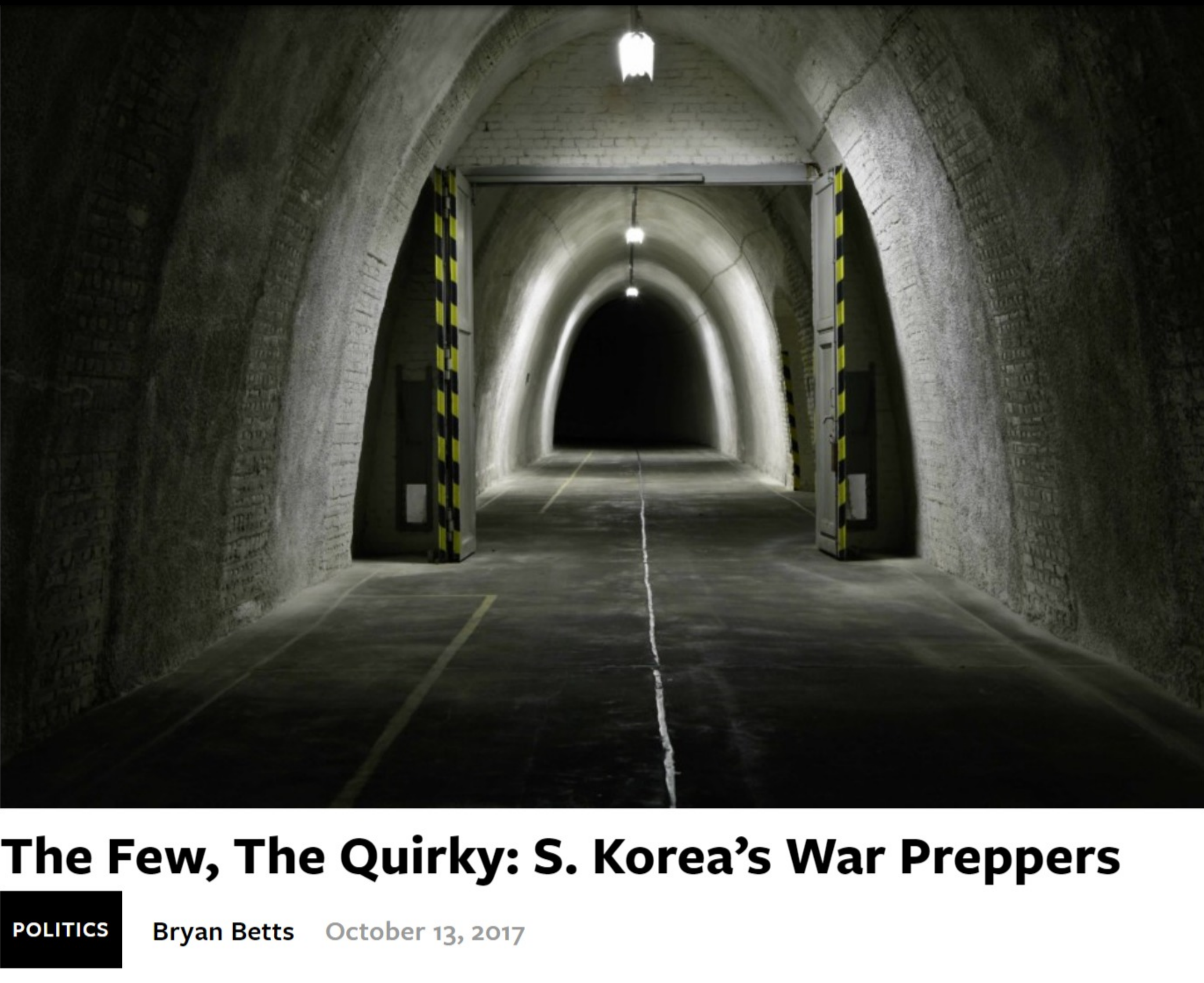




The Few, The Quirky: S. Korea’s War Preppers

POLITICS Bryan Betts October 13, 2017

Seated at a downtown coffee shop dressed in business casual, Woo Seung-yep looked more like an office worker than a war prepper as he calmly explained how he became the best-known South Korean engaged in guerrilla efforts to prepare for the possibility of war on the Korean peninsula, which has been divided for over 70 years. The two Koreas are still technically at war, since the 1953 armistice that halted the Korean War.

Woo, 44, left his job as an actual office worker in Anseong a few years ago and has gone on to become the public face of war prep in South Korea. In 2010, he started the online forum [Survival 21](#) (생존21), on which nearly 20,000 preppers have found a place to anonymously discuss survival strategies.

What sets Woo apart is his willingness to publicly identify as a prepper. “I was the first ever to openly say that I’m a prepper,” he claimed, “because usually there’s a negative stigma attached to being a prepper. They think of you as an egotistic person. ‘Oh, you’ll be the only one alive.’ And so that kind of negative stigma has led preppers to not be open about what they’re doing in public.”

Woo says Survival 21 has a mixed crew of members, including housewives, farmers, laborers, professors, police officers, and other professionals debating topics ranging from the risks of war and natural disasters to which food stuffs to stockpile.

One topic of interest on the forum is the building of private bunkers, well-stocked refuges that people can escape to if war does break out. “There aren’t a lot of bunkers in South Korea, but there are a lot of spaces that people make in their basement,” Woo said. “That’s about the degree to which people are concerned about it.”



A COMPLEX OF 575 BUNKERS IN SOUTH DAKOTA, U.S. (SOURCE: VIVOS)

With business booming in the [United States](#) and [Japan](#), American bomb shelter manufacturers see untapped sales potential in South Korea and hope to make inroads in a country where, until now, there has been virtually no market for their niche product.

Ron Hubbard, the owner of Atlas Survival Shelters, said the push to market his company’s bunkers to South Korea began when a Korean-American businessman who sells copiers to Atlas Survival put Hubbard in touch with his brother, a builder working in Seoul and Gyeonggi Province.

“[The businessman] was in my office and he was like, ‘Oh my God, these bomb shelters. We could sell them in South Korea,’” Hubbard said.

Now, Atlas Survival bunkers, like the compact “all-in-one” Bombnado, could soon start being exported from the U.S. to South Korea. Kim Geon-woo, the businessman’s brother and the owner of Buheung Construction, plans to install a miniature bunker at his company’s office in Goyang and initially target private residences, though military bases are also in his sights.



THE BOMBNAO COMES IN A VARIETY OF SIZES, STARTING WITH THIS MODEL (ABOUT 6 SQUARE METERS) THAT CAN SHELTER TWO ADULTS FOR SEVERAL MONTHS. (SOURCE: RON HUBBARD, ATLAS SURVIVAL SHELTERS)

“Right now, there isn’t interest from specific customers, but I know that demand is really high because North Korea keeps developing nuclear weapons,” Kim said, predicting three or more sales per month (which qualifies as ‘high demand’ in the South Korean market).

Another bunker manufacturer, Gary Lynch, has been fielding calls at his Texas-based company Rising S Bunkers for years, but he said that prior to 2017 he had only ever sold one or two bunkers per year to South Korean buyers .

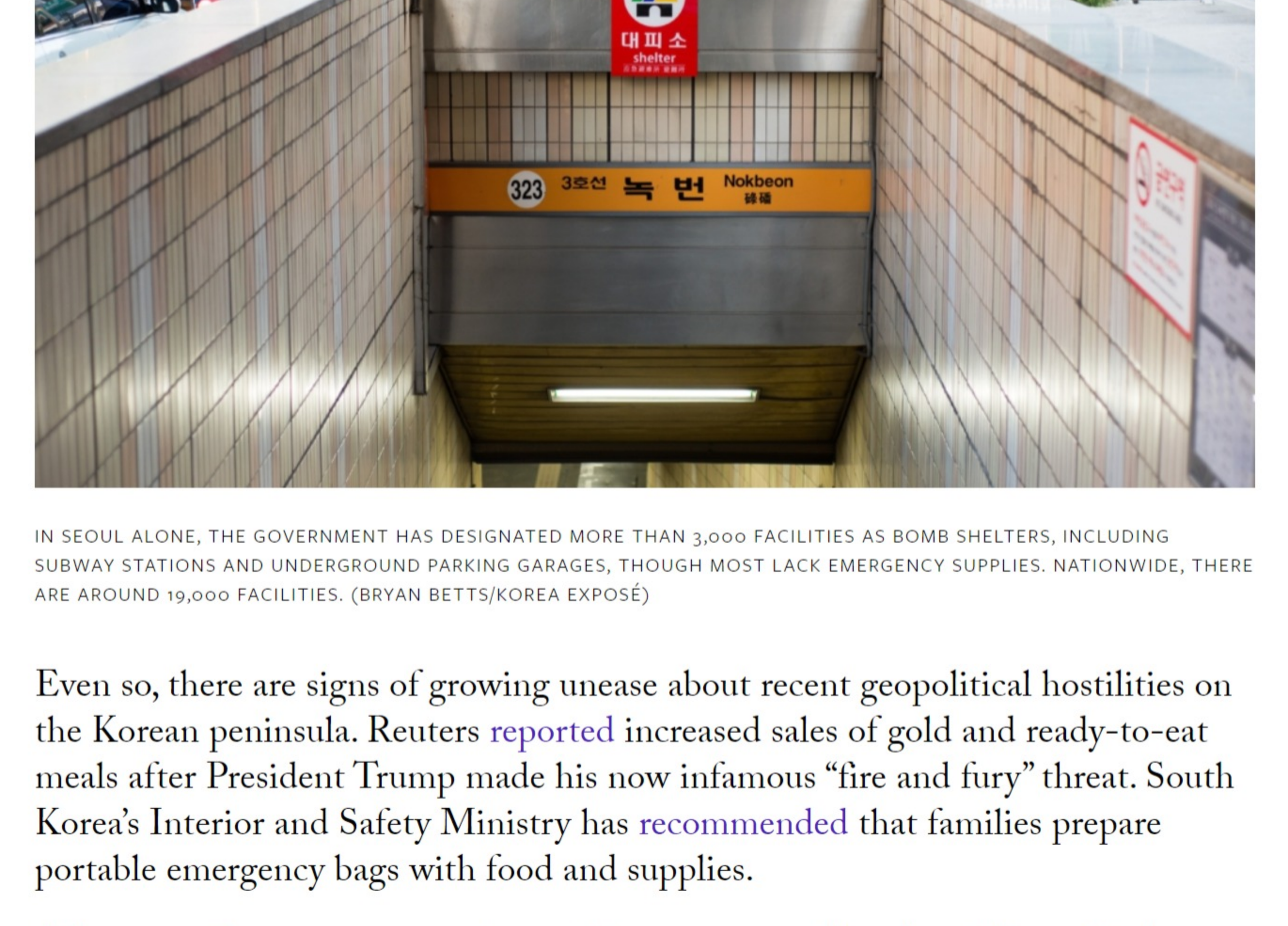
This year, amid escalating anxiety about North Korea, Lynch has seen an uptick in orders from South Korea for the all-steel bunker models his company manufactures, selling ten as of early September.

So far all his sales to South Korea have been for his smallest models, two to three person shelters up to about 19 square meters with a starting price of \$39,500 (about 45 million South Korean won).

“I think they’re just worried about a possible disaster that’s gonna be caused by backing Kim Jong-un into a corner,” said Lynch, the General Manager at Rising S. “And I think there are a lot of people in the world who see that.”

Just how worried are most South Koreans?

On the streets of Seoul, the vast majority of people carry on their daily lives with little regard for the latest provocation from Pyongyang. Elderly women in bright floral pants sell produce outside a subway station entrance as office workers commute to their jobs. Children in matching uniforms shuffle from school to a private academy and study well into the evening. Tourists rent hanboks and pose for selfies in front of a palace.



IN SEOUL ALONE, THE GOVERNMENT HAS DESIGNATED MORE THAN 3,000 FACILITIES AS BOMB SHELTERS, INCLUDING SUBWAY STATIONS AND UNDERGROUND PARKING GARAGES, THOUGH MOST LACK EMERGENCY SUPPLIES. NATIONWIDE, THERE ARE AROUND 19,000 FACILITIES. (BRYAN BETTS/KOREA EXPOSÉ)

Even so, there are signs of growing unease about recent geopolitical hostilities on the Korean peninsula. Reuters [reported](#) increased sales of gold and ready-to-eat meals after President Trump made his now infamous “fire and fury” threat. South Korea’s Interior and Safety Ministry has [recommended](#) that families prepare portable emergency bags with food and supplies.

“There *may* be an increase in demand for war survival kits,” said Hong Yunhui, the head of public relations at eBay Korea. “But we’re not certain about that. There are more online searches, yes, but it’s not like we have a separate category at eBay for ‘war survival kits.’ We don’t have the exact sales statistics.”

The city of Seoul increased the number of districts participating in an annual [nationwide civil defense drill](#) to all 25 districts from just five in 2016.

South Koreans have also voiced concerns about new uncertainties which have come with Donald Trump’s election and North Korea’s new capability to reach the western United States with its ballistic missiles. Some have [speculated](#) that Trump’s commitment to the principle of “America First” might mean Washington won’t defend the South, possibly fearing that intervening in a conflict would lead to nuclear war with North Korea and the loss of American lives.

For now, indifference and relative calm remain the predominant attitude among South Koreans, with a [September Gallup poll](#) finding that 58 percent of the population thought there was no possibility North Korea will cause a war.

[Another Gallup poll](#) released this month found that 59 percent of South Koreans consider it unlikely that North Korea would use nuclear weapons.

Luxury bunkers

Sensing opportunity amid threats of disaster, Vivos, a California-based company specializing in luxury bunkers, is targeting the South Korean market as a potential source of clients. In promoting his shelters, Vivos CEO Robert Vicino described them as both “an underground cruise ship” and “insurance” for “dangerous times.”

The Vivos shelter in South Korea will be a multi-level underground complex carved out of a mountain, burrowed into solid rock. Customers can reserve space in advance, in the more than 23,000-square-meter bunker. If war does break out, customers can flee to either an opulent private suite or less expensive units modeled on Japanese capsule hotels, depending on how much money they spent.

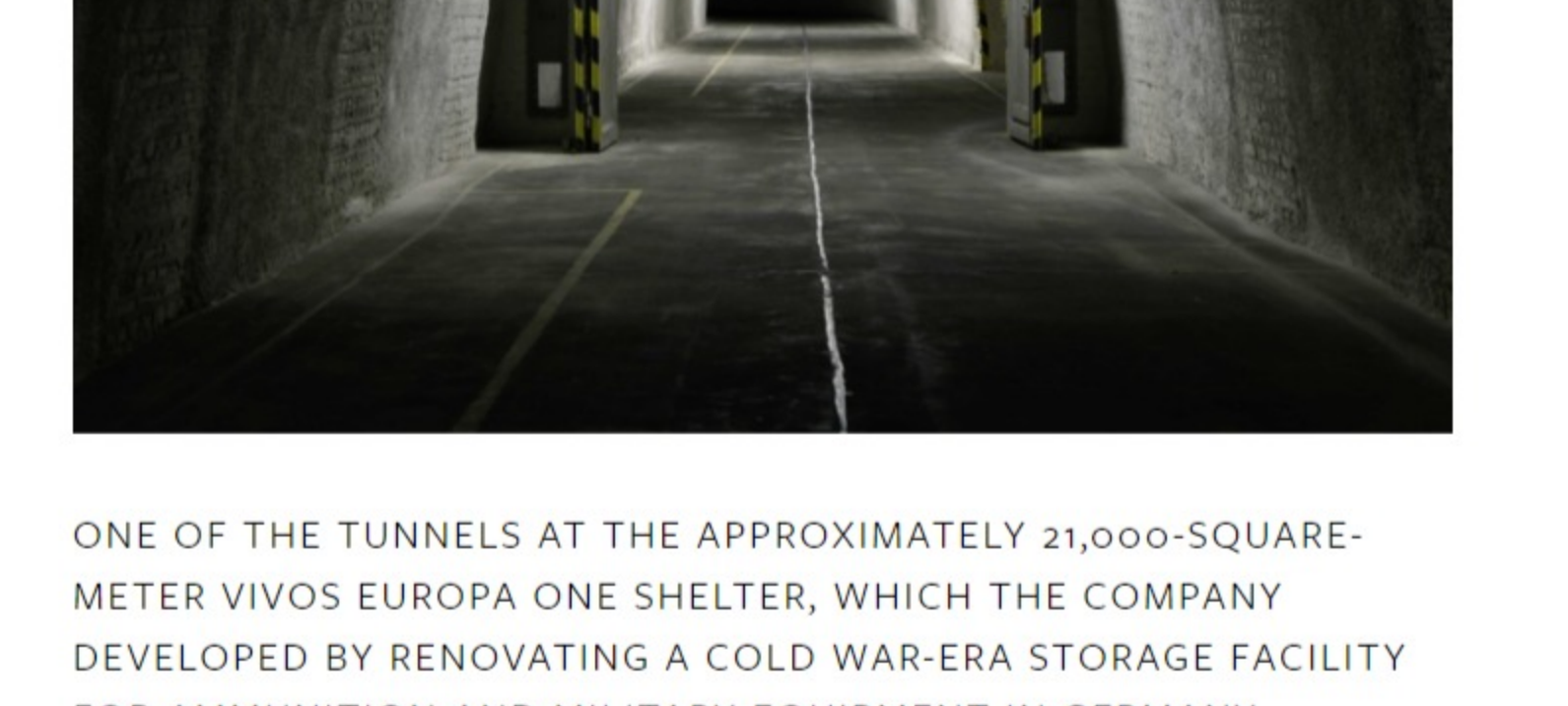


THE COMMUNITY POOL AT VIVOS EUROPA ONE IN GERMANY. (SOURCE: VIVOS)

Long-term supplies of food, fuel, medicine, and other necessities will allow up to 1,500 people to survive there for a year or more. Aquaponic systems will enable the inhabitants to raise plants and sea life to supplement their diets. Common areas featuring entertainment options like a pool, movie theater, bar, and restaurant will help stave off boredom during the months or years of subterranean living.

Vicino says the the appeal of his company’s shelters is in part “aspirational.” “It’s like if you have a yacht, you have to have a shelter to go with it.”

The project, called Vivos Asiana One, aims to start construction early next year and has a scheduled completion date of mid-2019. Vicino said Vivos already owns the land for the project but declined to reveal the exact location or the names of investors.



ONE OF THE TUNNELS AT THE APPROXIMATELY 21,000-SQUARE-METER VIVOS EUROPA ONE SHELTER, WHICH THE COMPANY DEVELOPED BY RENOVATING A COLD WAR-ERA STORAGE FACILITY FOR AMMUNITION AND MILITARY EQUIPMENT IN GERMANY. (SOURCE: VIVOS)

Vivos has a reputation for targeting the higher end of the bunker market and plans to build private apartments in the South Korean shelters, primarily for investors and wealthy clients. However, Vicino said his goal is to sell the capsule hotel rooms for as low as \$10,000 (11.3 million won).

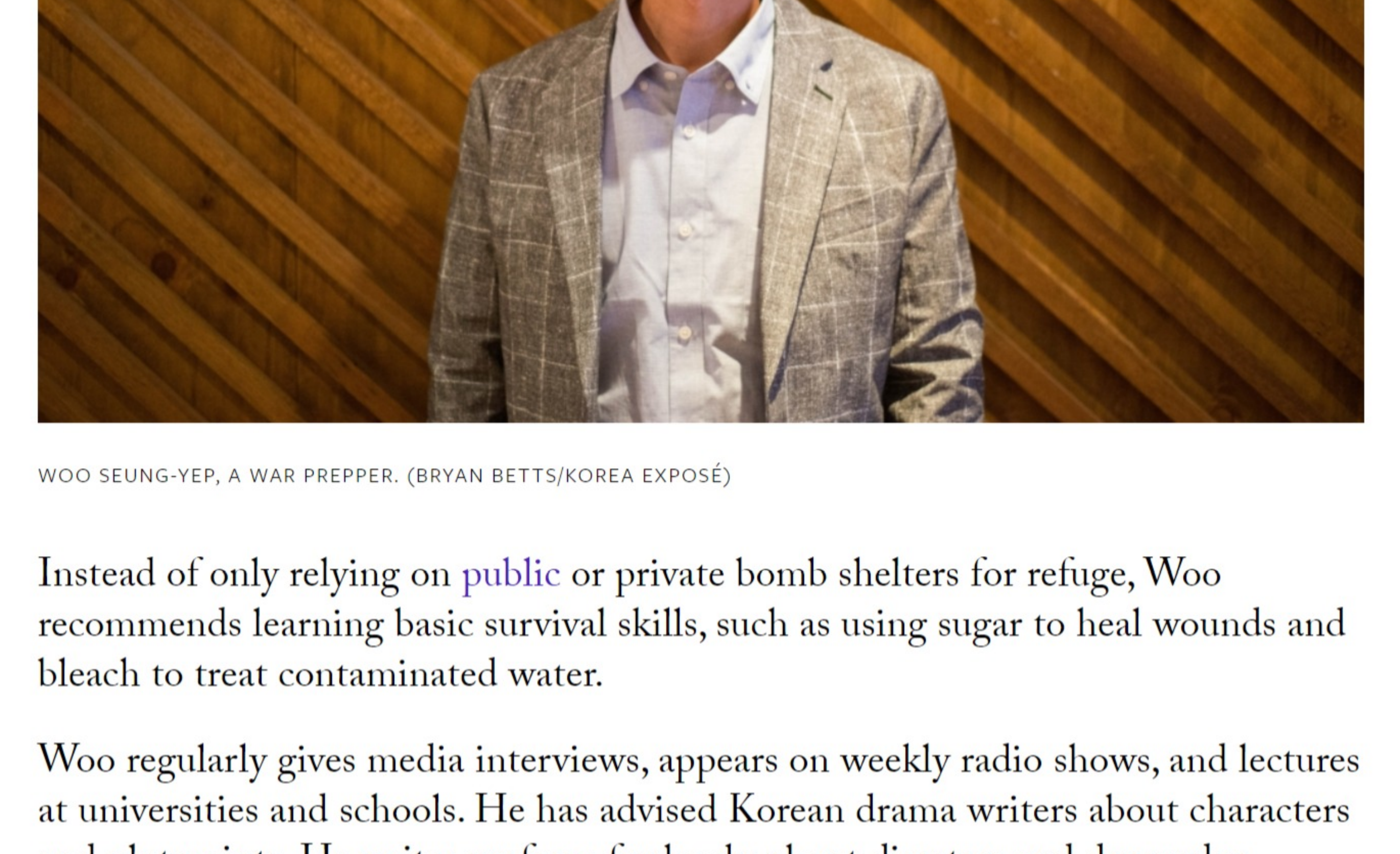
The company, still awaiting required government permits and approvals, hasn’t yet started selling the spaces to the public, but Vicino said they will begin promoting the shelter sometime after making an official announcement at an undisclosed future date.

“I’m pretty convinced with the supply and demand [in South Korea], that we’ll sell it out pretty quickly,” he said.

Lack of faith in government

For South Korean preppers, a relatively recent, and very real, disaster looms larger in their minds than the risk of war with North Korea. In April 2014, the [Sewol ferry](#) sank off the south coast of the country, causing the deaths of more than 300 people, most of them high school students. Following a rescue effort many perceived as incompetent, the sinking seriously called into question the South Korean state’s ability to deal with emergencies.

The incident left Woo and others feeling like they had to fend for themselves. Woo calls the Sewol sinking a “defining moment,” and said, “The government did not have the proper control tower to deal with the accident, and there were no specialists doing their job. More people started thinking that maybe I should take care of myself. We can’t rely on the government.” The distrust toward the state intensified after Sewol, and Woo claims the ferry disaster was the starting point of prepping becoming more popular in Korea.



WOO SEUNG-YEP, A WAR PREPPER. (BRYAN BETTS/KOREA EXPOSÉ)

Instead of only relying on [public](#) or private bomb shelters for refuge, Woo recommends learning basic survival skills, such as using sugar to heal wounds and bleach to treat contaminated water.

Woo regularly gives media interviews, appears on weekly radio shows, and lectures at universities and schools. He has advised Korean drama writers about characters and plot points. He writes prefaces for books about disasters and doomsday scenarios. He will soon publish a new book, his third, about how to prepare for military conflicts.

He says his main challenge is overcoming what he calls a mindset whereby most South Koreans are reluctant to talk about the possibility of disaster. “We like to not talk about bad things, worrying that it might happen once we spit it out,” he said.

Never mind the fear of bad words potentially creating a bad reality. Woo remains one of the few people openly talking about prepping, in a country where most have just learned to ignore the threats from the North.

“I think that it’s just an insurance that people should have,” Woo said, “being prepared.”

Cover image: A tunnel leading to a Vivos shelter in Europe. (Source: Vivos)