive a steady dose of political propaganda.

The 1000 or so children had to attend school seven days a week, while their parents labored in work units. It was like no school Kang had ever experienced. The principal carried a pistol, and the teachers were all soldiers.

Kang soon realized it made little difference whether you tried to learn or not. The only important thing was to behave. Serious infractions led to savage beatings.

He especially hated one teacher named "Red Face" by the students, a fat man who taught "Policies of the Party." One day Red Face discovered that seven boys in the Kim Il-sung study room were not wearing socks. For this lack of respect, he lined them up for his favorite punishment, a kick to the stomach. Aiming at the first boy, Red Face slipped in the mud and collapsed in a heap. The class burst into laughter. Enraged, Red Face took an iron bar and beat one of the children severely enough to break an arm and several ribs.

Like all the prisoners in Yoduk No. 15, the schoolchildren were constantly hungry. Of 60 kids that Kang got to know in his early days at the camp, nearly a third would die from malnutrition. One day Kang saw a boy stealing food from the teachers' lounge. Teachers beat him for hours, then locked him in a closet. When they opened the door two days later, the boy was dead.

But nothing stoked Kang's fears

more than the 15 or so executions prisoners were forced to watch each year. Once, when he was 16, for instance, Kang found himself standing near the front of a crowd of 5000 men and women. A hush fell as uniformed guards muscled out two blindfolded men. Kang recognized them as former university students who a few days earlier had tried to escape. Both had swollen, bloody faces, and stones had been jammed in their mouths to keep them from speaking.

An army colonel pointed at the pair. "These traitors betrayed our country!" he shouted. "They are worthy only of death." Guards tied them to two trees. "Fire!" the officer yelled. Three bursts of bullets slammed into the men's bodies.

"The same fate awaits anyone attempting to escape," the colonel shouted. *The only way out of here is death*, Kang thought to himself.

WHEN AHN HYOK arrived at Yoduk No. 15 on November 17, 1987, the compound's inmates were just returning from work. Many had wrapped their heads and hands in rags against the cold; their listless eyes stared at the newcomer.

That night Ahn and seven other inmates stretched out on the dirt floor of a barracks room to sleep. At 4 a.m., guards stomped in, yelling, "Wake up! Wake up!"

The prisoners hurried to their breakfast of boiled corn and salt. Afterward, 50-man units trudged off to work a 13-hour day in the gold

mines, forests and cornfields that sustained the camp.

Even elderly prisoners were not exempt from punishment. One day Ahn saw a gray-haired man crawling with a rock on his back between two young guards. The man's crime? He had failed to bow to the soldiers.

Ahn learned to keep an eye out for anything that might ward off malnutrition. By throwing stones at the crows that stole corn from a storehouse, he could sometimes make one drop a precious kernel.

Once Ahn was assigned to work near a sty that held pigs raised to feed the guards. The pigs' rations were larger than the prisoners', so in an unguarded moment he dashed to the trough and began shoving corn into his mouth. A guard ran over and bashed Ahn's head against the trough. His nose broken and bleeding, Ahn thought to himself, *I don't care about the pain, the extra food was worth it.*

Ahn eventually developed a nutritional disorder that caused skin eruptions and a distended belly. He managed to cure himself of the condition by capturing and devouring rats—a prized delicacy among the prisoners.

In Yoduk No. 15, the constant drumbeat of praise for "Great Leader" Kim Il-sung and his son "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il made Ahn angry. Knowing that one wrong word or act could extend his sentence, he slept with a rag in his mouth. He could not afford to be overheard talking in his sleep.

Ahn steeled himself against the abuse and kept his true feelings inside. He took particular pride in never crying in front of the guards who berated and beat him. At night, he thought of his family. *I'll never see them again*, he would say to himself, and tears would streak down his cheeks.

FOR KANG'S FAMILY, the trauma came to an unexpected end on February 16, 1987, Kim Jong-il's birthday. That morning, a guard informed them they had been pardoned in honor of the Dear Leader. They were taken to the front gate and made to shout, "Long live Great Leader Kim Il-sung! Long live Dear Leader Kim Jong-il!" Then they were sent to farm a small plot of land near the camp. Now 19, Kang had spent ten years, about half his young life, in Yoduk No. 15—and he still didn't know why.

AHN'S INCARCERATION ended in 1989, also on Dear Leader's birthday. On that auspicious day, a guard announced, "Five prisoners will be granted the chance to return to the arms of the Party."

Ahn Hyok was the first name read off. *I did it*, he thought. *I survived.*

But again his release did not mean a homecoming. Instead he was taken to nearby Coal Mine No. 103 to work under guard. About half the miners were released political prisoners. The young man was ordered not to communicate with family members, who still did not know

where he had been imprisoned or even if he was alive.

Within a few months of his "release," Ahn met Kang, who worked as a laborer for the Yoduk Community Service Center and was living with his uncle and sister. Kang's father and grandmother, weakened by malnutrition, had died not long after their release. With a warmth that came from shared suffering, Kang brought Ahn into his home.

Soon after, Ahn defied authorities and sent a telegram to his parents. Five days later, after securing travel papers, they arrived at Kang's house.

"You're alive!" cried Ahn's mother as she clutched her son. Continuing to hold him, she began saying over and over, "Thank you, Dear Leader, for keeping him alive! Thank you!"

With overwhelming sadness, Ahn realized his mother remained brainwashed by the system. That she would thank his torturer for not killing him was almost unbearable.

Ahn's father tried to get his son released from the mines. It didn't work. So Ahn continued to live with Kang's family. Together, the two friends spent hours discussing how to escape North Korea forever.

In the spring of 1992, risking a return to Yoduk No. 15, they bribed local officials into giving them permits to journey to Hyesan, a town by the Yalu River. There, they once again used bribery to get across the border. In China, an ethnic Korean woman sheltered the defectors, then

put them on a train to a port near Shanghai. There the two swam out to a Honduran-registered vessel, lying at anchor. Hauling themselves up a rope ladder, Kang and Ahn

clear to navy officers that Kang and Ahn wanted to defect, they brought them on board and headed for the nearby port of Inchon. From there, South Korean officials took them to Seoul.

This past spring, Kang Chol-hwan and Ahn Hyok took a big step toward rebuilding their lives by gaining admittance to Hanyang University in Seoul. Kang is studying international trade, while Ahn is pursuing business management. Though they are busily planning their futures, neither man wants



Ahn Hyok and Kang Chol-hwan

sneaked aboard and hid in the engine room.

Twelve hours later, with the ship well out at sea, the pair emerged from their hiding place to ask for asylum. The stunned captain, who spoke no Korean, assumed they were criminals. He cut the ship's engines and, gesturing to the choppy waters, ordered them overboard.

Then came the defectors' greatest stroke of luck. The ship had stopped in South Korean territorial waters and thereby attracted three Korean naval vessels. When it became

to forget his bitter past. Neither can afford to.

"The North Korean people know of political camps like Yoduk No. 15," says Kang, "but they are unaware of how much prisoners there suffer. I hope I can change that by telling the world what I saw."

When asked why he wants his story told, Ahn grows very quiet. Finally he says, "I am certain my family was thrown into prison to avenge my escape. So you see, I must tell the world the truth about North Korea. I owe it to them."



"I SUPPORT an air bag in every car," says Rep. Robert Michel of Illinois. "Unless a Senator is on board, in which case it becomes redundant."

—Quoted in *The Wall Street Journal*