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The Korean War Continues With Biden's Renewal of Travel Ban to North Korea



General Douglas MacArthur, UN Command CiC (seated), observes the naval shelling of Incheon from USS Mount McKinley, 15 September 1950

On August 22, the U.S. State Department renewed its ban on the use of U.S. passports for travel to North Korea. This travel ban prohibits as many as 100,000 Korean Americans living in the United States from visiting their relatives in North Korea. The ban was first set in place by the Trump administration in 2017, and—in spite of Korean American activists' repeated calls to lift the draconian ban—has been renewed annually since.

During his presidential campaign in 2020, Joe Biden had promised to “reunite Korean Americans separated from loved ones in North Korea for decades,” but has extended the travel ban each year he has been in office. This current ban will remain in place until August 31, 2024, at which point it will either be lifted or extended again.

Families Separated by the Travel Ban

Kate Youngjoo Shim, an activist with the women’s peace organization Korea Peace Now!, is one of the many Korean Americans the travel ban impacts. Born in Korea, Shim moved to the U.S. at the age of 15. Both sides of her family are originally from North Korea, and the ban now prevents her from visiting cousins and other close relatives there.

Shim pointed out the hypocrisy of the U.S. government lecturing North Korea on human rights while keeping so many Korean family members separated.

“The biggest human rights violation to me is not letting people see their family,” said Shim. “The U.S. government is always trying to say things about [North Korea’s] human rights conditions, but if you’re not letting people meet their mothers, their children, their immediate families... there’s no excuse.”

Things were not always this way. Shim’s grandmother was separated from her oldest son—Shim’s uncle—during the Korean War. After decades of trying to track him down while living in South Korea, her grandmother moved to the U.S. at the age of 65 in the 1980s in the hopes that it would improve her chances of finding and reuniting with him. The task had proved difficult for her in South Korea due to the political situation between the North and South at that time. Even after decades of not knowing where he was and against all odds, Shim’s grandmother remained hopeful that she and her long-lost son would meet again. After moving to the U.S., she even started working at a factory so that she could afford to bring him back gifts once he was found.

Eventually, Shim’s family was able to track down her lost uncle in North Korea, and her grandmother was finally reunited with her son after 37 years. While there, Shim’s grandmother also met her brother after decades of separation. She would return to North Korea again to attend her grandson’s wedding.

Shim’s grandmother died more than 10 years ago. If she were alive today, she would no longer be able to visit her own child or other family members because of the travel ban.

The ban is a cruel expression of U.S. imperialist policy, and as the generation of Korean War survivors are now aging well into their 80s, lifting it is a matter of urgency now more than ever.

“My grandmother was one of the lucky ones,” said Shim. “There are so many unlucky people who cannot even see their family members. Or maybe a mother has her children there. Now it’s been 70 years [since the signing of the Armistice Agreement], so people are dying.”

Trips to North Korea Were ‘Life-Changing’

And it’s not only Korean Americans barred from visiting family members in North Korea—the travel ban prohibits any U.S. passport holder from traveling there, effectively prohibiting any kind of cultural exchange between American citizens and Koreans in the North. These exchanges are essential to challenging the U.S. propaganda campaign that dehumanizes North Koreans in order to justify sanctions.

Gloria La Riva, an organizer with the ANSWER (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism) Coalition, called her travels to the North in 1989 and 2015 “life-changing experiences.”

“I saw people and a country that is the opposite of the hysterical, demonizing images we see in the West,” La Riva recalled. “I met people who were thoughtful and kind to visitors. That is what struck me most of all. When we boarded a full train, people immediately offered us their seats, smiling—the best language of all.”

“That is the *real* reason the U.S. government bans its citizens from visiting North Korea,” she continued. “It is the same reason the U.S. travel ban to Cuba has existed for more than 60 years. The U.S. fears that we will see the Korean people as our friends, not our enemy. The travel ban is a denial of our right to see North Korea for ourselves.”

End the Korean War

The crimes that Washington has inflicted on Korea cannot be overstated. It was the U.S. that divided Korea along the 38th parallel in 1945 and separated millions of families, occupied the South, and dropped more than 600,000 tons of bombs over the peninsula during the Korean War. So extensive was the bombing campaign that U.S. pilots even ran out of targets and would drop bombs into the sea to safely land. Over the course of the war, the U.S. military leveled “nearly 90 percent of major cities and villages in North Korea,” killing a staggering 20 percent of its population.

On top of the murderous carpet bombing campaign, the entire Korean War itself was punctuated by U.S.-backed atrocities: the murder of more than 100,000 people during the Bodo League massacre in 1950, which was committed by the government forces of U.S.-installed President of South Korea Syngman Rhee; the Sinchon massacre in which the U.S. military and South Korean anti-communist forces killed more than 30,000 civilians;

the No Gun Ri massacre where U.S. military forces opened fire on civilian refugees, killing around 300 people. Taken altogether, U.S. involvement in the Korean War was nothing short of genocidal.

While the signing of the 1953 Armistice Agreement brought an end to the fighting, it did not bring an end to the conflict. The U.S. refuses to sign a peace treaty, and it, along with the South, remains suspended in an official state of war with the North. And even after the signing of the armistice, the U.S. government maintains a heavy military presence in Korea and continues to ratchet up tensions between the North and the South. South Korea remains under occupation: it's home to the largest U.S. overseas base, and a total of 28,500 U.S. military personnel are stationed in the country. South Korea also hosts the annual Ulchi Freedom Shield joint military exercises with the U.S. These annual drills simulate the invasion of North Korea and include live-fire practice attacks from the air, land, sea, and space. The war games present a dress rehearsal for regime change in North Korea. And especially since 2006, the U.S. government, along with the United Nations Security Council, have relied on a brutal sanctions regime to punish North Korea for defying U.S. imperialism. These sanctions have caused food insecurity, malnutrition, and medical supply shortages in the country, leading to enormous suffering and thousands of preventable deaths.

The travel ban for the U.S., then, is another weapon of war, part of its broader strategy to further isolate North Korea and inflame tensions between both halves of the peninsula. And with Washington forging stronger military ties with Australia, the Philippines, and other countries in the "Indo-Pacific," as well as increasing its militarization of the South China Sea, the Pentagon's ultimate goal is to secure South Korea as an ally in its road toward major power conflict in Asia.

"We're in a period of extreme tension in Korea," explained Ju-Hyun Park, an organizer with the nonprofit Nodutdol for Korean Community Development, which advocates for reunification of the country. "The U.S. does not want to do anything to de-escalate that tension because the current situation benefits U.S. interests. The more conflict there is in Korea, the easier it is to corral South Korea and Japan into an alliance against not only North Korea, but ultimately against China and Russia as well."

This path that Washington is leading North and South Korea down will only lead to more war and devastation for the Korean people. The U.S. government has never been interested in peace for the Korean peninsula. For more than 70 years, it's done everything in its power to divide North and South, obstruct any and every path to lasting peace, and

turn Koreans against each other. What the U.S. government owes to the people of Korea can never be repaid. But the path toward justice begins with lifting the travel ban to North Korea—along with signing a peace treaty to bring an official end to the Korean War.

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