Trading Ideals for Sustenance

By Barbara Demick

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For most of her life, Kim Hui Suk had spouted the sayings of North Korea's founder Kim Il Sung and never for a moment harbored a doubt: Capitalists were the enemy. Individualism was evil.

But then disaster rained down on her hometown, Chongjin, on North Korea's remote east coast. Factories ran out of fuel. Food rations stopped. Watching her family slowly succumb to the famine — her mother-in-law, husband and son eventually would die of starvation — Kim realized she had to change.

Once a stickler for following the rules, she bribed a bureaucrat so she could sell her apartment. Then, with no business skills other than the ability to calculate on an abacus, she used the proceeds of the sale to set herself up in a black market business, hawking biscuits and moonshine she brewed from corn.

Kim could have been sent away for life for such crimes. But obeying the rules would have meant a death sentence.

"The simple and kind-hearted people who did what they were told — they were the first to die of starvation," said Kim, a soft-spoken grandmother who now lives in South Korea and has adopted a new name to protect family members still in the North.

The famine that killed 2 million North Koreans in the mid-1990s and the death of the nation's founder, Kim Il Sung, in 1994 sparked vast changes across the secretive communist country.

Markets are springing up in the shadows of abandoned factories, foreign influences are breaching the borders, inflation is soaring and corruption is rampant. A small nouveau riche class has emerged, even as a far larger group has been forced to trade away everything for food.

This is the picture of life in North Korea as painted by more than 30 people from Chongjin, the nation's third largest city. Some are defectors living in South Korea. Others were interviewed in China, which they had entered illegally to work or beg. Accounts of aid workers and videos taken illegally in Chongjin by disgruntled residents were also used to prepare this report.

Although the North Korean regime has a reputation as the ultimate Big Brother, people from Chongjin say the public pays less and less heed to what the government says. There is little that might be called political dissent, but residents describe a pervasive sense of disillusionment that remains largely unspoken.

"People are not stupid. Everybody thinks our own government is to blame for our terrible situation," said a 39-year-old coal miner from Chongjin who was interviewed late last year during a visit to China. "We all know we think that, and we all know everybody else thinks that. We don't need to talk about it."

Kim Sun Bok, a 32-year-old former factory worker who came to South Korea last summer, said the country was "changing incredibly."

"It is not the same old North Korea anymore except in name."

Just a decade ago, when people in Chongjin needed new trousers, they had to go to government-owned stores that sold items mostly in drab browns or a dull shade of indigo. Food and other necessities were rationed. Sometimes the government permitted the sale of home-grown vegetables, but even a hairbrush was supposed to be purchased from a state-run shop.

Today, people can shop at markets all over Chongjin, the result of a burst of entrepreneurship grudgingly allowed by the authorities. Almost anything can be purchased — ice cream bars from China, pirated DVDs, cars, Bibles, computers, real estate and sex — for those who can afford the high prices.

The retail mecca is Sunam market, a wood-frame structure with a corrugated tin roof that is squeezed between two derelict factories.

The aisles brim with fresh cucumbers, tomatoes, peaches, scallions, watermelons and cabbage, as shown by rare video footage taken last year by the Osaka, Japan-based human rights group Rescue the North Korean People. Everything else comes from China: belts, shoes, umbrellas, notebooks, plates, aluminum pots, knives, shovels, toy cars, detergents, shampoos, lotions, hand creams and makeup.

Each of Chongjin's seven administrative districts has a state-sanctioned market. Sunam, the city's largest, is expanding, and some say it has a wider variety of goods than the main market in Pyongyang. Many vendors wear their licenses pinned to their right breasts while the obligatory Kim Il Sung buttons remain over the heart.

Although markets have been expanding for more than a decade, it was only in 2002 and '03 that the government enacted economic reforms that lifted some of the prohibitions against them. Most of the vendors are older women such as Kim Hui Suk, a tiny 60-year-old with short, permed hair and immaculate clothing.

She was working in the day-care center of a textile factory in the early 1990s when production ground to a halt. Men were ordered to stay in their jobs, but Workers' Party cadres at the factory started whispering that the married women, or ajumas, ought to moonlight to provide for their families.

"It was clear that the ajumas had to go out and earn money or the family would starve," Kim said.

She first tried to raise pigs, locking them in a shed outside her downtown apartment building and feeding them slop left over from making tofu. But the electricity and water were too unreliable to keep the business going.

In 1995, Kim sold her apartment in the choice Shinam district and bought a cheaper one, hoping to use the proceeds to import rice from the countryside. But that too failed when she injured her back and couldn't work.

The family's situation became dire. Her husband's employer, a provincial radio station, stopped paying salaries, and food distribution ended. In 1996, her mother-in-law died of starvation, and her husband the following year.

"First he got really, really thin and then bloated. His last words to me were, 'Let's get a bottle of wine, go to a restaurant and enjoy ourselves,' " Kim recalled. "I felt bad that I couldn't fulfill his last wish."

In 1998, Kim's 26-year-old son, who had been a wrestler and gymnast, grew weak from hunger and contracted pneumonia. A shot of penicillin from the market would have cost 40 won, the same price as enough corn powder to feed herself and her three daughters for a week. She opted for the corn and watched her son succumb to the infection.

But Kim did not give up. She swapped apartments again and used the money to start another business, this time baking biscuits and neungju, a potent corn moonshine. If buyers didn't have cash, she would accept chile powder or anything else she could use.

"We made just enough to put food on the table," said Kim.

Much of Chongjin's commerce is still not officially sanctioned, so it has an impromptu quality. Money changes hands over wooden carts that can be rolled away in a hurry. Those who can't afford carts sell on tarpaulins laid out in the dirt.

Fashion boutiques are slapped together with poles and clotheslines, enlivening the monochromatic landscape with garish pinks and paisleys. Some clothes have the labels ripped out and vendors whisper that these items came from araet dongne or the "village below," a euphemism for South Korea, whose products are illegal in the North.

Shoppers can buy 88-pound sacks of rice emblazoned with U.S. flags, and biscuits and corn noodles produced by three factories in Chongjin run by the U.N. World Food Program — all intended to be humanitarian handouts.

Some people cut hair or repair bicycles, though furtively because these jobs are supposed to be controlled by the government's Convenience Bureau.

"They will bring a chair and mirror to the market to cut hair," Kim said. "The police can come at any moment, arrest them and confiscate their scissors."

Another new business is a computer salon. It looks like an Internet cafe, but because there's no access to the Web in North Korea, it is used mostly by teenagers to play video games.

More products are available, but inflation puts them out of reach for most people. The price of rice has increased nearly eightfold since the economic reforms of 2002 to 525 won per pound; an average worker earns 2,500 won a month — about $1 at the unofficial exchange rate.

World Food Program officials in North Korea say the vast majority of the population is less well off since the economic changes, especially factory workers, civil servants, retirees and anybody else on a fixed income. But there are those who have gotten rich. Poor Chongjin residents disparage them as donbulrae, or money insects.

"There are people who started trading early and figured out the ropes," said a 64-year-old retired math teacher who sells rabbits at the market. "But those of us who were loyal and believed in the state, we are the ones who are suffering."

If Chongjin's economic center is Sunam market, its political heart is Pohang Square, a vast plaza dominated by a 25-foot bronze statue of Kim Il Sung.

The grass here is neatly mowed, the shrubbery pruned and the pavement in good repair. Even when the rest of the city is without electricity, the statue is bathed in light. Across the street, a tidy pink building houses a permanent exhibit of the national flower, a hybrid begonia called Kimjongilia, named for current leader Kim Jong Il.

Since the practice of religion is barred, Pohang Square stands in as a spiritual center. Newlyweds in their best clothes pose for pictures, bowing to the statue so that their union is symbolically blessed.

When Kim Il Sung died on July 8, 1994, half a million people came to Pohang Square to pay their respects in the pouring rain and stifling heat. But among the adoring multitudes, there were malcontents.

One was Ok Hui, the eldest daughter of entrepreneur Kim Hui Suk. Though she dutifully took her place in the throng, any sadness she felt came from a foreboding that Kim Jong Il would be worse than his father.

"I went day and night along with everybody else. You had to…. But there were no tears coming from my eyes," recalled Ok Hui, now 39, who did not want her family name published.

Ok Hui worked for a construction company's propaganda unit, a job that entailed riding around in a truck with a megaphone, exhorting workers to do their best for the fatherland. But she didn't believe what she preached.

Her father had taught her to doubt the regime. As a reporter and member of the Workers' Party, he knew more about the outside world than many people and realized how far North Korea lagged behind South Korea and China.

"He and his friends would stay up at night when my mother was out, talking about what a thief Kim Jong Il was," Ok Hui said.

Her mother, though, remained a firm believer. "I lived only for the marshal. I never had a thought otherwise," said Kim Hui Suk. "Even when my husband and son died, I thought it was my fault."

Ok Hui and her mother frequently clashed. "Why did you give birth to me in this horrible country?" Ok Hui remembers taunting her mother.

"Shut up! You're a traitor to your country!" Kim retorted.

"Whom do you love more? Kim Jong Il or me?" her daughter shot back.

The regime was probably less beloved in Chongjin than elsewhere in North Korea. Food had run out in its province, North Hamgyong, earlier than in other areas, and starvation rates were among the highest in the nation.

Chongjin's people are reputed to be the most independent-minded in North Korea. One famous report of unrest centers on the city. In 1995, senior officers from the 6th army corps in Chongjin were executed for disloyalty and the entire unit, estimated at 40,000 men, was disbanded. It is still unclear whether the incident was an attempted uprising or a corruption case.

Chongjin is known for its vicious gang wars, and it was sometimes difficult to distinguish political unrest from ordinary crime. There were increasing incidents of theft and insubordination. At factories, desperate workers dismantled machinery or stripped away copper wiring to sell for food.

Public executions by firing squad were held outside Sunam market and on the lawn of the youth park, once a popular lover's lane.

In a village called Ihyon-ri on the outskirts of Chongjin, a gang suspected of anti-government activities killed a national security agent who had tried to infiltrate the group, former kindergarten teacher Seo Kyong Hui said.

"This guy was from my village. He had been sent to inform on a group that was engaged in suspicious activities," she said. "They caught him and stoned him to death."

Work crews went out early in the morning to wash away any anti-regime graffiti painted overnight, according to human rights groups, but most people were too scared to express their discontent. Badmouthing the leadership is still considered blasphemy.

To discourage anti-regime activity, North Korea punishes "political crimes" by banishing entire families to remote areas or labor camps.

"If you have one life to live, you would gladly give it to overthrow this government," said Seo, the teacher. "But you are not the only one getting punished. Your family will go through hell."

Even as Kim Jong Il's regime weakens, many of its stalwarts are growing richer. Many of Chongjin's well-to-do are members of the Workers' Party or are connected to the military or security services. In the new economy, they use their ties to power to trade with China, obtain market licenses, extract bribes and sell bureaucratic favors.

"Those who have power in North Korea always figure out ways to make money," said Joo Sung Ha, 31, who grew up in Chongjin and now works as a journalist in Seoul.

Joo was the pampered only son of a prominent official, and his family lived in Shinam, in the city's northern hills overlooking the ocean. By the standards of South Korea or China, the single-family homes with lines of fish and squid drying from the roofs are nothing special. But for North Koreans, these are mansions.

The Joo family had a 2,000-square-foot cement-block house and a walled garden about twice that large. The garden proved crucial in protecting the family against the famine, though they had to contend with hungry soldiers who would scale the walls and steal potatoes and cabbages.

North Korean families like to measure their status by the number of wardrobes they own, and Joo's family had five — plus a television, a refrigerator, a tape recorder, a sewing machine, an electric fan and a camera. They didn't have a phone or a car — at that time those were unthinkable even for a well-off family — but they did have a bicycle.

"The appliances were of no use after the electricity ran out," Joo said. "The bicycle was the most important thing, because the buses and trams stopped running."

Joo attended the best elementary school in Chongjin, the city's foreign language institute, and eventually the country's top school, Kim Il Sung University in Pyongyang. He never met a native English speaker in the North, or any foreigner for that matter, but he trained his ear with videotapes of the BBC and banned Hollywood films.

"I sometimes watched 'Gone With the Wind' twice a day. Anybody else would have been arrested for watching Hollywood movies," he recalled.

Joo's glimpses of Western culture eroded his loyalty to the system. "I saw myself 20 years down the road in the prime of my career and North Korea would be collapsing," he said.

While many of his classmates went to work for the regime's propaganda news service after graduating, Joo arranged to return to Chongjin, where he taught high school until he escaped in 2001.

"The people from our neighborhood couldn't understand," said Joo, who stays in contact with his family. "They thought I had everything."

Kim Hye Young, an actress, was also a child of privilege. Her father, Kim Du Seon, was an official of a trading company that sold mushrooms and fish in China. He learned how to navigate the bureaucracy, using his connections with the army and security services.

"If one of [the officials] had a wedding in the family, they would come to me for a couple of cases of wine," the older Kim said.

As trade with China became more important, the family prospered. They took drives in a company car and ate at Chongjin's nicest restaurant.

Growing up, Kim showed a flair for theater, and through her acting became a member of the elite in her own right. Her best-known role was in a play called "The Strong and the Righteous," in which she portrayed a spy who sacrifices her life for North Korea.

When the production won first place in a Pyongyang drama festival in 1996, she got to meet Kim Jong Il. Still breathless with the memory, she said the leader shook her hand and gave her a fountain pen.

"I knew that I, as an actress, had an important role to promote the ideology of my country," Kim said.

Kim and her sisters were largely oblivious to the famine, and their mother said she took pains to shelter them.

"My daughters don't know to this day how many children in our neighborhood starved to death," said her mother, Choe Geum Lan. She also didn't tell them that their father, as a result of his business trips to China, had become increasingly pessimistic about North Korea's future.

In 1998, when Kim was home from Pyongyang on vacation, her parents told her the family was going to visit an aunt in Musan, a city near the Chinese border. It was not until they had crossed to the other side that Kim and her teenage sisters, were told they had defected.

Kim, now 29 and advertising toothpaste on South Korean television, is one of the few defectors who says she didn't want to leave.

"I was content with my life," she said.

Today, North Korea's elites are even better off, buying telephones for their homes and even cars.

"For $4,000 or $5,000, anybody can buy a car now. It used to be that you weren't allowed to register your own car. We couldn't dream of it," said Kim Yong Il, a defector from Chongjin who lives in Seoul.

Recently, he arranged to have a computer smuggled from China to his relatives in Chongjin. North Korea's state-run companies don't have computers, so they're eager to hire people who do. "If you have a computer, you can get a job," he said.

Visitors have been shocked to glimpse the new conspicuous consumption in Chongjin.

Jeung Young Tai, a South Korean academic who was in Chongjin delivering South Korean government aid, noticed a paunchy man standing in front of the Chonmasan Hotel next to a new Lexus.

And at a hot spring in Kyongsong, on the city's outskirts, he saw a woman carrying a lap dog — a striking sight in a country where there is so little food that the only pets usually are goldfish.

"You get the sense that there is a tremendous gap between rich and poor and that the gap is growing," Jeung said.

The flip side, of course, is that the poor are getting poorer.

In Chongjin, those at the very bottom of the heap can be found at the train station.

The cavernous building boasts a large portrait of Kim Il Sung above the entrance and a granite-faced clock that rarely tells the right time. In front is a vast plaza crammed with people waiting for trains — sometimes for days, because the trains have no fixed schedules — and people waiting for nothing at all.

These are the homeless, many of them children. They're called kotchebi, or swallows, because they wander the streets and sometimes between towns in search of food. Many gravitate to Chongjin station, because it is a major hub and the travelers have more to give.

A video shot last year by a military official and sold to Japan's NTV television captured barefoot children near the station in torn, filthy clothing fighting over a nearly empty jar of kimchi. One boy scooted along the pavement on his buttocks; the narrator said his toes had been eaten away by frostbite.

Kim Hyok knows how easy it is for a child to end up at the station; he spent the better part of two years living there.

"If you can't find somebody or they left their home, chances are you can find them at the station," said Kim, now 23 and resettled in South Korea.

Kim's mother died when he was a toddler, and he was raised by his father, a party member and an employee of a military unit that sold fish in China. During his early childhood, Kim, his father and elder brother lived in relative comfort in a high-rise apartment in the Sunam district.

When the government stopped handing out rations in 1993, Kim's father used his connections to place his sons in an orphanage 60 miles away.

Kim, who was about 12 at the time, wasn't sorry to be sent away. It was considered a privilege because the orphanages had food.

In 1997, just before his 16th birthday, Kim "graduated" from the orphanage. He caught a train back to Chongjin, but when he got to his neighborhood, things looked unfamiliar. The electricity was off. Many apartment buildings had no glass in the windows and appeared vacant.

Climbing the eight flights in pitch dark to his family's unit, he heard a baby crying and wondered whose it might be. Confused and scared, he knocked on the door.

A young couple opened the door and told him his father had moved long ago but left a message: Look for him at the train station.

The phenomenon of vagrancy is testament to how much North Korea has changed. Before the famine, the government controlled people's movements so strictly that they could not dream of visiting a relative in a nearby town without a travel permit, let alone selling their homes. Not showing up for work could bring a visit from police.

But as people embarked on increasingly desperate hunts for food, families broke apart. With few telephones and a barely functional postal service, parents and children became separated.

"People just started wandering around because they were hungry," Kim said. "They would sell their apartments for a few bags of rice."

Kim never found his father. He also never found his brother, who had left the orphanage a year earlier.

With no place to go, Kim ended up at the train station. By night, he slept squeezed into a narrow space designed for a sliding iron gate. By day, he loitered near the food vendors on the plaza. He often worked with a gang of other kids — a few would topple a vendor's cart and the others would scoop up whatever spilled.

"If you're not fast, you can't eat," said Kim, who even today in South Korea bears the signs of chronic malnutrition, with a head that looks oversized on a shockingly short frame.

Kim began hopping the slow-moving trains that pass through Chongjin on their way to the Chinese border. Once on board, Kim would scramble up to the top of a car, flatten himself to avoid the electric lines above and, using his pack as a pillow, ride for hours.

At the border, he would wade across the river to hawk the items in his pack: household goods on consignment from Chongjin residents, who were selling off their possessions.

In 1998, Kim was arrested by Chinese authorities, who do not recognize North Koreans as refugees. He was sent back to North Korea and spent two years in a prison camp before escaping again in 2000 to China, where he was eventually taken in by missionaries and brought to South Korea.

For every homeless person who survived, many more likely died. Kim Hui Suk recalled a particularly ghoulish scene at the train station.

"Once I saw them loading three bodies into a cart," Kim said. "One guy, a man in his 40s, was still conscious. His eyes were sort of blinking, but they still were taking him away."

Although the ranks of the homeless have thinned since the height of the famine, North Korean residents say their numbers are still considerable.

"If somebody disappears, you don't know whether he dropped dead on the road or went to China," the coal miner said.

About 100,000 North Koreans have escaped to China in the last 10 years. Many have ended up returning to North Korea, either because they were deported or because they missed their families. They often back bring money, goods to trade and strange new ideas.

Smugglers carry chests that can hold up to 1,000 pirated DVDs. South Korean soap operas, movies about the Korean War and Hollywood action films are among the most popular. Even pornography is making its way in.

This is a radical change for a country so prudish that until recently women were not permitted to ride bicycles because it was thought too provocative. Seo Kyong Hui, the kindergarten teacher, said that when she left North Korea in 1998, "I was 26 years old, and I still didn't know how a baby was conceived."

Even today, women are prohibited from wearing short skirts or sleeveless shirts, and both sexes are forbidden to wear blue jeans. Infractions bring rebukes from the public standards police.

But it is a losing battle to maintain what used to be a hermetic seal around the country. Just a few years ago, ordinary North Koreans could make telephone calls only from post offices. Dialing abroad was virtually impossible. Now some people carry Chinese cellphones and pay for rides to the border to pick up a signal and call overseas.

Smugglers also bring in cheap Chinese radios. Unlike North Korean radios, which are preset to government channels, the Chinese models can be tuned to anything, even South Korean programs or the Korean-language broadcasts of Radio Free Asia.

In the past, being caught with such contraband would land a person in political prison. Nowadays, security personnel will more likely confiscate the illicit item for personal use.

When a policeman caught Ok Hui, the entrepreneur's daughter, with a Chinese radio in 2001, the first question he asked was, "So how do you work this thing?"

She wrote down the frequencies for South Korean radio stations.

"Don't you have earphones so you can listen without anybody hearing you?" the officer then demanded.

North Korea instructs its citizens that the country is a socialist paradise, but the government knows outside influences can puncture its carefully crafted illusions.

"Bourgeois anti-communist ideology is paralyzing the people's sound mind-set," warns a Workers' Party document dated April 2005. "If we allow ourselves to be affected by these novel ideas, our absolute idolization for the marshal [Kim Il Sung] will disappear."

Among those who make it to China, many describe a moment of epiphany when they find out just how bad off North Koreans are.

Kim Ji Eun, a doctor from Chongjin, remembers wading across the partially frozen Tumen River in March 1999, staggering to a Chinese farmhouse and seeing a dish of white rice and meat set out in a courtyard.

"I couldn't figure it out at first. I thought maybe it was for refrigeration," recalled Kim, who now lives in South Korea. "Then I realized that dogs in China live better than even party members in North Korea."

Many Chongjin residents who are caught trying to flee the country end up back in the city, behind the barbed wire of Nongpo Detention Center.

It sits near the railroad tracks in a swampy waterfront area. Prisoners are assigned back-breaking jobs in the nearby rice paddies or brick factory, where the workday begins at 5 a.m.

Ok Hui was one of those who served time in Nongpo. A rebel by nature, she had become fed up with North Korea and a difficult marriage.

In September 2001, during one of several failed attempts to escape, she was arrested in Musan and brought back to Chongjin by train. Guards tied the female prisoners to one another by tightly winding shoelaces around their thumbs.

In Nongpo, the inmates bunked in rows of 10, squeezed so tightly together that they had to sleep on their sides. Newcomers sometimes had to bed down in the corridor near overflowing toilets. Meals consisted of a thin, salty soup, sometimes supplemented by a few kernels of raw corn or a chunk of uncooked potato.

"The walls were very high and surrounded by wire," Ok Hui said. "One woman tried to climb the wall. They beat her almost to death. You can't imagine. They made us stand and watch."

One day, when she was assigned to work in the fields, she spotted an old woman. She took off her underwear and offered it to the woman in exchange for sending a message to her mother. Underwear is scarce in North Korea, so the woman accepted and agreed to send a telegram to Ok Hui's mother.

With her market earnings, Kim Hui Suk bought 10 packs of cigarettes for a security official to arrange her daughter's release.

Some days later, the prison administrator came to talk to Ok Hui and other female prisoners who were picking corn. They were all due to be freed shortly, and the administrator urged them to resist the temptations of capitalism and imperialism, and to devote themselves to North Korea.

Then, he asked for a show of hands: Who would promise not to run away again to China?

Not a single woman raised her arm.

"We were all just thinking that our whole lives we had been told lies," Ok Hui recalled. "Our whole lives, in fact, were lies. We just felt this immense rage toward the system."

The prison administrator looked at the women squatting sullenly in silence in the cornfield.

"Well," he said, "if you go again to China, next time don't get caught.

Forty days after her release, Ok Hui escaped again to China and made her way to South Korea. She used $8,000 in resettlement money from South Korea's government to pay a broker to smuggle her mother out of North Korea. Today Ok Hui works in a funeral home and her mother as a housekeeper.

\*Jinna Park of The Times' Seoul Bureau contributed to this report.

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