

Christians Seek Covert Ways To Send Aid Into North Korea

One German medical missionary says Christianity is the communist nation's biggest fear

International fears over North Korea have centered recently on its nuclear arms capabilities, but Christian observers say the issue masks what should be another global concern—the communist nation's treatment of its own citizens, especially Christians.

The world was watching North Korea Sept. 9 to see if it would use its 55th anniversary to showcase a new missile or test an atomic bomb. It did neither, though leaders of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea reaffirmed their intent to build up the nation's nuclear arsenal.

Such threats have made North Korea a formidable international concern, with former President Jimmy Carter describing it in September as having "the ability to destroy ... thousands of lives and most of Seoul, if a war should come," the New York Times reported.

"It's like the dying gasp of an animal and you wonder what is going to happen," said retired Col. Larry Forster, former director of the recently closed Peacekeeping Institute at the U.S. Army War College in Pennsylvania. "If North Korea ... falls apart, it could respond as a dangerous animal trying to save itself by using military force in hopes of uniting the Korean peninsula.

"Or it may ... quietly fall apart and become a basket case for

the international community to support in a major relief effort. [Or] as it weakens it may just become absorbed by ... South Korea, paralleling the unification of Germany.”

Forster, administrative pastor of the charismatic Life Center Ministries International in Harrisburg, Pa., stood in a demilitarized zone between North and South Korea in 1996 and saw firsthand the result of an economic crisis. “The elites will survive, but it’s the common person, the families that are on the verge of starvation and poverty and collapse,” he said.

Humanitarian relief experts report that more than 4 million people have died of hunger since 1995. Although the famine has drawn international relief agencies into the area, the government restrictions on food distribution deter the agencies from continuing their efforts. Most relief donations are given to the North Korean military or sold on the black market.

Not only are some of North Korea’s citizens starving, approximately 200,000 men, women and children accused of political crimes are languishing in prison in the far northeast region. Anyone caught criticizing President Kim Jong Il is arrested and subjected to hard labor, torture, starvation, biochemical experimentation or mass execution.

Dr. Norbert Vollertsen, a German physician and a Christian, traveled into the secret places of North Korea taking video and still images of the starved and dying. “Kim Jong Il does not allow any god besides him,” he told Charisma. “The Christians in North Korea are eliminated—executed. Christianity is their main enemy because they know about the power of Christianity.”

By all appearances, North Korea is cruel, isolated and closed. But Christians on the outside haven't lost hope.

Tim Peters, an American missionary and founder of Helping Hands Korea (), has lived in South Korea for 13 years. His ministry sends food into North Korea through proven smugglers who assist the most needy. Besides its normal monthly shipments, the ministry delivered 19 tons of baby food to a northeastern province.

Where feet are not permitted to tread, helium balloons launched by Christians are bringing hope to isolated North Koreans. On Aug. 22, Vollertsen and supporting activists attempted to launch helium balloons carrying small, solar-powered radios from South Korea's northern border into North Korea. Vollertsen hoped the radios would give citizens access to the outside world.

The South Korean government gave his group permission to execute the launch, but Vollertsen said the attempt was thwarted when a South Korean man attacked him and stole several radios.

Vollertsen isn't the first to attempt a launch of helium balloons into North Korea. Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) annually prints booklets of the gospel of Mark and floats them into North Korea via helium balloons, though anyone caught picking up these balloons can be executed. VOM told Charisma it received a report of a little girl who brought one of the balloons home to her grandmother.

The grandmother wept and said of the world's Christian

community, "Thank God, they haven't forgotten us."

C. Hope Flinchbaugh