

Aid agencies denied travel to North Korea, blocking humanitarian relief

Faith-based groups have spent years building relationships in North Korea with efforts such as improving farming or providing health care. Now the U.S. State Department has a visa embargo.

by [Chris Rice](#) in the [November 21, 2018](#) issue

Faith-based humanitarian workers from the United States have been denied travel to North Korea by the U.S. government since September as part of its “maximum pressure” campaign against the North Korean government.

The policy comes even as the past nine months have seen an unprecedented breakthrough on the peninsula: the two Koreas marching together at the PyeongChang Winter Olympics, three summits between South Korean president Moon Jae-in and North Korean chairman Kim Jong-un, the Trump-Kim summit in Singapore in June, and, most recently, teams of soldiers from both South and North Korea removing land mines to disarm the demilitarized zone at the border. After 70 painful years of almost complete separation between the Korean people, the leaders of South and North Korea are opening a new chapter, with political momentum from both sides.

And yet the U.S. State Department’s visa embargo and United Nations’ sanctions have caused U.S. faith-based agencies to suspend or severely reduce their programs in North Korea.

About a dozen U.S.-based nongovernmental organizations work in North Korea, though none has personnel in the country full-time. Among them are six faith-based groups. World Vision, American Friends Service Committee, and Mennonite Central Committee have worked there steadily for more than two decades. Three started in the aftermath of evangelist Billy Graham’s historic 1992 visit with North Korea leader Kim Il-sung, grandfather of current Chairman Kim—Samaritan’s Purse, Christian Friends of Korea, and the Eugene Bell Foundation. Agency staff show

compassion for the vulnerable and build communication among adversaries in places of conflict—not only during crisis, but for the long haul.

For more than a year, there has been a general travel ban for U.S. citizens. It was put in place in September 2017 after an American university student who had traveled from China to North Korea was arrested and imprisoned and died from a brain injury shortly after his release. Now the State Department is denying exceptions for humanitarian work, and no appeal is possible.

“The travel ban makes it hard to plan and responsibly monitor our projects,” Linda Lewis, director of the North Korea program at AFSC, told the *New York Times*. “We’re a small organization. . . . It makes a big difference to the North Koreans whether I’m there or not.”

Agencies have spent years building relationships in North Korea with efforts such as improving farming or providing health care. North Korea has one of the highest tuberculosis rates in the world, and CFK and Eugene Bell have made a significant impact in improving tuberculosis treatment.

In early work in North Korea, MCC often faced serious challenges in gaining sufficient access to monitor support. But as trust has been built, access has greatly improved. On a visit to North Korea in May, MCC’s team visited three pediatric hospitals, spending two to three hours at each location talking with hospital directors, physicians, and cooks in the kitchen who serve donated food.

Even before the travel ban, sanctions had been taking a toll. For example, a ban on shipments of metal objects meant nail clippers could not be included in MCC health kits for tuberculosis patients. Durable and inexpensive plastic filters used to clean dirty water were blocked from sick children in pediatric hospitals because they are said to mimic nuclear-like “centrifugal” material.

Stephen Linton, Eugene Bell chairman, told the *Washington Post*, “When you care about a system, or an idea, more than the people who actually live in that system, that’s when things get really brutal.” —Mennonite Central Committee; *Christian Century* staff

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