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STARS AND STRIPES.

Sunday, June 27, 2004

S. Koreans see delicate future with the North

By [Jeremy Kirk](#), Stars and Stripes

Pacific edition, Sunday, June 27, 2004

DEMILITARIZED ZONE — Kim Sang-su pumped his fist within sight of deteriorating buildings in North Korea, leading a cheer Friday among a group of aging South Koreans: “We beg for unification! Move forward!”

The pilgrimage to the village of Tae Song Dong in the Demilitarized Zone on the 54th anniversary of the start of the Korean War was the first for some and a return trip for others, many of whom harbor memories of the brutal civil conflict. From the closest inhabited town to the border, the group pointed and gazed into North Korea.

It’s the closest many may get to North Korea in their lifetimes. And it prompted thought on how to deal with their prickly northern neighbor as the United States moves to withdraw 12,500 troops by 2005.

“I think it’s too early [for U.S. troop withdrawals],” said electrician Kim Yeo-sang, while eating cold buckwheat noodles — a dish of North Korean origin — for lunch. “It would be a disaster.”

While many wax nostalgic for unification and the welfare of ordinary North Koreans, some fear a hasty joining would crush South Korea economically at a time when the country remains on good but fragile footing.

Relations with North Korea won’t get better with a U.S. troop reduction, Kim said. But unification wouldn’t be great, either: Kim fears higher taxes if the Koreas unified because of the two countries’ economic imbalance. The average income for a North Korean is roughly \$1,000 annually, while a South Korean makes \$9,800 a year, according to U.S. State Department figures.

If American soldiers leave, it could also undercut South Korea’s progress, said

71-year-old Kim Kil-lae. “The United States has done a lot of good things for Korea as a nation,” she said.

U.S. troops — while often scorned by young South Koreans — are still embraced by the elder generation. Son Young-rak remembers kind American soldiers when he was a 10-year-old during the war. Relations between the Koreas are improving, but U.S. troops should stay, he said.

“We want them here to protect,” Son said.

South Korea and the United States share delicate politics, strained by the beheading in Iraq this week of a 33-year-old South Korean man who was working for a company that supplied the U.S. military. The shocking moment has polarized opinions on the pending South Korean dispatch of 3,600 troops to Iraq.

The tension between South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun and President Bush, along with the troop-withdrawal proposal, has left impressions that the United States is “abandoning” South Korea, said Park Yang-sun, a minister who traveled to the DMZ from Sosan.

But for many South Koreans, the threat of war is a distant thought, as an armistice has preserved a tenuous combat freeze for 51 years. A more tangible issue is helping North Koreans who defect through an underground railroad-like system of ethnic Koreans in China.

Those lucky enough to make it out face a difficult adjustment to fast-paced South Korean life. Many DMZ visitors Friday wore red vests saying they are part of the North Korean Defectors Integration Association.

The group has a hot line for defectors and holds seminars to aid integration into southern society. It also helps North Koreans find jobs: one cold buckwheat noodle factory in South Korea is known for hiring defectors, and those noodles were eaten by participants Friday.

The meal came before a scheduled performance of North Koreans who worked in the entertainment industry before they defected. The performance — the 10th scheduled by the defectors aid group — is intended to enhance the familial bond since many of the North Korean performers’ family members are still on the border’s other side.

“They are all Koreans,” Park said. “It’s inevitable that we help them.”

— *Jennifer Kleckner contributed to this report.*

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