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The Mistery of the Super- notes

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The Mystery of the Supernotes

At the end of July 2006, Interpol, the International Criminal Police Organization, sent out invitations to a “Crisis Conference on the Supernote” at its General Secretariat in Lyon, France. In March 2005, it had already issued an “orange notice,” with which Interpol member states are – generally – made aware of particularly high levels of threat. Now, some 60 representatives of central banks, the high-security printing industry and counterfeit money investigators were to be convinced of Washington’s theory that the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea), really was producing those high-quality counterfeit 100-dollar bills whose origins had been a mystery for years. However, at the end of the one-day conference, to which even specialists from the United States had been flown in, not one single conference participant was fully convinced of the American viewpoint, according to a survey. Some were even making jokes. The South Koreans, who should really have been interested in the topic, did not even attend. This must have come as a shock to the American General Secretary of Interpol and his new head of the counterfeit money control department, who was appointed from the CSDB, the U.S. Secret Service – not to be confused with the FBI or CIA.

This is not a defense of the inhuman reign of terror in North Korea or of its bizarre dictator Kim Jong-il. However, North Korea is one of the poorest countries in the world, with production facilities whose level of technological advancement is from the early 20th Century. Is this country really supposed to be capable of such perfect counterfeiting? U.S. banknote printer, the Bureau of Engraving and Printing (BEP), claims that its 100-dollar bills are among the most secure banknotes in the world, produced with the current state-of-the-art intaglio printing technology. In any case, the largest North Korean banknote, a 500-won note – which at least carries the head-and-shoulders portrait of the beloved father and “Great Leader” Kim Il-sung, is a pitiful product.

When the first counterfeit 100-dollar Federal Reserve Note was discovered in a bank in Manila (Philippines) in 1989, it caused great anxiety. This counterfeit banknote surpassed the usual offset print counterfeits, not to mention the basic color printer counterfeits. Even acknowledged banknote printing experts cannot distinguish these counterfeit 100-dollar bills from the originals in optical and tactile tests – the first and most important authenticity test to be made by any member of the general public. The counterfeit is only clearly recognizable as such under UV or infrared light. Almost three-quarters of all dollar banknotes in circulation around the world are 100-dollar bills, of which in turn two-thirds are held abroad. In 1992, in the U.S. Congress, the then Chairman of the “Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare,” a Republican, saw billions of dollars in damages for the world’s leading currency looming and spoke of “economic warfare against the USA.” The investigators gave the counterfeit the registration number «PN 14342» (PN stands for «parent note»), and respectfully called it the «supernote».

Since that time, many countries have been suspected of the crime, including the Mullahs in Iran, the Syrians with their Lebanese auxiliary forces from the ranks of the Hezbollah, and even the now defunct GDR. No one in Washington likes very much to remember this any more, because today everyone is convinced it must be North Korea. The corroborating evidence is the North Korean diplomats and businessmen with diplomatic passports, who have been intercepted over the years with bundles of “supernotes” in their luggage. Time and again, North Korean dissidents report of a state-operated counterfeit money operation, although the reliability of their statements remains an open question. The chief witness supporting this theory is a former economic attaché at the North Korean Embassy in Moscow, who

was also a member of the international office of the Workers' Party of North Korea, who in 1998 was caught in the Russian city of Vladivostok with 30,000 dollars in «supernotes». He of all people deserted to the West in 2003 and reported that he was responsible for dictator Kim Jong-il's privy purse and had personally participated in the production of the «supernotes». Since then, the word in Washington is that Kim Junior is not only using the counterfeit dollars to pay for his French Cognac imports or to finance his rocket and nuclear weapons program with, but also quite simply to keep his heavily ailing economy from collapsing. Conservative journalists, all of whom have probably never held a real «supernote» in their hand, are continually coming up with new rumors that might be true on the subject. They now claim that North Korea is printing «supernotes» to the value of 250 million dollars every year – although they do not even know where. Doubts are not permitted. The entire U.S. media scene has voluntarily muzzled itself on the topic. Do not touch!

Banknote printing is a highly complex technological undertaking. The average layman cannot even begin to grasp the technological and logistic implications of a forgery of the quality of the «supernote». And the industry is maintaining a deathly silence on the issue. Making security paper is considered the most difficult part of banknote production. The banknote paper used for the «supernote» is created on a Fourdrinier paper machine, with the correct ratio of 75 percent cotton to 25 percent linen. Only the Americans do it like this. Everything is there, even the wafer-thin polyester security thread embedded in the paper with «USA 100» imprinted in positive microprint and the multi-tone, localized water mark. Twenty years ago, even paper company Crane, Dalton, the exclusive manufacturer of dollar paper, had not mastered these technologies itself. The counterfeiters need at least one test paper machine. This does not come cheap, not to mention the expertise required. Moreover, a paper expert who carried out a chemical and physical examination found that the cotton used came from the Southern States of the U.S. This cotton is available on the open market. The scientist was nonetheless emphatically advised by interested parties – who incidentally were by no means surprised at his findings – not to make his analysis public.

The print quality is another mystery. Apart from the counterfeit British pound notes manufactured by Nazi Germany during World War II, there has never been an intaglio print counterfeit before in the long history of counterfeit banknotes. However, the «supernote» is one of these counterfeits, with embossed, perfectly palpable intaglio print. This extremely high intaglio print is considered the outstanding trademark and indeed the best security feature of the U.S. currency. To produce this feature, a special multicolor intaglio sheet-fed printing press is required. This special press is only manufactured by the German company Koenig & Bauer AG in Wuerzburg and distributed by KBA-Giori (formerly De La Rue Giori) in Lausanne, which controls this market. It has been used by the BEP for many years to print dollar notes. Intaglio sheet-fed printing presses are not available on the open market. Even the resale of a used machine is subject to strict surveillance and reported as a matter of routine to Interpol.

North Korea owns a series of standard printing presses manufactured by KBA in the 1970s. It is completely antiquated, unsuitable for printing the «supernote» because it lacks the auxiliary equipment, according to an expert, and is also currently standing idle. Because of pressure from the USA, KBA Giori has not delivered any spare parts to North Korea for many years. It is suspected that China now prints banknotes for its neighbor. The assertion constantly repeated in the media that North Korea managed to acquire a series of modern KBA Giori printing machines in the 1990s, is completely unfounded. Although the North Koreans are currently attempting to acquire new machines for printing banknotes in Europe, they have been unsuccessful up to now, however – among other things - because Pyongyang never fully paid for its old standard machines.

The issue of security printing inks is no less mysterious. As licensees, the Americans print their banknotes exclusively using security inks manufactured by Swiss ink specialist Sicpa. The North Koreans were once Sicpa customers too – until supply was «interrupted» at the request of the Americans many years ago now. A forensic science laboratory analysis found that the security inks used to print the «supernote» matched those used on the original bills. This even holds for the expensive color shifting inks (OVI), which change their appearance depending on the angle at which light falls on them – in the case of the dollar, from a bronzy-green to black. This change in color on the «supernote» is identical to that on the original bill. The top-secret color shifting ink is only manufactured by Sicpa and is exclusively reserved for the BEP in the above-mentioned color combination. It is mixed by the licensee in high-security production plants in the USA. Although it can never be ruled out that small amounts could be purloined now and then during production despite strict monitoring, the interesting question remains as to how the amounts of ink needed for mass production could get into the wrong hands – and more especially across heavily guarded state borders. It would be easy for the Swiss corporation to determine whether the inks on the «supernotes» really are original Sicpa inks. Secret markings known as «tagging» permit the security inks to be traced right back to an individual production batch. However, at the Interpol conference mentioned at the beginning of this article, Sicpa of all people were conspicuous in their absence. There is a reason for their silence: BEP is a major customer and vital for Sicpa's survival.

The revision of the dollar series which the BEP began in 1996 throws up further mysteries. With a large head-shot portrait, as well as new security features hidden in the paper substrate and print, it is designed as a response to the rising threat from counterfeiters. The counterfeiters immediately implemented each and every change to the 100-dollar bill. The pace at which they put out their revised fake notes made observers even wonder whether they had access to information concerning to the speed with which the Fed replaced its old notes.

Currently, there are no fewer than 19 different plates for printing the «supernote»! Since 1966, there has been a microprint on the dollar bills which sometimes only measures 1/42,000 of an inch (1 inch = 24.5 mm). This minuscule writing – sometimes «USA100», sometimes «The United States of America» - is hidden in the zeros of the hundred-dollar bill or in the collar of Franklin's portrait. This microprint is considered unique in the world of banknotes. It was reproduced so perfectly by the counterfeiters that even under a microscope no difference is distinguishable. The gravure of an intaglio printing plate requires many months of hard work and eats up many tens of thousands of dollars per plate. For security reasons, the craft is always taught in-house only. So where do the counterfeiters get this specialized knowledge? Where does this skilled labor come from?

Meantime, the theory of a deliberate economic war against America is on very shaky ground. Although the counterfeiters of the «supernote» have proved that they have mastered the technique of infrared-sensitive security inks as are now used with a large portrait on the dollar bills, yet they use them so stupidly that every banknote inspection system immediately recognizes the «supernote» and throws it out. In reality, this counterfeit has absolutely no chance of causing any damage in America! Is that intentional? There is even a «supernote»-quality 50-dollar counterfeit. Counterfeit money investigators consider them to be even better than the 100-dollar bills. In America, 50-dollar bills are much more popular than the 100-dollar notes as a means of payment. Yet the «super-50» is so rare that the Secret Service was able to keep its existence secret for a long time. Why do the «super-»counterfeiters initially go to so much trouble and then relinquish a guaranteed profit? Incidentally, the «super-50» is by no means as rare as it has been made out to be either. While only a handful of the bills are claimed to have been found in America, several thousand were taken out of circulation in Europe. How-

ever, it is conspicuous that only a very low percentage of the forgeries were of the new dollar with the large portrait.

If the North Koreans really did undertake this counterfeiting operation with the aim of maximizing profits, they could not have made a worse investment. In the 17 years of their existence, «supernotes» with a total value of a mere 50 million dollars have been confiscated, according to the Secret Service. That would not even be enough to get Kim Junior one of the highly coveted series of KBA Giori printing machines today. If this figure is correct, and that is by no means certain, Columbia's counterfeit mafia would have put many times that amount of forged dollars – admittedly of poorer quality – into circulation in the same period. European counterfeit money investigators cannot confirm that the «supernotes» predominately came from East Asia either. In Europe, these banknotes are usually seized during routine, fully automatic banknote inspections in banks – permitting the origin of these bills to be traced back seamlessly. Zurich, the world's third-largest banking center, plays a pivotal role as a «clearing-house» in international trade in physical banknotes. The «supernotes» seized there originated mainly from the Near and Middle East, from East Africa, and sometimes also from Russia – and these are all regions where American foreign policy is facing particular challenges. From there, it is suspected, these counterfeit bills could have reached North Korea – and China – in the course of arms purchases.

Up to now, Japan has had the most intensive economic relations with North Korea. There was even weekly ferry traffic, which has now had to be suspended. In all those years, according to its own statement, the Japanese police had never come across a high number of «supernotes» – if anything, the converse was true. According to this source, the incident with the North Korean freighter «Rimyongsu 7», which is often cited as additional proof, is also depicted in a false light. In the port of Sakai Monato, the Japanese police had found 6,500 100-dollar bills, which were evidently intended to be used to purchase luxury goods for North Korea's higher officials, on the freighter. Of these banknotes, 100 were indeed «supernotes»; the remainder were genuine. However, the media reports constantly mention the seizure of 6,500 «supernotes». Moreover, while the police in South Korea can confirm that substantial amounts of «supernotes» have been seized many times in Seoul, these counterfeit banknotes originated from Shenyang and Dadong, Chinese cities on the border with North Korea. Also, according to the South Korean police authorities, the last case of a North Korean diplomat in possession of larger amounts of «supernotes» was many years ago. If a North Korean were to be apprehended with «supernotes» today, one could not be sure whether he was a culprit or a victim, the police said. Pyongyang has none of the modern banknote inspection systems as offered specially for this purpose by the German company Giesecke & Devrient, Munich.

In light of all these facts, leading representatives of the high-security printing industry and counterfeit money investigators have been wondering for some time now what the CIA is actually doing in its secret printing works. There is a machine in this plant, which is located in a well-known city north of Washington, which is exactly of the type required for printing these super counterfeit bills. The CIA could use it to procure funds which would be subject to no controls from Congress, for undercover operations in international crisis regions. The arch enemy in Pyongyang could then be conveniently blamed for the counterfeit money operation. There is no proof to support this theory, but some counterarguments: The CIA is swimming – at least at the moment – in money. Furthermore, it would scarcely be possible to keep such an extensive operation secret over such a long period of time. In any case, the «supernotes» interested no one but the counterfeit money investigators over one-and-a-half decades. It was George W. Bush who took it away from them and made it into a cornerstone of his politics on the Korean peninsula. His Administration was the first to officially accuse Pyongyang of the crime. Since then, tensions in the region have increased dangerously. Washington claims to

have «unequivocal evidence», but refuses to disclose it for security reasons. The time has come to produce this evidence. Otherwise, public opinion might possibly come to the conclusion that this is yet another case of the «Iraqi weapons of mass destruction» variety.

Klaus W. Bender was a foreign (business) correspondent for three decades for the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) and is the author of the book «Geldmacher, das geheimste Gewerbe der Welt», which has now been published in an up-dated English version «Moneymakers, the secret world of banknote printing», by J.Wiley.

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