

# BRIEF:

## Why the U.S. Should End the Travel Ban to North Korea

Since the early 1990s, thousands of Americans have traveled safely to North Korea for family reunions, educational and cultural activities, and humanitarian projects. However, in response to the 2017 tragic death of American student Otto Warmbier, the Trump administration imposed a ban on U.S. citizens traveling to North Korea that essentially ended these meaningful people-to-people exchanges.

Here are four reasons why the U.S. should end the North Korea travel ban:

### **1. To allow Korean Americans to reunite with their family members in North Korea, thus fulfilling decades of U.S. promises to resolve one of the longest humanitarian crises in the world.**

- An estimated 10 million Koreans became separated from their families as a result of the 1950-53 Korean War. In 2001 U.S. officials estimated that approximately 100,000 Korean Americans still had loved ones in North Korea, but that number has likely decreased as many have died since then.
- The U.S. government has made promises to arrange reunions with divided Korean Americans and their North Korean families since 2001. Just before he was elected, President Biden pledged to pursue these reunions. The U.S. has a moral obligation to facilitate these reunions as quickly as possible, as time is running out for many of these elderly Korean Americans.
- The travel ban, however, prevents Korean American families who had previously traveled to North Korea to see their family members from further access and communication. It also prevents elderly Korean Americans who have been searching for their loved ones since the Korean War one last chance at a reunion.

### **2. To allow civil society efforts and people-to-people exchanges, which would help break down barriers and build trust between the people of nations still technically at war.**

- People-to-people exchanges are vital to transforming 70 years of enmity into peaceful coexistence. For example, in 2015 representatives of Women Cross DMZ, a U.S.-based women's peacebuilding organization, traveled to North Korea for a women's peace symposium and peace walk. The historic meeting of American and North Korean women would not have been possible had a travel ban been in effect.
- Ending the travel ban would allow American civil society organizations to resume their important trust-building activities, helping to fulfill U.S. commitments made under the 2018 Singapore Agreement to "establish new U.S.-DPRK relations" and "build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula" — which the Biden administration has also pledged to uphold.



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**3. To help facilitate the repatriation of U.S. servicemen remains in North Korea, which serves the interests of both the U.S. and the D.P.R.K. and offers a rare and needed opportunity for collaboration.**

- The U.S. estimates that about 5,300 U.S. servicemen were lost in North Korea during the Korean War. While the recovery of missing U.S. servicemembers is a stated national commitment, successive U.S. administrations have never had an active policy on the Korean War MIA issue. Instead, the repatriation of Korean War servicemember remains has been continually sidelined for political reasons.
- Ending the North Korea travel ban would help facilitate the repatriation of U.S. servicemember remains, particularly in negotiating permission for non-governmental research teams to access known Korean War U.S. air loss sites to learn the fate of still-missing crewmen. By ending the travel ban, a crucial non-governmental channel would reopen and contribute to building trust between the two nations, potentially advancing future negotiations between the United States and North Korea.

**4. To allow U.S. humanitarian organizations to resume the delivery of life-saving aid to the most vulnerable populations in North Korea.**

- Reputable aid organizations with long-standing programs in North Korea are some of the strongest, most well-informed, and trusted channels of communication between the United States and North Korea.
- The travel ban, however, has greatly restricted or halted entirely U.S.-based humanitarian and development projects in North Korea. While the State Department's travel ban has exemptions for humanitarian workers, journalists, and those acting in the "national interest," many aid organizations have reported that the process of applying for these Special Validation passports has been cumbersome and unpredictable, greatly hindering their operations.



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