

Women's undergarments, bananas, refugees: The Philippines-North Korea relationship

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Though the Philippines and North Korea don't have embassies in each other's lands, the future might change because of North and South Korea's vow to end Korean War. Illustration by JL JAVIER

Manila (CNN Philippines Life) — It was only in 2000 that we started having diplomatic ties with North Korea.

Prof. Lucio Pitlo III, consultant for the UP Korea Research Center and lecturer at the Ateneo de Manila University, believes that the Philippines' 'minor' relationship with North Korea or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) may be because our values are more aligned with that of South Korea or the U.S., our allies during the Korean War. "We have that long history of working with the U.S. on security issues and we share the values of democracy and liberalism, and I think this is one reason why it is quite difficult for us to fully engage the North," says Pitlo.

Pitlo adds that, like most countries, we have yet to allow North Korea to have an embassy in Manila, because North Korean diplomats are known to carry out illegal activities. "Some North Korean diplomats were apprehended for trafficking wildlife, ivory, gold, counterfeiting money. I haven't heard about drugs," he says.

The DPRK has no embassy in the Philippines, but they do have a non-resident ambassador to the Philippines, Mun Song Mo, who is based in Thailand. The Philippines also has a non-resident ambassador to North Korea, Ambassador Jose Santiago Sta. Romana, who resides in China and is also our ambassador to China.

Philippines and North Korea do not have embassy bases on each other's lands, our country has a trade relationship with the North; although, it is not as extensive as our ties with the South. According to the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency, the Philippines is North Korea's fifth largest trading partner, with bilateral trade amounting to \$28.8 million. The Philippines is also among the top import origins of North Korea, together with China, India, Russia, and Thailand. According to the Department of Trade and Industry, the Philippines' main exports to North Korea in 2015 were computers, bananas, integrated circuits, and women's undergarments.

However, on Sept. 8, Foreign Minister Alan Peter Cayetano announced that the Philippines is suspending trade with North Korea to comply with the United Nations Security Council resolution, following the sixth and largest missile test of the DPRK on Sunday, Sept. 4.

Filipinos in North Korea

Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) acting spokesperson Robespierre Bolivar says that as of September 2017, there are already 65,000 Filipinos who live in South Korea. While it is known that the South is home to a considerable amount of Filipino migrant workers, Palumbarit says that an accurate number of Filipinos living in the North may be hard to decipher.

"In 2006, there were about four Filipinos in Pyongyang working for a tobacco company, and in 2012, based on my personal communication with Ambassador Hernandez, [the Philippine ambassador to South Korea], he mentioned that there were about seven Filipinos in North Korea working for the United Nations related agencies," Palumbarit says.

But based on the information from Bolivar, there are currently six Filipinos working in the DPRK: one is working for the UN World Food Program, two working for an international NGO, and three working for a Singaporean multinational company. "Our embassy in Beijing closely monitors and communicates with all six Filipinos in North Korea, just to make sure they are in good health and their living conditions are appropriate," he says.

Because of the repeated missile tests of the North, Palumbarit says that Filipinos in the Korean Peninsula may already be accustomed to it. Pitlo also agrees that the people living in Korea may have already accepted North Korea's threats with resignation. "What could they do? The only way to reverse that would be war," he says. "Do you think North Korea will give up their nuclear arm? No. In the 1990s, there was a huge famine that killed thousands, if not millions, of people. But did they divert resources away from military and into feeding people? No."


North Korean refugees

With North Korea continuously allocating resources to military and nuclear operations instead of providing for their people, it is unavoidable for some North Koreans to opt to flee and take refuge in another land. In a 2015 study by Christopher J. Dawe entitled "The Philippines as an International Transit Site for North Korean Refugees," he argues that the Philippines has a pivotal role in aiding the transit of North Korean refugees from China to South Korea.

Dawe states that the Philippines is a country that has never been reluctant to assist refugees, one reason being that the Philippines is also a signatory of the United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a treaty that ensures the socio-economic rights of refugees. Pitlo also says that the Philippines does assist refugees, but more as a transit point rather than the final destination, akin to the aid extended to refugees who fled Vietnam after the Vietnam War.

Further evidence of the Philippines being a waypoint is Dawe's research stating that there was "an official correspondence from the American embassy in Manila indicating that the Philippines has adopted a policy of low-key assistance in helping North Korean refugees reach South Korea."

However, this correspondence was written in 2005, and Dawe says that it is impossible to say whether the Philippines continues to assist North Korean refugees until now as all the governments involved are silent on the topic. Bolivar says that the DFA does not have information regarding refugees, but they do have information on the number of North Korean tourists who have gone to the Philippines, although their information stops at 2012.

 e these are private individuals in the Philippines on a holiday. That's the information we got from DOT. It's very rare that you can find a (10) or 12 tourists in a year, that's almost negligible," he says.

Nevertheless, Dawe concludes in his research that even if North Koreans are no longer flown to Manila on the way to Seoul, many have survived, thanks, in "large part" to the Philippines.

These information are only some of the documented accounts that have been made available to the public. Pitlo says that we can never know for certain the extent of our present ties with North Korea, and Palumbarit agrees: "North Korea is a very reclusive country. [It's] very isolated, very mysterious."

Perhaps this might change with the North and South Korean's vow to end the Korean War.

Note: Portions of this article originally appeared in "How does North Korea's missile test affect the Philippines?"




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