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U.S. Funding Cuts Slash Independent Broadcasts Into North Korea by 80%

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A significant reduction in U.S.-backed foreign broadcasting into North Korea has sparked concerns about growing censorship and limited access to outside information for the North Korean population. The cuts, which took effect earlier this year, have led to a drastic scale-back of programming by Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA), two U.S.-funded outlets that for decades provided rare access to global news and democratic values for North Koreans living under the regime's strict media controls.

The decision followed an executive order signed in March by President Donald Trump directing a major restructuring of the United States Agency for Global Media (USAGM), the federal entity overseeing both broadcasters. The Senate later formalized substantial reductions in funding, significantly weakening one of the last remaining tools of soft diplomacy in the region.

Advocates warn that the implications are far-reaching. Teppei Kasai, Asia program officer at Human Rights Watch Japan, stated that the cuts may lead to less visibility into human rights conditions in North Korea. “In the long term, we risk knowing less about the human rights situation in North Korea,” Kasai said. “The international community, including Japan, will then naturally have to rely on official statements by the North Korean government, which don’t carry a lot of credibility.”

Since May, VOA and RFA have reduced their North Korean broadcasts by an estimated 80 percent, scaling back Korean-language news, human rights reporting, and cultural programming that previously offered rare glimpses into the outside world. For many North Korean defectors, these broadcasts were instrumental in shaping their understanding of the outside world and ultimately encouraging their escape.

This reduction comes amid an already shrinking flow of outside information into North Korea. Smuggling of USB drives containing foreign media has declined due to enhanced border enforcement by Pyongyang, and the expiration of the North Korea Human Rights Act passed in 2004 and renewed three times further complicated efforts. The Act, which expired in 2022, had previously funded efforts such as satellite monitoring, support for defector testimonies, and documentation of human rights abuses.

Lina Yoon, senior researcher at Human Rights Watch, argued in a July 16 article for *Foreign Policy in Focus* that cutting these programs diminishes not only North Koreans’ access to the outside world but also Washington’s ability to monitor developments inside the regime. “Ending funding for broadcasts into North Korea would leave the U.S. without critical information,” Yoon wrote, especially as North Korea deepens ties with Russia and tightens domestic control.

According to an analysis by 38 North, a research platform under the Stimson Center think tank, the broadcasting decline has already benefited Pyongyang’s state censors. Martyn Williams, a senior fellow at the center, noted that North Korean propaganda operatives “can

hardly believe their luck,” as the U.S. pullback reduces the influx of alternative information that has long undermined regime narratives.

Further complicating matters, the South Korean government under President Lee Jae-myung has reportedly curtailed its broadcasts into the North, citing a shift toward diplomatic engagement. Simultaneously, authorities in Seoul have imposed a ban on the use of balloons that previously carried items such as rice, medicine, and leaflets into North Korean territory.

Williams concluded that these developments will likely leave the North Korean public increasingly in the dark about both domestic and global events. “As a result of the cuts, North Koreans will be less informed... and the information they do receive will be more dated,” he stated.

Observers warn that if tensions escalate on the Korean Peninsula, the loss of these independent communication channels could hinder the United States and South Korea’s ability to monitor developments and engage with the North Korean population.