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North Korean Activities Overseas



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A Research Paper

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A Research Paper

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This paper was prepared by  Office of
East Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are
welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Korea
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North Korean Activities Overseas

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Overview

*Information available
as of 1 July 1984
was used in this report.*

North Korea increasingly is using military assistance, including weapons and training, to strengthen relations in the Third World. We estimate that at the end of 1983 about 450 confirmed North Korean military personnel were assigned overseas, primarily in Africa. P'yongyang has had its greatest success in offering to train VIP security forces. Many Third World leaders who feel threatened by domestic unrest or regional rivalries view North Korean military and security assistance as an acceptable alternative to reliance on the Soviets or the Chinese.

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North Korean advisers are present in several countries where the Soviets or Soviet proxy forces are also active, and although the Korean activities often contribute generally to the local advancement of Soviet objectives, the Koreans, as far as we know, do not usually coordinate their goals or work with the Soviets. P'yongyang, in such circumstances, typically conducts independent assistance programs using its own equipment and pursuing its own interests.

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The stress on the military dimension in bilateral relations results in large part from the limited economic resources at the disposal of North Korea. North Korea can mobilize only a modest economic aid program; it focuses on high-visibility projects—such as sports stadiums, meeting halls, and monuments—that are intended to achieve maximum political benefit at minimal cost. Aid projects rarely exceed a commitment of more than \$1-2 million, with assistance usually taking the form of grant aid or a loan on generous credit terms.

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P'yongyang also has little to offer on the political front. North Korea's diplomatic corps lacks finesse and experience and is hindered further by:

- Inadequate funding that forces its missions to resort to black-marketing and smuggling to meet expenses—activities that often lead to serious irritants in relations.
- The requirement that overseas missions sponsor activities glorifying Kim Il-song and his son and chosen heir, Kim Chong-il. All but a few developing countries view these activities with disdain.
- Virulent attacks against the policies of the US Government that have led some embarrassed host governments to deny North Korean diplomats further access to the public media.

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In one case—that of its arms sales to Iran, which has provided roughly one-third of North Korean hard currency foreign exchange earnings over the past several years and totaled more than \$1 billion in transfers since the Persian Gulf war began—the military dimension of P'yongyang's foreign relations is economically profitable. This is the exception, however, and the more usual motivation of its military assistance programs is to enhance the prestige of North Korea. P'yongyang seeks to do so both to gain stature in the international community and to compete successfully with Seoul for diplomatic recognition and influence.



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Expansion of North Korean Advisory Presence



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North Korean Activities Overseas

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Growing Military Relations

As of late 1983, the North had an estimated 450 military advisers serving in some 20 countries with a large percentage of these advisers having been dispatched out over the past five years.¹ Shipments of North Korean military equipment overseas have increased sharply since 1980, with arms sales accounting for most of the increase. With arms exports running at about \$300 million annually, North Korea by 1983 ranked eighth among the world's leading arms suppliers.

Several factors account for P'yongyang's ability to expand its military presence and involvement abroad:

- P'yongyang has a well-developed arms industry with the capacity, particularly in munitions and small arms, to meet its own needs and support foreign assistance.
- North Korea offers foreign military personnel a wide range of training in North Korea, and P'yongyang has a large pool of military instructors familiar with Communist bloc weapons who can serve abroad as advisers.
- Furthermore, because of its small size, North Korea is not viewed as a threat by most Third World leaders.

North Korea has dispatched military equipment and advisers to a wide range of countries, but the primary emphasis is on Africa, where advisers are currently assigned to 13 states, including seven in Sub-Saharan Africa with sizable contingents. Taking advantage of the political turmoil of the decolonization period in the 1960s and early 1970s, North Korea actively courted insurgent groups and newly independent governments. P'yongyang's early support, including covert military shipments and training, helps to account

¹ This estimate places North Korea's military presence abroad roughly on a par with China (530), but well behind Cuba (44,000—mostly troops) and the USSR (18,000 not including Afghanistan).

in part, we believe, for the durability of its alliances with such countries as Tanzania and Zimbabwe.

Interested in expanding its influence outside Africa, North Korea has recently increased its activities in Latin America. North Korea believes that the emergence of leftist, anti-US governments and opposition groups in the area offers opportunities to expand its recognition and influence at the expense of Seoul. In addition to its longstanding ties with Cuba, it is vigorously courting Nicaragua, Guyana, Suriname, and former Prime Minister Manley of Jamaica. 25X1

Although these inroads in the Western Hemisphere are important to North Korea in a broad political context, they have not yet had a significant impact on the region. Nicaragua thus far has received only limited supplies of arms, most notably several patrol boats, but the visit of North Korean Chief of Staff O Kuk-Yol in early July may presage a qualitative change in the level of arms transfers. 25X1

In Grenada, North Korea had attempted since 1980 to strengthen ties with the Bishop regime, but it had not established a significant presence by October 1983, when the United States intervened. On the economic side, North Korea had offered to help build a 15,000-seat stadium, a party headquarters building, a fruit-processing factory, two fishing boats, and an irrigation system. These projects were part of a five-year development program announced publicly during Prime Minister Bishop's visit to P'yongyang in April 1983. North Korea was to provide technical advisers and some construction materials and equipment; Grenada would have paid for the expenses of the technicians. 25X1

Documents captured in Grenada reveal that in April 1983 Bishop concluded a secret military agreement that provided for the training of a crack Grenadian force similar to Zimbabwe's 5th Brigade. According to the agreement, North Korea had promised to

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Status of North Korean Military Activities Overseas

Country	Advisers (number of persons)	Selected Arms Deliveries (since 1975)	Remarks
Benin	10	Patrol boats, small arms	A limited advisory role in naval training.
Burundi	None	Mortars, antiaircraft machineguns	North Korea no longer has any advisers in the country.
Egypt	10	Multiple rocket launchers, field artillery, antiaircraft machineguns	In early 1984, North Korean delegations toured several of Egypt's military-industrial complexes, suggesting increased cooperation in that sector.
Ethiopia	None	Field artillery, small arms	North Korea recently offered to build a small arms factory.
Guyana	Small number	Patrol boats, artillery, ammunition	Twelve additional advisers arrived in May 1984 to train Guyanese forces on howitzers and antiaircraft guns recently purchased from North Korea.
Iran	50 to 100	T-62 tanks, SA-7 surface-to-air missiles, antitank missiles and launchers, small arms, field artillery, mortars, rockets, naval mines.	P'yongyang is likely to remain Tehran's chief source of military supplies.
Libya	Small number	Field artillery, multiple rocket launchers, mortars, antiaircraft machineguns.	Since the departure of its pilots in early 1981, P'yongyang has not had a significant military relationship with Libya.
Madagascar	50 to 75	Patrol boats, field artillery, antiaircraft machineguns	North Korean pilots and ground support personnel have become a more or less permanent fixture in Antananarivo.
Malta	None	Antiaircraft guns, small arms	Publicity concerning a "secret" military agreement between P'yongyang and Valletta set off a storm of protest in Malta's parliament in late 1983.
Mozambique	100 ^a	Patrol boats, field artillery, antiaircraft machineguns	Military advisers are training a "special" army brigade for a counterinsurgency role.
Nicaragua	Small number	Patrol boats, artillery, trucks	Although arms shipments have been limited thus far, a spate of recent high-level military exchanges points to a larger North Korean supply relationship.
PLO	Small number	Artillery, multiple rocket launchers, anti-tank weapons, mortars, antiaircraft machineguns	During a visit in May 1984, Arafat received renewed pledges of support in the form of arms shipments.
Pakistan	None	Artillery, multiple rocket launchers	Although Islamabad was once a major customer, P'yongyang has not had much success in recent years in making arms sales.
Rwanda	10	Air defense artillery, small arms, antiaircraft machineguns	A limited advisory presence in recent years.
Seychelles	90	Antiaircraft machineguns, ammunition	North Korea's advisers will be the principal foreign military presence on the islands following the departure of Tanzanian security forces in 1984.
Somalia	Small number	Mortars, small arms	Advisers supervise the operation of a North Korean-supplied ammunition factory.
Suriname	None	Small arms, ammunition	Not much progress since a small-arms sale in 1982.
Syria	Small number	Gunpowder, unidentified military equipment	Most military shipments to the PLO are routed through Syria.

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Status of North Korean Military Activities Overseas (continued)

Country	Advisers (number of persons)	Selected Arms Deliveries (since 1975)	Remarks
Tanzania	Small number	Field artillery, small arms, ammunition	P'yongyang recently concluded an agreement with Dar es Salaam to construct two small-arms factories.
Uganda	50 to 90	Aircraft spare parts, small arms, and ammunition	Providing artillery, infantry, and military intelligence training for the Ugandan Army.
Upper Volta	20 to 49	Undetermined	Advisers are training local security forces.
Zambia	20 to 40	Field artillery, ammunition	Advisers are training a Zambian commando unit for operations along the northern border with Zaire.
Zimbabwe	30	Rocket launchers, field artillery, anti-aircraft machineguns, small arms, ammunition, trucks	Presence peaked in 1982; now only training newly formed militia force. [redacted]

^a Minimum estimate.

[redacted]

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supply small arms and ammunition free of cost for a force of about 1,000. This equipment, valued in the document at \$12 million, was to include 1,000 rifles, 80 machineguns, two coast guard boats, 6,000 uniforms, and large amounts of ammunition. We believe that this military assistance had not been implemented as of late 1983. [redacted]

North Korean advisers are often active in areas where Soviet, Chinese, or Soviet proxy forces are also present. In some areas of West Africa, for example, it is common to find Cuban, Libyan, and East German experts working alongside North Korean personnel. [redacted]

Even so, we are able to identify only a few countries where North Korea and the Soviet Union actually coordinate their aid programs:

- In Madagascar, North Korea in 1978 provided a small number of pilots and jet fighter aircraft until the Soviet Union could place a more sizable jet fighter contingent on the island. The North Koreans, however, have stayed on but have never integrated with the Soviet pilots.

- In Libya, North Korean pilots in 1979 used Soviet-supplied MIG-21s to cover an important air defense sector until the Libyans could make other arrangements. The North Koreans departed after two years.

We do not know if these cooperative arrangements resulted from direct Soviet-North Korean military contacts or were worked out by the host governments in consultation with Moscow and P'yongyang. [redacted]

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The North Koreans usually conduct independent assistance programs using their own equipment and pursuing their own interests. In fact, North Korea, in attempting to portray itself as a nonaligned state, deliberately plays down its own security relationship with China and the USSR. The North's attitude reflects Kim Il-song's obsession with reducing, in both form and reality, dependence on the Soviet Union and China. On occasion, Kim has even sought to capitalize on Moscow's misfortunes in the Third World. In the Middle East, for example, North Korea moved quickly to extend aid to Egypt following the late President Sadat's decision in 1972 to expel Soviet military advisers [redacted]

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Advisory Groups

North Korea's military presence abroad takes three basic forms: individual technical specialists, Air Force tactical contingents, and advisory groups. Technicians usually accompany and supervise the transfer of arms when a new military supply relationship is established. In most cases, the number of technicians in any one country is small, ranging from five to 10. Military technicians also are assigned on a long-term basis to assist in the operation of North Korean-equipped small arms and ammunition factories, such as those in Somalia and Madagascar. [redacted]

Largely self-contained Air Force tactical contingents comprising pilots, controllers, and maintenance personnel have served in Vietnam (1965-68), Egypt and Syria (1973-75), and in Libya (1979-80). There is currently a 50-man contingent in Madagascar. The North Korean pilots serve an air defense role and are rarely engaged in hostile encounters. The limited scope of this program over the years suggests that North Korea reserves it for select clients. [redacted]

Military advisory groups (MAGs)—first noted in Zaire in 1975—account for most of the recent increase in the number of North Korean military personnel abroad. Essentially, North Korea offers an assistance package to train special VIP security forces and also paramilitary or militia forces. P'yongyang usually provides "free" equipment for a brigade-size security force (perhaps 1,000 to 2,000 men), requiring that the host government meet the costs for the advisers' pay and living allowances. [redacted]

Kim Il-song makes a point of inviting potential MAG hosts to P'yongyang, where they are briefed on the need to organize a loyal and well-drilled presidential security force along the lines of Kim's own praetorian guard. We believe Kim is trying mainly to capitalize on those leaders who will view North Korea as less threatening than the Soviet Union or China. Prime Minister Mugabe of Zimbabwe, President Obote of Uganda, and President Rene of the Seychelles all have contracted with the North Koreans to train a special security force. The secret agreement signed by the late President Bishop of Grenada appeared to have the same purpose.² [redacted]

² The appendix provides a brief review of the North Korean MAGs in seven selected countries. [redacted]

In 1981, the North Korean advisory role came under intense world scrutiny in Zimbabwe, where 100 North Koreans equipped and trained a newly formed 5th Brigade comprising army personnel drawn exclusively from Prime Minister Mugabe's preliberation guerrilla forces. The brigade, since becoming operational in 1982, has gained notoriety for its ruthless suppression of domestic opposition elements. The adverse publicity does not appear to have damaged the appeal of the North Korean program and may in fact have helped it. [redacted]

Arms Sales

North Korea in the past several years has become a significant factor in the international arms market. North Korea produces almost all of its ground forces and naval weapons, ammunition, and equipment. Sales consist primarily of small arms and ammunition, towed artillery, mortars, multiple rocket launchers, and anti-aircraft weapons. P'yongyang exports only a few domestically produced T-62 tanks and none of its indigenously designed armored personnel carriers or self-propelled guns. [redacted]

Throughout the duration of the Persian Gulf hostilities, North Korea has been the major supplier of weapons to Iran. Artillery, anti-aircraft machineguns, mortars, and ammunition make up most of the transfer. Tanks, small arms, naval mines, and antitank and surface-to-air missile systems have been sold in more limited quantities. North Korea's rapid response to Iran's purchase orders for conventional ground force weapons and ammunition in 1980 suggests that P'yongyang has acquired significant military stockpiles to meet any surge in demand. [redacted]

North Korea derives an estimated one-third of its hard currency earnings from arms sales to Iran. We estimate that arms shipments between July 1980 and December 1983 totaled at least \$1 billion. In 1982—the last year for which relatively complete data are available—North Korea provided 30 percent of the arms that Iran received from overseas. P'yongyang's close ties with Tehran also have enabled North Korea

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to diversify its sources of oil. Prior to 1980, North Korea, which has no significant domestic oil deposits, was almost completely dependent on China and the Soviet Union for its oil. [redacted]

Arms Production Technology

North Korea has helped a small number of countries build and operate factories that produce small arms and ammunition. Although providing this kind of aid cuts into potential arms sales, P'yongyang probably calculates that in the long run it gains more lasting influence. In the case of Somalia, for example, Mogadishu's desire to keep its North Korean-supplied small-arms plant in operation is a major factor keeping the Somalis from upgrading relations with South Korea. [redacted]

In June 1984, Dar es Salaam concluded a preliminary agreement with North Korea for construction of two arms plants. [redacted]

[redacted] North Korea has also offered recently to build a small-arms factory in Ethiopia, [redacted] Factory construction reportedly will begin in late 1984, with completion planned for 1987. [redacted]

Support to Terrorists and Opposition Movements

North Korea's reputation as a patron of international terrorism dates to early 1970, when P'yongyang gave asylum to nine Red Army Faction members who had hijacked an airliner from Japan. In the spring of 1971, both Sri Lanka and Mexico publicly identified North Korea as the source of training and financial backing for local subversive groups. Colombo expelled the North Korean Embassy and suspended diplomatic relations; Mexico City responded by turning down repeated North Korean requests to establish a mission. [redacted]

The developments in Sri Lanka and Mexico grew out of established government policies: by 1968, P'yongyang was offering guerrilla warfare training in North Korea and was directing its missions overseas to maintain contacts with local underground movements. [redacted]

P'yongyang's willingness to deal with terrorists, subversives, and insurgents reflected in general its desire to prove its revolutionary credentials. Other motivations were at work as well:

- In the late 1960s and early 1970s, expertise in commando and guerrilla training—honed in agent operations against South Korea—was one of North Korea's few salable commodities or services.
- Contacts with terrorist and subversives were natural byproducts of North Korean efforts to strengthen ties with leftist movements abroad.
- Dealings with underground groups helped support North Korea's widescale black-marketing and drug-trafficking activities. [redacted]

[redacted] there are six training complexes near P'yongyang of the type known to support agent training. Instruction at these facilities typically includes training in urban and guerrilla warfare, martial arts, military medicine, clandestine communications, explosives use, and infiltration-exfiltration techniques. These facilities are also used for North Korean personnel, and it is not possible to judge what share is dedicated exclusively for the training of foreign personnel. [redacted]

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, North Korea had extensive dealings with terrorist groups and extremists in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. By the mid-1970s, Ghana, Chad, Central African Republic, Argentina, and Mauritania had followed Sri Lanka in suspending relations because of the North's proven or suspected dealings with subversive groups. In recent years, North Korea's quest for international recognition and respect has had some moderating effect on such dealings. Also, as the number of active liberation movements has declined, North Korea has had fewer opportunities to offer covert backing for insurgent groups. [redacted]

Nonetheless, some support activities still exist:

- In Tanzania, [redacted] North Korean advisers are training South African insurgents.
- In Jamaica and Peru, P'yongyang is supplying funds to opposition political elements.

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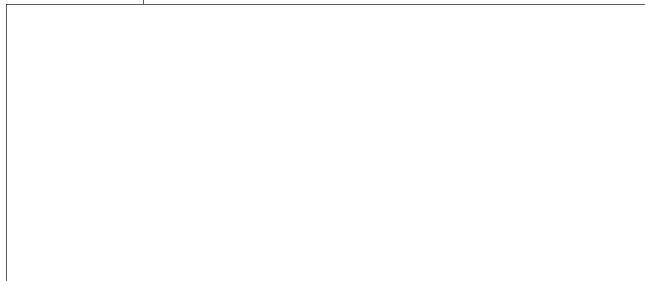
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- P'yongyang supplies arms and training to the Palestinians. [redacted]



North Korea's "military diplomacy" will not enable P'yongyang to mount a serious challenge to South Korea's commanding lead in the diplomatic sweepstakes. P'yongyang, moreover, faces increasing competition in the international arms market from suppliers who are able to offer more advanced equipment and training. As in the past, North Korea will find its greatest receptivity among the relatively small, less developed countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, although we believe P'yongyang is likely to place more emphasis on Latin America as an area to increase its influence. [redacted]

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Outlook

We believe that North Korea's military assistance program will continue to play an important role in P'yongyang's foreign dealings. At the same time, problems encountered earlier in the 1970s in aiding insurgencies and extending military aid will color North Korea's approach to such activities:

- North Korea today seeks to avoid commitments that might entangle it in regional disputes. An exception is its involvement in Iran, where—we believe—the financial inducements outweigh the costs that P'yongyang has paid in terms of strained relations with most Arab states.
- North Korea also is reducing its support to locally based underground movements. Its support of such groups set back relations with Mexico and Sri Lanka in 1971.
- As a corollary to the above, North Korean dealings with terrorists now emphasize support to groups that are stateless such as the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), where the risks to bilateral diplomatic dealings are minimized. [redacted]

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Appendix

Major Military Advisory Groups Stationed Abroad

North Korea established a military presence in Madagascar shortly after President Ratsiraka signed an economic and technical cooperation agreement during a visit to P'yongyang in 1978. The core of the North Korean presence is a detachment of four MIG-17 jet fighters and a 50-man contingent of pilots, air controllers, mechanics, and other ground support personnel. The planes, of Korean war vintage and Soviet manufacture, are officially on loan and are stationed at Madagascar's principal military base outside the capital. [redacted]

The North Korean contingent was sent to Antananarivo as an interim measure until the Soviets could equip and train the local air force with more advanced MIG-21s. (This is the clearest example of a cooperative arrangement involving Soviet and North Korean security assistance to a third country.) Although Moscow subsequently has provided MIG-21s and Soviet pilots, Ratsiraka has asked the North Koreans to remain. The North Korean pilots, who have never integrated with the Soviets, serve in effect as a private air force responsive directly to the President. [redacted]

In addition to the MIG-17s, North Korea has provided an assortment of military arms, ammunition, and equipment, including four patrol boats. A small number of military technicians also help operate an ammunition plant that was completed last year with North Korean aid. [redacted]

In Mozambique, North Korean military advisers are training a "special" army brigade for a counterinsurgency role. President Machel, dissatisfied with the assistance he was receiving from Soviet and Cuban advisers, intensified his search for new military aid in the spring of 1982. Machel may have concluded an agreement for the North Korean advisers during his visit to P'yongyang in April 1982, [redacted] the North Koreans began arriving in late 1982. [redacted]

We believe the special brigade will be used for operations against the Mozambican National Resistance Movement (RENAMO) who remain a serious problem for the Machel regime despite Mozambique's March 1984 signing of a nonaggression pact with South Africa. [redacted]

Fifty-six North Korean military trainers arrived in Seychelles in April 1983. President Rene requested such troops because of his concern about the low morale of his forces and the unreliability of Tanzanian forces assigned to Seychelles. Planning for the North Korean advisory group probably dates to October 1982, when Defense Minister Berlouis traveled to P'yongyang only two months after an army mutiny in his country. [redacted]

North Korean advisers have sought to restructure the Seychellois Army by emphasizing the use of small arms and quick-reaction forces. In November 1983, a North Korean merchant ship delivered [redacted] military supplies that included anti-aircraft guns and ammunition. [redacted]

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Since 1981, North Korea has assumed an increasingly important role in security assistance training in **Uganda**. President Obote, who returned to power in December 1980, turned to North Korea for help following the withdrawal of Tanzanian troops and the emergence of several Ugandan dissident groups; military advisers began to arrive in sizable numbers by October 1981. Because of the transient nature of their training mission, the number of military advisers in Uganda has varied considerably. We estimate there are currently about 50 in country, but the number could be considerably higher. [redacted]

The North Koreans are providing artillery, infantry, and military intelligence training for the Ugandan Army as well as training a presidential security force. Some advisers who have participated in antiguerrilla operations have been killed in these actions; this is the only known instance of hostile fire against North Korean advisory personnel assigned abroad. [redacted]

In January 1984, an 11-man North Korean team arrived to take over the task of training police special forces from a private British firm. This is a long-term program aimed at training up to 1,000 special forces. [redacted]

Since at least 1981, North Korea has shipped large amounts of arms and ammunition to Uganda, primarily through Tanzania. We estimate the value of the shipments—which have included artillery and communications equipment—as high as \$45 million by the end of 1983. [redacted]

North Korean military advisers first arrived in **Upper Volta** in late 1983, following more than two years of discussions with the shifting governments in Ouagadougou. North Korean advisers, who reportedly number about 20, are providing instruction in individual combat and martial arts to security forces in the capital and to military units at Po, site of the paracommando school near the border with Ghana. The Upper Voltan Defense Minister's visit to P'yongyang in May 1984 suggests that North Korea's military training role will increase. [redacted]

Twenty North Korean military advisers arrived in **Zambia** in the spring of 1981 to begin training a security guard for President Kaunda. Discussions about the training program, under way at least since

April 1980, undoubtedly received impetus following an alleged coup attempt against Kaunda in October 1980. The advisers are running a training course, which we believe is renewed yearly. [redacted]

In 1982 a separate group of North Korean advisers began training a **Zambian** commando unit, which Kaunda is using against smugglers and illegal aliens along the northern border with **Zaire** as well as to combat urban crime. [redacted] the commandos are using tactics similar to those employed by the North Korean-trained brigade in neighboring **Zimbabwe**. The Kaunda government has tried to keep its North Korean connection out of the public eye—leading some observers to believe that the program is being phased out—but there is no firm evidence that the North Korean trainers have departed. [redacted]

Approximately 100 North Korean military instructors arrived in **Zimbabwe** in August 1981 to equip and train the newly formed 5th Brigade of the **Zimbabwean** Army. This arrangement was first discussed during Prime Minister Mugabe's visit to P'yongyang in October 1980, but it was not formally signed until June 1981. [redacted]

The brigade has been trained using equipment produced in North Korea, including artillery, mortars, and trucks. Supplied on a grant basis, this equipment is claimed to be valued at \$12-25 million. North Korean advisers departed for home at the completion of the training program in June 1982. [redacted]

Another group of North Korean advisers arrived in the fall of 1982 to begin training a presidential security unit and a nationwide militia force. Following six months of basic training, the North Korean advisers working with the presidential guard returned home. Advanced training is being conducted by the British and the Chinese. In March 1983, the North Koreans completed a four-month training course for some 750 **Zimbabweans** who will serve in turn as instructors for militia units. The militia training is a long-term program aimed at developing a 20,000-man force. It will probably require the presence of roughly 30 North Korean advisers, more or less permanently. [redacted]

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