

Marching towards peace in Korea

Real interactions with outsiders are the best weapons against an authoritarian state | BY TIM SHORROCK, PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHEN WUNROW



Women march through the military checkpoint on the south side of the Demilitarized Zone. (below left) Filmmaker Deanne Borshay-Liem took documentary footage of the event. She is with Aiyoung Choi of the Korean American Family Service Center and Ann Wright, peace activist and recipient of the Award for Heroism in the Iraq War. Photos by Stephen Wunrow

On Sunday, May 24, Gloria Steinem, looking radiant but tired in a white dress traditionally worn by Korean women, walked into a room packed with reporters and photographers at the Customs, Immigration and Quarantine building in Paju, South Korea, just a mile from the North Korean border.

Gathered around the American feminist icon were 30 women from 15 countries who had just accomplished what only two foreign groups had ever done before — cross the demilitarized zone dividing the communist North from the capitalist South. They were greeted in the South by hundreds of women and peace and unification activists from a country long divided by war and 60 years of tension.

But their visit to North Korea incited harsh critiques from some journalists and a vocal community of



activists within and outside Korea who oppose any contacts with the militaristic regime of Jong Un Kim.

the International Crisis Group. If North Korea is ever to change, Pinkston says, North Koreans need



(above) Medea Benjamin, cofounder of the women-led peace organization Code Pink, with fellow Code Pink cofounder Jodie Evans and Irish Nobel Peace Laureate Mairead Maguire. Photos by Stephen Wunrow

Those criticisms were misplaced, said Daniel Pinkston, an Air Force veteran and long-time North Korea observer for

to change their thinking. And the only way that can happen is for North Koreans to be exposed to different perspectives and points of view — something that can only happen from interactions with civil society from the outside, such as Steinem and her crew, or Dennis Rodman, the NBA star who was

invited to North Korea by Jong Un Kim two years ago. Why?

“Because it completely contradicts the state narrative. Any of these types of groups, whether it’s students, sports, culture, music, I support it because it’s a mechanism, a transmission belt for new ideas and thinking,” he told me at a café in Seoul on Tuesday.

When Rodman went to the North — in a trip where Pinkston played an advisory role — the kids who met and played ball with him realized “they were people just like them,” Pinkston says. “It’s the same thing with these women. There are things we have in common as human beings. That in and of itself is subversive.” As for the groups in Washington who want to stop such interaction, “I just don’t get it,” he said. “What is the alternative?”

For the three days, Women Cross



(front row) Jean Chung of Action for One Korea; Vance Kim Hansen Korea War refugee and spiritual teacher; Una Kim; Co-Chair Gloria Steinem, organizer Christine Ahn; Hyung Kyung Chung theologian and activist from United Theological Seminary; Nobel Peace Laureate Leymah Gbowee of Liberia; Nobel Peace Laureate Mairead Maguire of Ireland and Medea Benjamin of Code Pink. Photo by Stephen Wunrow



Gloria Steinem addresses the assembled press after their group cleared customs into South Korea at the DMZ. Photos by Stephen Wunrow

DMZ had been in Pyongyang, North Korea's capital, to talk about war, conflict and reconciliation. By Sunday, they had arrived in the South to do the same with their counterparts in Seoul.

"We were told this would be impossible," Steinem triumphantly declared as the cameras clicked and whirled. "But we're feeling very celebratory and positive we could cross the DMZ" despite those who predicted it would never happen. She then handed the microphone to Leymah Gbowee, a Liberian social worker and human rights activist who won the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts to end the civil war there.

"Our purpose was citizen to citizen diplomacy," Gbowee said while telling the crowd the marchers had

accomplished all their objectives. Most importantly, her group had fostered "actual communication between North and South" that allowed the women to ride a bus across the DMZ.

Their original intent was to walk through Panmunjom, the nearby truce village run by a UN Command that's dominated by the U.S. military. But the South Korean government, citing vague threats to security, demanded that the women use a road normally used by vehicles carrying goods to and from the Kaesong Industrial Zone, where North Korean workers assemble goods for South Korean companies.

I waited for several hours with *KQ* photographer Stephen Wunrow and other reporters and photojournalists

at the customs center. We had all been cleared by South Korea's Ministry of Unification to witness this historical event. Standing with us on the observation deck of the building were two soldiers from the UN Command, D.E. "Dan-O" McShane, a lieutenant commander in the U.S. Navy and a joint duty operator at Panmunjom, and Damian Jaques, a lieutenant in the New Zealand Army.

McShane, a gregarious officer whose job is to brief American tourists to the DMZ, kept us apprised of the time of the crossing and told me that this would mark only the third time such a crossing had happened. A few years ago, a group of Russian-Koreans whose families had left North Korea during the Korean War had crossed from south to

north to visit their loved ones.

And in 2013, a crew of motorcyclists from New Zealand had crossed from the north on an unusual tour that took them through the entire Korean peninsula. "I was here then, with two Kiwis," McShane told me. But Americans crossing? "Never seen that." Both he and Jaques shared the South Korean contention that their attempt to walk across the DMZ had been risky, though they couldn't quite say why.

The Women Cross DMZ marchers were more concerned about the risks inherent to a divided Korea. Gbowee told the reporters back in the customs center that the trip was a huge success that could only advance the peace process. "We came here to end the war, and we



Christine Ahn gives the peace sign. Photo by Stephen Wunrow

think this is a first step," she said.

With that, a barrage of questions began, mostly from men, and some hostile. What did they think about human rights in North Korea? Was it true that members of the group had praised the North Korean government? Doesn't your visit give support to the regime of Kim Jong Un? Just before the women's arrival, several North Korean defectors shouting slogans ("Women Cross DMZ are puppets of Kim Jong Un") were removed from the area by South Korean police.

Mairead Maguire, another Nobel laureate recognized for leading a non-violent movement in Northern Ireland, took on the human rights issue directly. Speaking in her deep Irish brogue, she explained that the purpose of the march was to create the environment for political change on both sides of the border. And that could only happen, she insisted, if the U.S. and North and South Korea signed a permanent peace treaty to end the Korean War, which was settled in an uneasy 1953 armistice that persists to this day.

"You can start talking about human rights when you have a normal relationship and not a country at war," she explained. Her hope, she added, was to give Koreans on both sides "every strength to continue on the long journey of finding peace and reconciliation." ●

Tim Shorrock is a Washington journalist and frequent Korean Quarterly contributor who was raised in Japan and South Korea. He was in Korea last May to accept an honorary citizenship from the southwestern city of Kwangju for a series of stories he wrote in 1996 that exposed for the first time the previously hidden role of the U.S. government in a 1980 military coup in South Korea (see column, page 10).