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**Reporter views change in Korean standards**

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — He fooled North Korean border guards into thinking he was a poor Chinese peddler, risking arrest — and possible death — as a suspected spy.

Lee Chan-sam, a Korean-American reporter for South Korea's JoongAng Daily News, came back from a clandestine visit with one of the most detailed accounts available of life today in the reclusive Communist nation.

In a 10-part series running over the past two weeks, Lee reports desperate food shortages in the countryside, poverty so deep that shoeless peasants wrap their feet with rags to ward off winter's bitter cold.

But he says he found a remarkable improvement in living standards in the cities, where people crowd restaurants and amusement parks.

He describes government efforts to build a personality cult around Kim Jong Il, the de-facto leader who still hasn't officially taken power six months after the death of his father,

President Kim Il Sung. Lee sounds a compassionate tone toward North Koreans in his reports, which are getting much attention in a country accustomed to decades of harsh propaganda blasts against the rival North.

"South Koreans can't do anything to change North Korea's terrible government," Lee, the father of four, said in an interview. "But we can reach out to our fellow Korean people."

Lee, a soft-spoken American citizen who lives with his family in Chicago, where he edits a U.S. edition of his paper, said he crossed China's border into North Korea in December with a forged Chinese passport.

He disguised himself as a Chinese-Korean peddler and hired a Chinese woman to act as his wife to reduce suspicion. Before going, he had drilled for eight years on North Korean customs, geography and language patterns.

Lee visited North Korea twice with permission as a reporter, in 1988 and 1990. Both

times he was closely supervised by government guides and could only visit tourist attractions and model cities such as Pyongyang, the capital.

After those visits, North Korean officials warned he would be killed if he returned because he had criticized the government in his stories, Lee said.

During the secret trip, Lee said he was able to travel undetected and unhindered. The shortages of food and other necessities in the countryside, he said, were "beyond description."

The trains he rode had no glass in their windows. Travelers carried their own food and kept it close at hand to guard against theft, he writes.

In stark contrast, Lee said he was astonished to see the improvement in living conditions in Pyongyang since his last visit. Large crowds filled an amusement park, and many people were buying goods.

He said the military's power had grown dramatically since Kim Il Sung's death, often sur-

passing local civilian authority. He said businessmen connected to companies owned by the military told him that it has much more leverage these days.

Throughout the country, radio broadcasts, newspapers and political study sessions were devoted almost completely to praises of Kim Jong Il, an effort to enhance his reputation and prepare for his formal rise to power, Lee said.

People in rural areas, he said, knew almost nothing about the outside world. They blamed their hunger on North Korea's need to build a strong military to counter outside threats, not on their own leaders, Lee writes.

But mid-level officials, he said, had become much more desirous of foreign currency, especially the U.S. dollar and Japanese yen.

Lee said many North Koreans were aware that their country had signed a nuclear agreement in October with the United States, but worried about whether Washington could be trusted.

**Prime Minister urges resolution as Russian attack in Grozny stalls**

GROZNY, Russia (AP) — With its offensive in Chechnya stalling, Russia on Monday called for immediate peace talks to end a secessionist rebellion it said threatens the nation's security and well-being.

"The future of Russia, our future, depends on resolving the crisis in Chechnya," Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin said Monday night in a 15-minute address on national television.

He called for talks "with all interested parties and forces" and a simultaneous cease-fire.

Both sides have appealed for negotiations before, but Chernomyrdin's speech — which did not impose the usual Russian conditions that the Chechens disarm — was one of Moscow's strongest statements yet.

The prime minister, saying he was speaking for President Boris Yeltsin, expressed "profound grief and condolences" to relatives of the dead. He repeated Russia's insistence on new elections to replace Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudayev, who has led the independence drive.

Thousands are believed to have been killed since Dec. 11, when Moscow sent troops into Chechnya, a mostly Muslim republic of 1.2 million people in southern Russia's Caucasus Mountains.

Russia says fewer than 400 of its soldiers have been killed. But the ITAR-Tass news agency, quoting North Ossetian Medical

Services, reported that the city Mortuary in Mozdok, North Ossetia, had about 800 bodies of Russian soldiers.

Yeltsin earlier this month put Chernomyrdin in charge of resolving the Chechnya conflict, and the prime minister's TV appearance indicated he may be assuming a larger role.

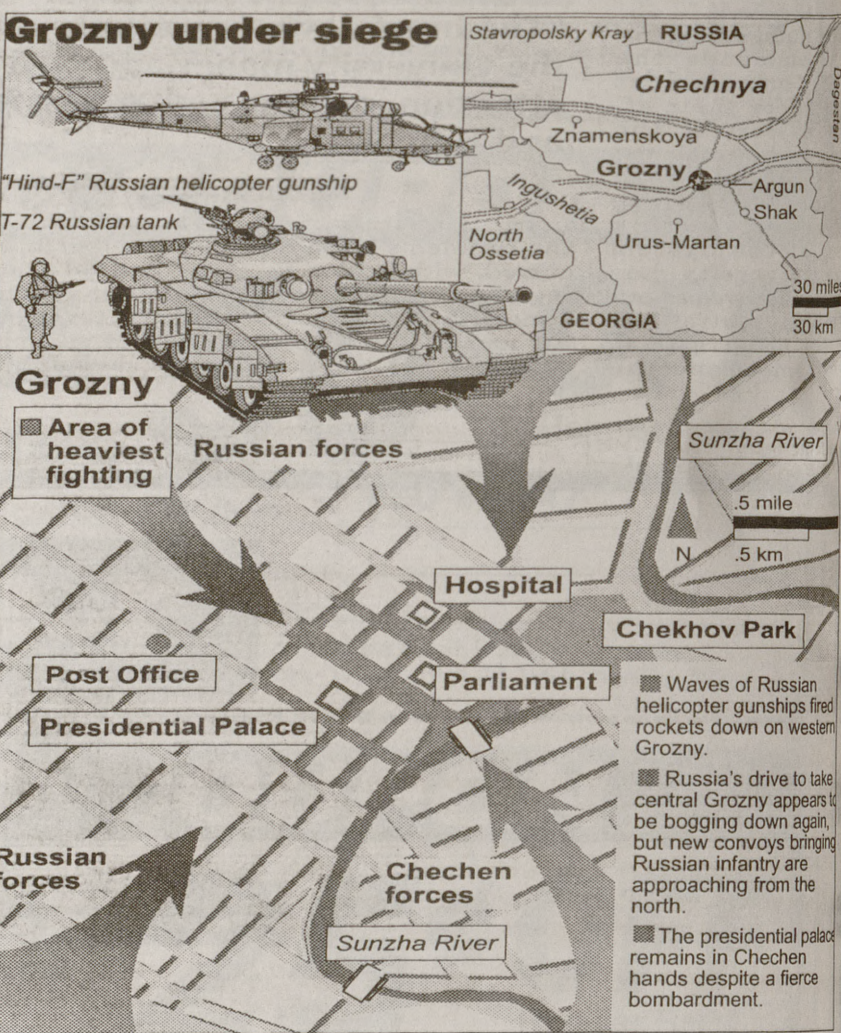
In the early weeks of the conflict, Chernomyrdin remained largely uninvolved, and therefore relatively unblemished while the military suffered humiliating defeats. Yeltsin has kept a low profile.

The Russian ground assault on Grozny has turned the city into a daily meat grinder that consumes bodies, buildings and weapons.

On Monday, the Russian campaign faltered again. Chechen fighters claimed to have pushed the Russians back and taken part of the railway station. Heavy machine-gun and rifle fire was heard in the direction of the station, but there was no way to confirm the claim.

For some civilians, a lull in shelling was reason to smile. "At least we got to sleep last night," an elderly woman on a street corner said.

But on Monday morning, the routine resumed: Russian artillery picking up after 10 a.m. and regular air attacks before lunch. Chechen fighters change shifts twice a day, heading home for meals and rest.



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