

PRESS RELEASE

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Shining Light on the Hidden North Korean Refugee Crisis Exploitation, Abuse and Fear Rampant on the Border with China

Rare Interviews with Refugees Offer Glimpse into Everyday Life in North Korea and on the Chinese Border

Washington— Stability on the Korean peninsula and in other parts of Asia is threatened not only by aggressive military actions by the government of North Korea, but also by the refugees fleeing oppression, poverty and hunger. Moreover, life outside of North Korea holds another potential series of risks to this growing refugee community. Interviews with more than 1,300 North Korean refugees hiding in China paint a grim picture of the terrors and deprivations they fled in North Korea and the precariousness of their underground existence in China.

The results of the interviews, conducted along the Chinese-South Korean border by Yoonok Chang and her colleagues, are part of the new report released today by the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, *The North Korean Refugee Crisis: Human Rights and International Response*. The report, edited by Marcus Noland and Stephan Haggard, can be downloaded from www.hrnk.org

“North Korean refugees in China face a particular set of vulnerabilities that range from their insecure legal and personal status, fears of deportation, and difficulties in securing livelihoods,” wrote Chang. “Whatever disagreements there may be over the ultimate resolution of the refugee problem, there should be no disagreements that they constitute a highly vulnerable population living in fear of arrest and deportation to punishment in the country of their birth.”

Among her findings about the refugees in China:

- In violation of international agreements, the Chinese government is forcibly returning North Korean refugees who are trying to escape poverty, hunger and repression in their home country. Such fears are well-founded: upon their return, the refugees face prison and torture.
- Two-thirds of the refugees cited “fear of arrest” as the principal source of their distress in China.
- Nearly 10 percent of the respondents report having been incarcerated in the North Korean gulag, where they attest to witnessing beatings, hunger, and infanticide.
- Nearly all (97 percent) of the refugees expressed no intention of returning to North Korea, despite most having family in the country. Most want to continue on to South Korea; roughly one in five want to settle in the United States, the second most favored destination. However, a substantial number report making risky return visits to North Korea, bearing money and food.
- Female refugees face particular risks. A majority of respondents said they knew of North Korean women being trafficked as prostitutes or brides. In addition, North Korean women suffer abuse from Chinese border guards and North Korean officials once they are returned.

Surprisingly, the refugees still expressed persistent optimism, Chang said. “Despite all that they have been through, and the current conditions they are suffering, they still have hope for a normal life,” she said. “The international community should foster that hope and help give the refugees the chance they deserve to live happy, healthy lives.”

Life in North Korea

This group of refugees also is one of the few sources that outsiders have about life under Kim Jong Il’s regime. Not surprisingly, most express decidedly negative evaluations of North Korean government performance.

- Three-quarters of the refugees say that the food shortage problem in the country has not improved in the past two years.

- Despite a decade of international food assistance feeding up to 30 percent of the North Korean populace, more than 40 percent of those interviewed were unaware of the aid program. Of those who knew about it, 96 percent did not believe they had personally benefited. The near universal perception was that aid was diverted to the military.
- Most surprising, five out of six respondents said that North Koreans are voicing their concerns about the chronic food shortages – a very large number given the repressiveness of the regime.

“Knowing of the existence of the food aid program, but believing that one had been abandoned, is a profoundly demoralizing experience,” said Marcus Noland, one of the report’s editors. “Those refugees who believed that they were denied aid in their time of need were even more embittered than those who had been incarcerated in the political prisons.”

“While it is important to focus international attention on the plight of these refugees, it is also important to remember that this problem is only the tip of the iceberg of repressive conditions within North Korea,” said Debra Liang-Fenton, executive director of the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea. “World attention should focus on alleviating the despair and anxiety faced by North Korean refugees, but we should also remember that the refugee crisis is a symptom of a larger problem. It is North Korean government policy—political repression and the denial of the most basic human rights, including the criminalization of exit—that creates the refugee problem.”

Where will they go?

The majority (64 percent) of refugees in China want to settle in South Korea, where they are citizens under the South Korean constitution. But, as detailed by Andrei Lankov in a chapter of the report, South Korea has become less welcoming because of concerns about destabilizing North Korea and because of the increasing costs associated with assimilating this new cohort of poorer, less educated immigrants into their society. Lankov concludes that there is clearly room for the South Korean government to play a more active role in ameliorating the refugee crisis than it has to date.

“Not only is South Korea growing quietly more inhospitable to refugees from the North, compared to other countries’ histories of accepting refugees, South Korea’s numbers are stunningly small,” said Lankov. “Compare the less than 8,000 refugees in South Korea with the more than 500,000 East German defectors who fled to West Germany before the Berlin Wall fell.”

Interestingly, the second choice for a new home among these refugees is the United States. In extraordinary testimony to the idea of the American dream, recent research by Marcus Noland, one of the editors of this report, shows that the younger, more educated refugees want to migrate to the United States despite having been subjected to the virulent anti-American propaganda Kim Jong Il regime for their entire lives.

Recommendations for China

The report also provides a study by Joshua Kurlantzick and Jana Mason of China’s obligations with respect to the refugees, as well as their actual response to the crisis. This study concludes that:

- China has failed to uphold its obligations under the Refugee Convention, and should stop repatriation of North Koreans in its borders.
- China should allow the UNHCR into the border region to assess cases of North Korean asylum seekers.
- Chinese cooperation with respect to refugees does not commit it to a weakening of its border security or to any particular strategy toward North Korea. Therefore, Chinese policy should move on two tracks: upholding its international obligations with respect to North Korean refugees; and continuing its preferred strategy of political and economic engagement with North Korea with respect to the broader security issues on the peninsula.
- With the help of South Korea, Japan and the U.S., China should establish temporary resettlement camps together with third-country commitments to accept the refugees for permanent resettlement.

The U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea is a leading organization in the field of North Korean human rights research and advocacy.