

Explainer: Why “Leafleting” to North Korea Ruffles Feathers

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Throughout the month of June, North Korea has shown increased hostility toward South Korea. Some of these efforts include re-installing loudspeakers along the Demilitarised Zone at one point before removing them, blowing up a joint liaison office in its territory and announcing plans for a massive anti-South Korea leafleting.

What sparked the dramatic response from the North has a two-part explanation. First, the near-term and more obvious answer is the leafleting by defectors into the North.

Second, given that leafleting from both sides of the border has been going on since before the 1953 Korean Armistice Agreement, one cannot discount the fact that North Korea is using the leafleting as an opportunity to artificially ramp up tensions on the Korean Peninsula. It can serve multiple purposes such as adding weight to Kim Yo Jong’s position as the right hand to its leader Kim Jong Un, seeking more concessions on the international arena and to distract its people from the worsening economic situation. Kim Yo Jong is the first vice director of the United Front Department of the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) and the younger sister to North Korea’s leader.



North Korean students holding anti-defector signs in Pyongyang. Source: KCNA

Messages in bottles

Leafleting is a method used around the globe to disseminate written or visual information. In the context of inter-Korean psychological warfare, they contain promotion of one’s own regime and the criticism of the other regime, especially of the opposing leadership. In this brief, we mainly explore the leafleting efforts made by private defector-led organisations.

While government loudspeakers or foreign broadcasting to North Korea cover a wide range of topics such as news reporting on world affairs to entertainment including American and South Korean pop music, privately distributed leaflets from the South Korean side of the border have a specific main subject — the Kim family. One of the most recent leaflets sent to the North covers the death of Kim Jong Un’s half brother Kim Jong Nam in Malaysia. Other topics include South Korea’s economic prowess and Christianity. The language is much stronger than typical loudspeaker broadcasts also, calling Kim a “human butcher,” for instance.



김정일의 둘째딸 김정애 김정남과 살인자 김정은 독살당한 김정남(2017.2.13일)

형님을 살해 한 악마, 인간백정 김정은

2017년 2월 13일 오전 9시 경, 말레이시아 수도 쿠알라룸푸르 국제공항 매표소에서 김정일의 맏아들 김정남이 동생 김정은이 보낸 북조선 '총정찰국' 암살단에 의해 백주대낮에 살해되었다. 여성 2명, 남성 8명으로 구성된 암살단은 대량살상무기인 생화학무기 VX 신경작용제를 피해자 김정남의 얼굴 눈코, 입에 바르는 방법으로 단 3초 만에 범행을 저지르고 도망갔으나 몇일 뒤 3명은 체포되고 2명은 말레이시아 주재 북조선대사관에 잡혔으며 나머지 범피자들은 인도네시아-두바이-러시아를 거쳐 평양으로 도주하였다. 온 세상이 경악할 잔인한 살인을 저지르고도, 명백한 북조선 범인들이 체포되었는데도 철면피하기 꺾어 없는 살인마 처장 김정은은 '남조선의 음모, 죽은 사람은 김정남이 아니라 김철 이라는 외교관' 이라는 궤변을 제치고 있다.

왜 김정은은 고모부 장성택을 비롯한 료동당 고위간부들을 무자비하게 죽이는 것도 모자라 태양 같이 하는 형님까지 살해하였는가? '백두혈통' 이라고 떠드는 김정은은 어머니 고영희의 출신성분 때문에 '후지산혈통' 이라는 북조선 인민의 비판이 두려워 진짜 '백두혈통' 이고 장자인 김정남을 후계자로 둔갑한 2009년부터 수차례 살인 시도 하던 끝에 해외에까지 쫓아가 천추에 용서할 수 없는 잔인한 살인 만행을 감행하였다.



김정일의 맏아들 김정남 김정남의 아들 김한수 어린시절 김정남과 아버지 김정일

김정남은 1971년 5월 10일 김정일과 성혜림의 맏아들로 태어났다. 어머니 성혜림은 '분계선 마을' 주민공역을 한 배우이며 '똥' 과 '두만강' 을 쓴 북조선의 유명한 소설가 이기영의 딸이므로 당시 말이 있는 유부녀 이었지만 바람쟁이 김정일과의 불륜으로 김정남이 태어났다. 이후 강제로 본 남편과 이혼시켰다.

살인자 김정은은 1984년 1월 8일 '만수대에숙단' 무용수 고영희와의 불륜관계로 김정일의 셋째아들로 태어났고 두 살 위인 김정철과 여동생 김여정(로동당 선전선동부부장)과는 친형제 이지만 잔인한 이지는 이복형 김정남과 친형 김정철 마저 제치고 3대세습독재자로 둔갑하였다. 김정철, 김정은, 김여정을 낳은 고영희는 일본에서 출생한 재일동포(재포)로 70년대 혁명무용 '눈이 내린다' 의 주인공으로 유명하며 2004년 유방암으로 사망하였다.

지금 온 세계는 세습수령절대독재를 위해 형님까지 독살한 최대의 살인마, 인간백정 김정은을 반인륜살인범리자로 국제형사재판소(ICC)에 고발하였으며 이와 더불어 대한민국에 정착한 3만여 탈북자들은 피비린내 나는 이자를 온민족의 이름으로 기어이 처단하고 말 것이다.

탈북자들의 전위대 "자유북한운동연합" (조선인민해방전선)



어찌 잊으랴 6.25, 민족살육자
김정은, 여정 할애비 김일성 침략자를
인민이여 일어나라!
자유북한운동연합

The two most recent leaflets launched by The Fighters for a Free North Korea with texts about the Kim Family. Source: FFNK

The evolving faces behind leafleting

There are two different types of leafleting activities. The more traditional way is a stealth operation of launching balloons filled with leaflets and incentives such as dry rice and or money in the middle of the night — depending on the weather condition and without informing the press. Recently, there has been more attention to leafleting activities by private organisations in South Korea due to social media pushes to showcase efforts to donors.

While the correct term for such activities is leaflet dropping (전단살포) in Korean, it is also commonly referred to as “bbira,” especially by the older generation. It is a Japanese adaptation of the English word “bill” that made its way into the Korean language.

Media outlets are currently highlighting two organisations run by North Korean defectors Park Sang-hak and Park Jung-ho, who are brothers. Sang-hak, the elder brother, is the founder and executive director of The Fighters for a Free North Korea (FFNK or 자유북한운동연합) that focuses on balloon launches. The younger brother Jung-ho is the director of Kuen Saem (큰샘,) which covers the seaborne campaign.

The Park brothers’ organisations have been launching such leaflets into North Korea some eight to 15 times a year since 2004. Per launch, the standard leaflet count is 500,000.

An older leafleting organisation named "Campaign for Helping North Korean in Direct Way (북한동포직접돕기운동)" is led by Lee Min-bok, who lives along the DMZ border. Also a defector, Lee has been launching leafleting campaigns since 2001. Unlike the Park brothers, however, Lee is unlikely to face a legal action by the government as his group operates in the dark and unannounced to the media and the general public.

The [South Korean Unification Ministry](#) [1] announced on 13 June, it requested the Seoul Metropolitan Police investigate the Park brothers’ organisations. Investigation requests are made on multiple accounts, namely: violation of a law governing inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation by sending unauthorised materials to North Korea, violation of the Public Waters Management and Reclamation Act, as well as violation of the aviation security law. If found guilty, the organisations can lose their legal status.

More than words

Inside a typical double-sided leaflet, one will find one dollar bills in the total amount of \$2,000 per launch, provided to the

activist organisations mostly by Korean-American donors. Previously, human rights activist groups have included CDs and USB sticks inside plastic bottles filled with shortgrain rice, a staple in Korean diet. Other typically included items are female hygiene products, antiparasitics and the Bible.



Defector-led Kuen Saem organisation and its volunteers break-up antiparasitic tablets in small portions to fit into plastic bottles. Source: Facebook

Most recently, FFNK included SD cards with the entire content of a booklet about South Korea's economic rise from a war-torn country to the current prosperity. Once connected to a mobile phone, the all-colour booklet will be showcased as a slideshow. Other recently-added items include face masks.

As for the self-proclaimed "Balloon Warrior" Lee, he releases up to 1,500 balloons a year, each carrying 30,000 of his leaflets. His materials contain the South Korean version of history on who started the Korean War and the Kim family's use of wealth such as the construction of private ski resorts amid a nationwide food shortage.



Activist group Kuen Saem sending plastic bottles filled with rice and SD cards via sea in December 2019. Source: Facebook

From ad balloons to drones

The Park brothers travel to different parts of the Peninsula depending on the direction and strength of wind, precipitation and more recently, the likelihood of locals' sentiments about such activity. The aim is to get as close to the DMZ as legally possible. Some frequent locations include Baengnyeong Island, Yeonpyeong Island, Gimpo, the Ganghwa County, and more. The most frequent method is through advertising balloons using hydrogen gas, which is more affordable than helium gas, at about \$30 per balloon.

At least eight people are needed to launch a hydrogen balloon as the gas tank alone can weigh about 6-70 kilograms. To send a hydrogen balloon, one needs to go through a one-week training period to receive a certificate. These balloons can be

launched about six to seven months out of a year based on the region's climate.

Recently, there has been controversy over the use of drones by Park Sang-hak's FFNK. In an interview with South Korea's [ChosunBiz \[2\]](#), Park claimed that he used a drone for leafleting for the first time on 9 April. South Korea's Unification Ministry and the Ministry of National Defense were quick to counter this claim, on the basis that a commercial drone will be not able to travel some 170 km from Paju to Pyongyang. The then-Unification Minister Kim Yeon-chul also said the government has not detected such a drone activity.

Chipping away at theocracy

There are about a dozen South Korean, three American, and two Japanese and one British broadcasting networks, mostly radio, solely dedicated to spreading information to North Korea. So why does Pyongyang show a particularly aggressive reaction to leafleting?

As mentioned earlier, private leaflets coming from the South Korea side of the border and funded by the Korea Hana Foundation and overseas Koreans focus heavily on the North Korean leadership and this is seen as a demoralising insult for Pyongyang. When the North Korean public is exposed to detailed or even inflated and insulting information about the Kim family that are not covered by state-run media, it may lead to them questioning the nature of the North Korean government system — a *de facto* theocracy.



[South Korean leaflets to North Korea over the years](#) (click the link for more) Credit: DMZ Museum

Historical context

Even though both Koreas agreed on halting propaganda leaflets in the 4 July South-North Joint Communiqué in 1972, they have been engaged in the activity throughout recent history. Even during the first few years of the Moon administration, South Korea sent leaflets into North Korea.

During the Roh Moo-hyun administration, the two Koreas signed the "Agreement on the Prevention of Accidental Naval Clashes in the West Sea, and the Cessation of Propaganda Activities and the Elimination of Propaganda Apparatus in the Military Demarcation Line Areas." While the name is lengthy, the agreement is basically about putting a pause on the psychological warfare along the military demarcation line by agreeing not to spread propaganda materials.

Between 3-4 June 2004, the Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Ministry of the People's Armed Forces of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) held the second round of inter-Korean general-level military talks at Mt. Seorak. During the following working-level delegates' meeting, the two Koreas agreed to implement the following [3]:

“Agreement on the Prevention of Accidental Naval Clashes in the West Sea, and the Cessation of Propaganda Activities and the Elimination of Propaganda Apparatus in the Military Demarcation Line Areas.”

2. Measures for the Cessation of Propaganda Activities and Elimination of Propaganda Apparatus in the Military Demarcation Line Areas.

The two sides shall discontinue all propaganda activities in the Military Demarcation Line areas from 00:00, June 15, 2004.

- a. The two sides shall cease all propaganda activities using loudspeakers, signboards, standing electronic boards and leaflets as well as the spread of various materials using balloons and apparatus.
- b. Each side shall cease all propaganda activities targeting the troops of the other side from a place that they can observe.

To elicit an agreement, the North made the unprecedented move to hide the Kim Il Sung statue from the South side’s view along the demarcation line. However, the agreement was canceled after the North’s sinking of a South Korean corvette Cheonan, on 26 March 2010.

“Truth is a virus that can break into the minds of North Korean people”

Chun Young-woo, former South Korean Chief Negotiator to the six-party denuclearisation talks

[Chun \[4\]](#), who was the national security advisor during the Lee Myung-bak administration, recalls Pyongyang’s repeated request to quell the propaganda leaflets and restore the 4 June agreement. North Korea even threatened to target the originating point of any propaganda leaflets by displaying artillery for the South to see. When the threats did not work, it focused more on negotiations.

Pyongyang offered to stop the slander of then-President Lee if Seoul would disallow North-bound leafleting within the Civilian Control Line, where the activity is visible and demoralising to soldiers stationed along the DMZ. South Korean negotiators declined the offer on the basis that speaking freely about anyone regardless of title is protected by the freedom of speech in the South. Instead, Chun and his team said Seoul is willing to consider the halting of leafleting if and when Pyongyang accepts responsibility for the sinking of South Korea's Cheonan. Thus, no agreement was reached.



[North Korea leaflets found in South Korea](#) (click the link for more) Credit: DMZ Museum

Where to Go from Here

Most recently, the [Panmunjom Declaration](#) for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula [5] signed on 27 April 2018 also reaffirmed the Koreas' stance on propaganda materials including leafleting.

2. South and North Korea will make joint efforts to alleviate the acute military tension and practically eliminate the danger of war on the Korean Peninsula. Alleviating the military tension and eliminating the danger of war is a highly significant challenge directly linked to the fate of the Korean people and also a vital task in guaranteeing their peaceful and stable lives.

(1) South and North Korea agreed to completely cease all hostile acts against each other in every domain, including land, air and sea, that are the source of military tension and conflict. In this vein, the two sides agreed to transform the demilitarized zone into a peace zone in a genuine sense by ceasing as of May 1 this year all hostile acts and eliminating their means, including broadcasting through loudspeakers and distribution of leaflets, in the areas along the Military Demarcation Line.

Despite the historic move, tensions have continued to rise as hopes for a substantive agreement between the U.S. and North Korea began to wane. On 16 June, the North Korean military announced it will "actively support" multi-level leafleting by different groups within the country. In stark contrast, South Korea's presidential Cheong Wa Dae has said it is making efforts to discourage the defector-led leafleting.

As of 25 June, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un decided to hold off anti-South Korea propaganda. Pyongyang removed the recently re-installed loudspeakers along the DMZ and Korea watchers widely expect the North to also scrap the leafleting plan. Last Saturday, the state-run Korean Central News Agency had said Pyongyang plans to launch 12 million anti-South Korea leaflets and some 3,000 ad balloons as "retaliatory punishment."

[1] Ministry of Unification, "Ministry of Unification Position on Chosun Ilbo Report on Defector-led Organisations," 13 June, 2020

[2] Son Deok-ho, "From laminated leaflets to GPS Drone" (비닐코팅 전단에서 GPS드론까지,) Chosun Biz, 07 June, 2020.

[3] Ministry of National Defense, Defense White Paper (Republic of Korea, 2004), p. 303

[4] Chun Young-woo, "Episode 52: Republic of Korea crumbling at Kim Yo Jong's intimidation", 7 June 2020, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6J18uzzmEDs>

[5] The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula (2018)"

North Korea ONN propaganda

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