

North Korea's Overseas Workers After COVID-19

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Introduction

Being a North Korean overseas laborer means far more than simply enduring hard work. These workers live under constant surveillance, cut off from any reliable way to contact their families back home.

During an investigative reporting trip to Senegal, West Africa in 2024, I met one such worker, a North Korean construction laborer, quietly enduring this reality. He had not seen his wife and children in more than eight years. When he first left overseas, he believed he would return home within a few years. But when the COVID-19 pandemic struck and North Korean authorities blocked overseas workers from returning, he found himself completely stranded. Whether he could go home was entirely up to the authorities.

When I said, "You must miss your family," he let out a long, heavy sigh.

After the pandemic, the North Korean embassy withdrew from the country, and he found himself living with slightly more freedom from direct official surveillance. But he had no way of knowing how much his children had grown, or whether his wife was doing well. He could not call them. He could not write to them. He was earning hard currency abroad for the state, handing over most of what he made, and sending whatever little remained back to his family, yet he could not see them. I could not begin to imagine how profound that loneliness must be.

The only connection he had left was the image of his family preserved in his memory.

He did not know when or whether he would ever see them again. Unless the North Korean government gives its permission, he may remain there forever.

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Executive Summary

This report examines the state of North Korea's overseas labor dispatch program and the treatment of its workers in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Under UN Security Council Resolution 2397, all North Korean workers abroad were required to return home by December 2019. The border closures triggered by COVID-19, however, left most of them stranded overseas. For these workers, this meant an indefinite separation from their families and years of continued life abroad. Throughout this period, the North Korean regime continued to exploit its workers as a source of foreign currency, and once the border lockdown ended, it found new ways to ignore and evade UN sanctions.

In the process, a decisive opportunity presented itself: Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Facing a severe wartime labor shortage, Russia has been actively recruiting North Korean workers, a trend confirmed by multiple indicators. Notably, this report obtained testimony that North Korean workers are present in the Alabuga Special Economic Zone, Russia's drone production hub. No evidence was found, however, that these workers are directly involved in drone manufacturing.

Beyond Russia, North Korea has continued its labor exports through new channels, expanding the dispatch of workers to China and significantly increasing its IT workers.

Amid all these changes, the conditions facing the workers themselves have not improved. They are still required to remit more than 80 percent of their wages to the state, endure grueling labor in substandard conditions, and are denied free communication with their families back home.

Almost every former worker interviewed for this report understood, before they left, that overseas labor would be grueling. They went anyway for their families. The chance to earn more than they ever could at home, to give their children something better: that was worth the sacrifice. And so, they endured.

Preface & Methodology

- Research Background and Objectives

This report is one of four HRNK studies assessing Kim Jong-un's ideological shift, the extent of North Korea's repression, and the role of forced labor in the regime's strategy for survival. Building on HRNK's long-established record of investigating North Korean labor rights abuses in China, Russia, the Middle East, and elsewhere, this report updates the status of North Korean workers officially dispatched overseas, this time also including Korean People's Army soldiers sent to the Ukrainian front. It documents where workers are deployed and under what arrangements, assesses how the program has adapted since 2020 (particularly the expansion into wartime Russia, the continued presence in China, and the

growth of the overseas IT worker scheme), and evaluates the treatment of these workers against international standards for forced labor.

- Methodology: Defector Testimony, OSINT, Field Reporting

This report draws on three complementary streams of evidence: interviews, open-source intelligence, and investigative reporting.

Interviews. The foundation of this report is in-depth interviews with five former North Korean overseas workers who defected between 2012 and 2021, having worked in Russia and other countries across sectors including construction and IT. All interviewees participated voluntarily. To protect them and their families remaining in North Korea, this report withholds names, dates of defection, and identifying details of workplaces, and generalizes or omits any testimony that could place a source at risk.

Open-source intelligence (OSINT). To corroborate testimony and observe the system from the outside, this report draws on Russian-language and multilingual Telegram channels, recruitment postings, corporate records, official statistics, and commercial satellite imagery. Social media material was assessed for authenticity, geolocated where possible, and cross-referenced against independent sources, with posters anonymized where identification could put them at risk.

Investigative reporting. Where possible, the author made direct contact with individuals in a position to observe North Korean workers at specific sites. For their safety, their nationalities and the nature of their work are not disclosed. The author also sought comment from the companies and entities named in this report, and responses, or the absence of responses, are noted in the relevant chapters.

Part I. Structural Foundations: The Ideological and Institutional Basis of North Korea's Overseas Forced Labor

Chapter 1. The Ideological Foundations of Forced Labor

- 1.1 *Juche* Ideology and the Justification of Labor Exploitation

North Korea's airtight foundation of *juche* ideology works to justify and encourage overseas forced labor from its people. *Juche*, often translated as "self-reliance," is North Korea's official state ideology, originating from Kim Il-sung and further maturing through Kim Jong-il. It encompasses four core principles: ideological independence (*juche*), political independence (*chaju*), economic independence (*charip*), and military independence (*chawi*).¹

At first glance, it seems contradictory that the North Korean government wields *juche* to justify overseas labor when the act of working to accumulate foreign currency suggests dependence on foreign economies. However, by arguing that economic independence

¹ [Juche in North Korea](#), Sung Kyung Kim

grows due to the boost to the national economy that overseas labor fuels, *juche* is transformed into motivation for labor.² Moreover, *juche* can help frame overseas labor as extracting currency from foreign countries to fuel North Korea, rather than as depending on them for subsistence.

Even more fundamentally, *juche* shifts the meaning of labor for overseas dispatched workers. Whereas in many capitalist countries, an individual's labor is perceived as an economic transaction where they exchange their labor for compensation so that they can use that money to advance their own livelihoods, in North Korea, where individuality is absorbed into the greater national identity, labor is a *moral* duty. (In reality, it does not work that way. Overseas workers endure harsh conditions to earn foreign currency, hoping to support their families back home.) Especially overseas, each individual's work does not represent their own skills and accomplishments but rather demonstrates their loyalty to North Korea and flaunts their nation's superiority. As *juche* ideology preaches that the well-being of each individual is only possible with the flourishing of the greater nation, individuals do not perceive labor exploitation or wage extraction as unfair, but as their righteous way of contributing to the country and finding purpose. In this framework, forced labor and wage extraction are not exploitative, but inevitable and understandable.

Therefore, through *juche* ideology, workers do not understand their forced labor as coercive or exploitative. Instead, it is a duty they must provide, in service of North Korea's so-called "self-reliance," at the expense of their own well-being and health.

- 1.2 The Ten Principles of the Monolithic Ideological System and Labor Control

The Ten Principles for the Establishment of the Monolithic Ideological System, or the Ten Principles, are North Korea's supreme set of laws which, in practice, rival the authority of the national constitution. First created in 1974 by Kim Il-sung in response to internal political threats, then updated in 2013 by Kim Jong-un to legitimize his succession of rule, the Ten Principles span 65 sections that demand absolute loyalty, faith, and obedience to the Kim regime.³ These rules outline how North Korean citizens must act on a daily basis, highlighting how citizens must embody their unwavering loyalty to the Kim family no matter the cost or circumstance.

With the first principle urging citizens to "give our all," the fifth to display "unconditional obedience," and the tenth requiring "inheriting and completing [Kim Il-sung's revolutionary spirit] to the end," the Ten Principles demand total compliance and any sacrifice that comes with it.⁴ Under this framework, escape or even slacking off and failing to meet production quotas is unimaginable. Even labor that is physically demanding and poorly rewarded must be performed with full effort and no complaints, as individual shortcomings are perceived as critically harming the country.

² [Understanding Kim Jong Un's Economic Policymaking: Juche and Foreign Trade](#), Robert L. Carlin and Rachel Minyoung Lee

³ [The 1967 Purge of the Gapsan Faction and Establishment of the Monolithic Ideological System](#), James Person

⁴ ["What are the 'Ten Principles'?"](#), Daily NK

All North Koreans are required to memorize the Ten Principles. During regular evaluation meetings, both in North Korea and while abroad, groups of North Koreans gather and critique themselves and one another on their failures to live up to the standards of the Principles.⁵ This internalized shame, surveillance, and compulsion facilitate a powerful psychological mechanism of labor control that works far more effectively than any form of physical pressure. Overseas North Korean workers carry out their forced labor not because they are being metaphorically held at gunpoint, but rather because they see it as the natural fulfillment of their obligation to their leaders from years of psychological indoctrination.

- 1.3 The Myth of the "Speed Battle": How Domestic Mobilization Feeds Overseas Dispatch
 - Hwasong District, Pyongyang General Hospital, Samjiyon—Mobilization Figures

In North Korea, a “speed battle” is a mass mobilization campaign that nationally mandates additional work from citizens with the goal of completing projects at the highest quality in the shortest amount of time.⁶ Campaigns are usually launched to celebrate or commemorate important political or national milestones and arrive in the form of 70-, 80-, or 200-day sprints. For example, leading up to the seventh Workers’ Party Congress, large-scale construction projects such as the Future Scientists Street in Pyongyang and the Mt. Baekdu Hero Youth Power Stations were ordered to be completed in 200-day sprints.⁷

Inspired by the mid-1930s Soviet Stakhanovite movement, “speed battles” aim to reify the ideology that collective mobilization, stimulated by political passion and commitment, can achieve any physical goal. Due to the emphasis on speed, workers are forced to work long hours—up to 15 hours a day and at breakneck speeds—under harsh conditions, lacking proper safety equipment and precautions.

These “speed battles” are part of the North Korean government’s larger obsession with speed. In the late 1950s, North Korea launched the *Chollima* movement, where *Chollima* is the mythological creature that can travel “one thousand-ri” (*Cho-li*, equivalent to about 400km) in one day, to rebuild their buildings and facilities quickly in the aftermath of the Korean War. This was succeeded by the *Mallima* movement in 2016, where *Mallima* is ten times faster than even *Chollima*. In a country with limited resources and manpower, “speed battles” essentially hoped to show its citizens what was possible; tired and hungry citizens could prove their capabilities to themselves and to their leaders in a clear visual product, which would boost their morale and instill deep pride, in addition to gaining the physical and symbolic advantages of newly erected buildings and monuments.

A few years ago, in Hwasong District in Pyongyang, the third phase of a residential development called for “shock troops” to be deployed.⁸ “Shock troops” are state-organized groups of citizens who carry out arduous manual labor, often in construction or agriculture, who are taken far from their homes for extended periods of time without receiving proper

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ [“Speed Battle in N. Korea.”](#) KBS World

⁷ [“Speed Battling.”](#) Choson Exchange

⁸ [“Forced labor in North Korea cited as possible crime against humanity.”](#) Lisa Schlein

compensation—an architecture strikingly similar in its design to overseas labor.⁹ Meanwhile, when construction of the multi-towered Pyongyang General Hospital in a 200-day speed campaign failed to meet its deadline, Kim Jong-un expressed disappointment and replaced project managers with new ones—demonstrating that not just laborers, but workers at all tiers of the labor force, were vulnerable to replacement and punishment for lacking in speed. Finally, when the government undertook the Samjiyon city construction project in the late 2010s, which was highly ambitious in its scale, each unit assigned to construction received quota assignments.¹⁰ With barely any support from the government, regular citizens were forced to contribute their own labor and capital in order to avoid punishment for failing to meet their quotas.

Under this domestic web of speed and mobilization, overseas labor is a natural next step and even the illusion of freedom for many North Koreans. Having already been subjected to such ruthless labor conditions, long hours, meager remuneration, and displacement from their homes all under the anxious imperative for speed, overseas dispatched North Korean workers understand their labor as a required expression of their loyalty, rather than extraction. Further, under the precarious conditions of domestic mobilization, workers may opt to vie for the “lesser evil” of overseas labor, which is often portrayed domestically as granting more agency and reward. For instance, workers at Samjiyon claimed that they preferred being assigned there over farmers’ houses because they assumed Samjiyon was a greater priority for the administration and thus would have better labor conditions—demonstrating that workers do perform a calculus of convenience and reward when signing up for labor assignments, which may extend to applying for overseas labor. Because domestic labor is maintained as oppressive and cruel, overseas labor almost appears as an attractive alternative to many eligible, higher-ranking citizens.

- 1.4 Forced Labor as a Financing Mechanism for Nuclear and Missile Programs

The United Nations Panel of Experts’ report in March 2024 estimated that more than 100,000 North Korean workers dispatched across 40 countries were generating revenue for the North Korean government, spanning construction, food service, sewing, information technology (IT), and more industries.¹¹ The annual revenue from these workers was approximated to be \$500 million excluding that from IT workers, and the report expected North Korea to dispatch 400,000 additional workers abroad once borders opened further. Through taking most of what the workers make, and receiving a premium from employers for providing cheap, reliable labor, North Korea manages to earn significant additional revenue for its frail economy that has been weakened by international sanctions.

The U.S. Department of the Treasury found that funds raised by such overseas workers are funneled into North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and ballistic missile programs.¹² Specifically, actors such as Department 53 of The Ministry of the People’s Armed Forces, a North Korean government weapons-trading entity that sells advanced weapons and communications equipment, and conspiring overseas employers

⁹ [“The dark side of N. Korea’s efforts to speedily complete housing projects.”](#) Daily NK Mun Dong Hui

¹⁰ [“North Korean workers dread labor brigade assignments as countryside construction drive intensifies.”](#) Daily NK Eun Seol

¹¹ [S/2024/215 Report](#), UN Panel of Experts

¹² *ibid*

help North Korea earn revenue that directly supports North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. These actions resulted in the U.S. Treasury sanctioning multiple individuals and entities based in Russia, China, Laos, and the United Arab Emirates twice across 2024 and 2025.¹³ As such, the connection between North Korea's overseas workers and its WMD and missile programs is explicit, not inferred.

Paradoxically, the sanctions that sought to cripple North Korea's nuclear and missile programs may have bolstered them, through making its overseas labor networks more obscure. When the UNSC Resolution 2375 banned UN member states from issuing new work permits to North Korean nationals, North Korea responded by doubling down on evasive techniques such as student visas, forged documents, and an increase in IT workers who used fake identities and worked multiple jobs at once.¹⁴ For instance, South Korean intelligence estimated in 2025 that approximately 15,000 North Koreans were working in Russia under non-work visas to evade sanctions. Attempts to eliminate the more evident sources of overseas labor drove North Korea to make its overseas labor program less visible, which in turn left its workers more vulnerable to oppression, scrutiny, and exploitation.

Forced labor feeding into the development and acceleration of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs shows, once again, the integration of *juche* ideology into the overseas forced labor structure. By helping the government develop weapons to bolster its military and geopolitical authority, these workers are serving their true purpose as North Korean citizens by helping make the country more self-reliant. Thus, the fact that overseas labor funds domestic weapons programs helps complete the *juche* foundational logic, much like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Chapter 2. Control Structures Over Overseas Dispatched Workers

- 2.1 Pre-Dispatch Selection and Loyalty Screening

Selection is anything but arbitrary. Candidates undergo exhaustive loyalty vetting and political background checks. Family lineage is assessed through *songbun*, the regime's hereditary classification system that ranks every North Korean according to the perceived political loyalty of his or her ancestors, dividing the population into core, wavering, and hostile classes. Standing within Party organizations serves as a further criterion. Those chosen are not merely workers. They are, in the regime's calculus, trusted representatives of the state abroad and potential liabilities if that trust proves misplaced.

*Selection criteria include:*¹⁵

- Loyalty to the regime
- Marital status
- At least one child

¹³ [Treasury Sanctions Actors Financing the North Korean Weapons of Mass Destruction Program](#) and [Treasury Targets IT Worker Network Generating Revenue for DPRK Weapons Programs](#), U.S. Treasury

¹⁴ [North Korea's Forced Labor Reaching EU Supply Chains](#), Lina Yoon, Human Rights Watch

¹⁵ [Qatar's ambitious future driven on by North Korean 'forced labour'](#), The Guardian and based on interviews with North Korean defectors who formerly worked overseas, conducted in June–July 2026

- Relevant technical skills
- Ability to pay bribes to officials

These marriage and family requirements, however, are not applied uniformly across all dispatch categories. In border regions with China, where employers tend to prefer young female workers, unmarried women are permitted to be sent abroad, and the same exception applies to workers dispatched directly through military-run construction programs.¹⁶ For most other categories of overseas dispatch, however, including diplomatic postings, marital status, and whether a candidate has children, remain key selection criteria.

From the outside, North Korea's overseas labor program is widely and accurately characterized as a system of state-imposed forced labor. But inside North Korea, the picture is more complicated than that framing suggests. Many workers actively want to go.

With the country's public distribution system having largely collapsed, most North Koreans rely on the informal economy to survive. An overseas posting is seen as one of the few legitimate pathways to earning foreign currency. Workers who return home with hard currency can afford a middle-class lifestyle or better, a powerful incentive that leads many to volunteer, driven by the hope of providing for their families.

But the opportunity is not open to everyone. Traveling abroad is itself a privilege that requires both connections and resources. In practice, bribing officials to secure a placement has become standard. As a result, having overseas work experience functions as a kind of status symbol within North Korean society.

A Wide Range of Bribes

The financial burden begins even before departure. To secure a spot, workers must pay bribes to relevant officials throughout the process, from the selection stage through to departure. Reported figures vary widely from \$100 to \$200 in some cases, up to \$800 in others, and as high as \$2,000 to \$3,000.¹⁷ The reason the scope of bribes varies is that the agencies dispatching North Korean workers overseas belong to different ministries, and this varies by agency. The Party, the military, and cities each send workers abroad separately to earn foreign currency. The size of the bribe also depends on the position being sought—workers seeking a spot as an ordinary laborer pay far less than those seeking a coveted role such as an interpreter or manager position, where the bribes required are reported to be substantially larger. It also varies by individual, depending on personal relationships and circumstances. Even at the lower end of this range, the sum represents a significant portion of an average North Korean's income. Depending on which exchange rate and wage estimate you use, \$100 to \$200 alone can equal one to several months' earnings. For workers who do not meet the official dispatch criteria, whether due to age, marital status, party loyalty record, or other eligibility requirements, bribes can serve as a workaround,¹⁸ with the right payment to the right official effectively substituting for qualifications they

¹⁶ Interview with North Korea defector who dispatched overseas June, July 2026

¹⁷ [North Korean Workers Officially Dispatched to China & Russia](#), HRNK Greg Scarlatoiu and based on interviews with North Korean defectors who formerly worked overseas, conducted in June–July 2026, [North Korean Forced Labor in the U.S. Seafood Supply Chain](#), HRNK Greg Scarlatoiu

¹⁸ Interview defector overseas workers at Russia

otherwise lack. While this is a significant sum by North Korean standards, workers accept the cost because they expect to earn enough abroad to more than recover the investment after returning home.

Park Yoon-jae (a pseudonym), who was sent to Russia as a construction worker in 2015 and defected in 2020, told me¹⁹ in an interview that he spent nearly three years preparing for his overseas assignment. Because he held a managerial position in North Korea, he first had to pay about \$1,200 in bribes to secure his dismissal from that post before he could qualify as an overseas worker. Including additional payments made during the selection and departure process, he said he paid a total of \$1,400 in bribes to officials before leaving for Russia.

The financial pressure is even greater for workers seeking a second deployment. North Korean regulations require overseas workers to return home after three years and undergo more than two years of ideological re-education before being sent abroad again. But workers who have already adapted to life overseas typically want to return within six months and are known to pay officials an additional \$1,500 to \$2,000 to make that happen. In practice, officials have come to expect more from repeat applicants than from first-timers.

Choi Myung-chun (a pseudonym), a North Korean defector who worked as an interpreter in Oman from 2017 to 2018, described²⁰ a similar dynamic for first-time dispatches. According to Choi, workers heading abroad for the first time typically lack the lump sum needed to pay bribes at that stage, making it difficult to secure major benefits early on. Instead, the system rewards those who have already completed one deployment: substantial lobbying only becomes possible after a worker returns from their first stint abroad with money in hand.

Choi explained that if a worker earns \$10,000 during a single deployment, roughly half, around \$5,000, is typically spent lobbying superiors, such as officials and instructors in the cadre department, to secure the next dispatch, while the worker keeps the remaining half. At the initial entry stage, the standard pattern is for a worker to hand over approximately \$200–300 to the cadre department instructor at their assigned enterprise, along with an implicit promise to "do better" upon return. Choi also noted that the bribes required to become a manager, such as an interpreter, are far larger than those required for ordinary laborers.

- 2.2 Wage Structures and State Extraction
 - Revenue Collection Mechanisms of Foreign Currency–Earning Agencies

North Korean overseas workers deployed to China, Russia, the Middle East (including the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait), Eastern Europe, Africa, and Mongolia are subjected to systematic exploitation, long working hours, constant surveillance, and excessive wage deductions.

Workers labor for extended hours nearly every day with little to no time off. They are required to hand over 70 percent or more of their earnings in some cases as much as 90 percent to the state, under the labels of "state planning quotas" and administrative fees.²¹

¹⁹ Interview June 25, 2026

²⁰ Interview June 2026

²¹ 2024 Report on North Korean Human Rights, Department of Unification ROK

Lee Eun-seok (a pseudonym),²² who was dispatched to Russia as a soldier and worked as a construction laborer, said he was promised that \$100 per month would be recorded and settled in full upon his return home, but he ultimately received nothing after defecting. He also noted that, given the military nature of the assignment, officers served as site managers, and he was never once given any explanation regarding deductions such as state remittance fees or room and board costs.

Other interviews reveal²³ a multi-layered structure of exploitation in the wages of overseas dispatched workers. When Kim Il-sung established the Foreign Construction Agency (대외건설), he set a cap on overseas workers' monthly wages at under \$200; in practice, \$100–150 was recorded in the books, though this figure was merely nominal. The actual spending money workers received was \$13–20. The ledger operated on a deficit system, where absences due to illness or disputes with coworkers resulted in deductions—in some cases, workers who had worked a full year still ended up with a balance of -\$2,000.

According to one source,²⁴ workers performed labor worth \$2,000–3,000 a month on-site, but the manager kept the full amount, recording only \$150–200 for the worker in the books.

At the Oman site, the per-worker quota was set at roughly \$520.²⁵ From this amount, around six categories of deductions including office expenses, management costs, and state planning fees were subtracted in sequence, leaving a final take-home pay of roughly \$100 per month, described by one worker as "about average." Even though this was not fully the worker's own out of the \$100, workers had to pay a cut to team leaders and squad leaders, plus additional bribes as a matter of workplace custom, leaving the actual amount workers kept at only about \$50–60. These payments were not book deductions but direct monthly cash payments.

The wage structure at Russian sites followed a similarly exploitative pattern.²⁶ Monthly take-home pay ranged from a low of 10,000 rubles (about \$150) to a high of 100,000 rubles (about \$1,500), and receiving even one-tenth of the actual value of labor performed was considered "doing well." The remaining nine-tenths disappeared through a multi-stage process of deductions. To understand how, it helps to picture the money as a chain that passes through several hands before it ever reaches the worker. It starts with the contract rate—the price the client officially agrees to pay for each cubic meter of work completed, set at 1,500 rubles (about \$16). But the company managing the North Korean workers immediately takes roughly half of that for itself, cutting the amount down to what's called the site rate: 750 rubles (about \$8). From there, on-site managers skim off a bit more, bringing it down further to what's referred to as the effective rate: 740 rubles (about \$7.80). This is, in theory, the amount that should go toward paying the worker for their labor. But even this reduced figure doesn't reach the worker intact. A series of additional deductions are taken

²² Interview July 2026

²³ Interview June 2026

²⁴ Interview Park Yoon Jae June 2026

²⁵ Interview Choi Myung chun June 2026

²⁶ Interview Park Yoon Jae, Kim Jin Sung

out one after another: a large cut goes toward so-called "state remittance fees"—payments the regime requires from all overseas workers; another share goes to higher-level authorities overseeing the dispatch program; the on-site manager takes a personal cut as profit; and finally, costs for food and various other miscellaneous items are subtracted as well. By the time all of these deductions have been applied, what's left for the worker amounts to only about one-tenth of what their labor was actually worth under the original contract rate.

Based on existing research and witness testimony, workers earning approximately \$1,000 per month would see roughly half go directly to the North Korean government, with around \$300 going to the local construction company manager leaving the worker with just less than \$100 a month. In total, more than 90 percent of gross wages are extracted by the state and intermediary managers.²⁷

- Two Payment Systems: Cash and Ledger/*Donpyo*

The wage system for North Korean overseas workers has the appearance of a standard monthly salary. In practice,²⁸ it operates as a multi-layered system of state-engineered extraction.

Settlement through "money certificates" (돈표)

Workers at overseas worksites are, in most countries and reflecting a more recent trend, reported to receive their wages directly in on-site local currency, in cash. In China and certain other locations, however, wages are instead only recorded in a ledger on-site, with workers not receiving the money in hand until they return to North Korea, where it is settled in the form of *donpyo* (money certificates).

Under this ledger-based system, workers who are required to live in group housing have their wages collected and held in full by a supervising manager rather than paid out. Individual workers receive no physical cash; instead, their earnings are recorded only in a ledger. From that ledger total, a series of deductions are applied: housing, food, and medical costs, followed by political levies such as Party dues and "loyalty fund" contributions. In most cases, the balance remaining after all deductions is negligible, and workers can go through years of overseas deployment without accumulating any meaningful savings.

By contrast, where workers are paid in cash on-site, any money they manage to save and bring back with them into North Korea effectively becomes a form of personal wealth accumulation, a rare opportunity by North Korean standards. This saved cash is often reinvested as bribe money or seed capital to secure a future overseas dispatch, feeding into the broader cycle in which workers who have already completed one deployment are far better positioned to lobby for the next.

For workers under the ledger-based system, whether they receive *donpyo* at all appears to depend on regional and organizational discretion. Some managers settle in cash, in dollars, the night before departure; others promise to pay "once you're back in

²⁷ Based on interviews with North Korean defectors who formerly worked overseas, conducted in June–July

²⁸ Interview Kim Jieun RFA defector reporter

North Korea," a promise that almost always turns into a scam, with managers later deflecting responsibility by handing over *donpyo* and claiming the state has already been paid. In effect, *donpyo* functions less as a legitimate settlement instrument than as a means of evading payment. Cash settlement before departure is considered the normal case; receiving *donpyo* instead is, in practice, tantamount to non-payment.

- 2.3 On-Site Surveillance Systems
 - Overseas Application of the *Saenghwal Chonghwa* (Life Review) System

North Korean overseas workers do not escape their country's political control system once they cross the border. The central mechanism that follows them abroad is *saenghwal chonghwa* (생활총화), the regime's system of mandatory self-criticism and mutual criticism sessions.

Saenghwal chonghwa is required for all North Koreans from the age of eight. In these regular meetings, individuals are expected to confess their own ideological shortcomings and criticize those of their peers. It is one of the regime's primary tools for maintaining political conformity.

Alongside this is *dokbohoe* (독보회), a mandatory morning reading session held at overseas worksites, in which a manager or official reads aloud from the teachings of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un, *Rodong Sinmun* editorials, or Party policy directives, intended to guard against any weakening of ideological discipline. At most sites, *dokbohoe* was held once a week,²⁹ typically during breakfast or lunch. Many companies, however, often skipped it altogether. In most other cases, whether the sessions were actually enforced or merely handled on paper depended entirely on the individual manager, security officer, and Party secretary overseeing the site with many simply processing the paperwork and letting workers focus on earning money instead. At one site, by contrast, the manager, security officer, and Party secretary were all described as "crazy," resulting in sessions being held almost daily.³⁰

The reason these sessions are so critical abroad is straightforward: working alongside laborers from other countries, North Korean workers witness firsthand how the outside world actually functions. They see foreign coworkers freely calling their families, receiving their wages in hand, and moving around freely after work. None of these are freedoms North Korean workers share. These contrasts alone can shake a worker's belief in the system. The regime uses *saenghwal chonghwa* and *dokbohoe* to counter exactly that, reinforcing ideological loyalty before doubts can take hold.

²⁹ Interview Lee Hyun Seong 2023

³⁰ Interview Lee Eun-seok June 2026

Supervisors receive special training before departure focused on cutting workers off from outside contact and preventing escape. Workers themselves are instilled with a guiding instruction: while abroad, you must live as if you do not exist.

Information blackouts operate alongside *saenghwal chonghwa* and *dokbohoe* as a second pillar of control. North Korea enforces a strict set of laws against overseas workers, including the Law on Rejecting Reactionary Culture, the Youth Education Guarantee Law, and the Pyongyang Cultural Language Protection Law, that prohibit access to South Korean dramas, videos, and publications. Since 2024, training related to electronic device surveillance has been further intensified. Workers caught in violation face repatriation or punishment. At worksites in Russia, security personnel have been documented confiscating workers' mobile phones entirely, imposing a 7 p.m. curfew, and banning the use of smartphones altogether.³¹

- Collective Liability and Mutual Surveillance

Another pillar of the overseas control system is collective accountability. North Korean authorities minimize the cost of surveillance not only by monitoring individual workers directly, but by institutionalizing mutual surveillance among the workers themselves.

Workers travel abroad in groups from the outset, accompanied by political officers who monitor their behavior and assess the risk of defection. Upon arrival, passports are confiscated and held by North Korean security officials, effectively stripping workers of freedom of movement.

This system of control revolves around three figures stationed at each site.³² The security officer (*bowiwon*) monitors workers and tracks any unusual behavior; the Party official educates workers ideologically through *dokbohoe* and *saenghwal chonghwa* sessions; and the manager is tasked with running operations efficiently while simultaneously preventing defection or unauthorized departures. All three carry out their respective roles while also monitoring one another and reporting up the chain, producing a distinctive, layered structure of surveillance. Beyond this, each of the three figures is said to cultivate their own network of informants—so-called "*ppurakji*"—planted among the workers to feed them information, adding yet another covert layer that captures even casual conversations and behavior among workers themselves. As a result, workers must effectively avoid drawing the attention not only of these three "bosses," but also of informants whose identities they cannot know, and within this same structure, workers are placed under an unspoken obligation to monitor each other's words and actions, and report anything suspicious to their supervisors.

The principle of collective punishment also functions as a deterrent against defection. Workers' families back in North Korea serve as a form of hostages. The knowledge that a defection will bring direct consequences for their relatives is one of the most powerful forces keeping workers in line. If one member of a work unit escapes, the remaining members face collective punishment, a practice that further reinforces internal surveillance within the group.

³¹ [North Korea: Regime maintains its control of society through bans on foreign media and cross-border communications, surveillance and repressive laws](#), CIVICUS

³² Interview Choi Myungchun, three north korean who was dispatched in russia June, July 2026

North Korean authorities are aware of these risks yet continue sending workers abroad for the hard currency they generate. Their response is to intensify ideological education during the deployment period and conduct post-return debriefings and screenings upon repatriation. Even so, the exposure workers gain abroad is not easily erased. After returning home, some workers pass on a changed outlook to their families, conveying the sense that taking care of oneself matters more than demonstrating loyalty to the state.

**Most interviewees who defected while working abroad had access to smartphones. Through these devices, they obtained information from the outside world, including South Korean media. Many described the moment they realized how abnormal their own circumstances were by comparison. For a number of them, this realization became a decisive factor in their decision to defect.*

- 2.4 Living Conditions: Food, Housing, Healthcare, and Safety

The living conditions of overseas workers constitute a human rights violation in their own right. At construction sites in Russia, workers have testified to living in crowded shipping containers infested with cockroaches and bedbugs, with no heating or cooling, and access to a shower as rarely as once or twice a year.³³ Workers assigned directly to construction sites are effectively confined to the same space where they sleep and work, with no ability to leave freely.

Housing arrangements compounded these conditions. Workers were typically lodged in repurposed shipping containers at the construction site itself,³⁴ with eight people sharing a room fitted with four bunk beds. Bedbug infestations were severe enough to make normal sleep difficult, and while companies sometimes brought in low-cost pest control services, the problem was largely left unaddressed in practice. When containers were unavailable, workers were housed instead in unfinished sections of the buildings, under construction basements, or ground floors with makeshift doors installed to create livable space. The number of workers per site fluctuated with the volume of construction work, ranging from as few as twelve to as many as twenty. Although sleeping at construction sites is illegal under local law, in practice, wooden beds were installed inside standard shipping containers, with six to eight workers sharing each one. When police carried out inspections, companies routinely paid bribes to avoid penalties, perpetuating the cycle. Food supplies at these sites commonly consisted of rice, oil, soy sauce, salt, potatoes, and onions, supplemented by pig skin discarded from slaughterhouses material otherwise intended for animal feed.

This pattern is borne out across worker testimonies about the labor itself.³⁵ On apartment construction sites, workers were assigned to virtually every stage of the building process: foundation excavation, concrete pouring for footings, rebar assembly, wall and bricklaying, plaster finishing, and exterior facade brickwork with little regard for specialization; workers were simply put to whatever task needed doing.

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ *ibid*

Working ³⁶virtually nonexistent. Some workers have been reported working 364 days a year while taking home as little as \$10 a month. United Nations investigations have confirmed cases where workers who failed to meet their quotas had their food rations cut or were subjected to physical punishment.³⁷

North Korean workers' interviews reveal a near-total absence of rest. *Kim Jin-sung (a pseudonym)*,³⁸ who worked as a construction laborer in Russia, including during the COVID-19 period, reported just two days off per year: New Year's Day and the day after. Even on New Year's Day, work continued until 9 p.m., something he described as management "showing great generosity." There were no Saturdays or Sundays off; his only opportunities to leave the work site were a one-hour window during site transfers and a brief outing to buy chicken on his birthday. Park Yoon-jae, who worked in Moscow during the same period, described a similarly grueling routine under a piece-rate system, where income depended on the amount of assigned work completed. He worked 18-hour days, waking at 5 a.m. and not going to bed until 1 or 2 a.m., with breaks only for meals before resuming work late into the night. Like Kim, Park's only real day off each year was New Year's Day, with occasional irregular breaks occurring solely when material supplies were interrupted or during host-country holidays.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR),³⁹ drawing on 183 testimonies, concluded that workers are forced to labor in conditions where they have no wages, no freedom of choice, no freedom of movement, no safety equipment, no access to medical care, no rest, no food, and no adequate housing.

Safety standards are essentially nonexistent. Workers are forced to operate in extreme weather conditions without protective equipment. In Qatar, a North Korean worker at a construction company CDC (Construction Development Company) died in 2015,⁴⁰ yet the company initially denied any violation of labor law. An estimated total of 112 North Korean workers died⁴¹ abroad between January 2015 and April 2016: 61 in Russia and 46 in the Middle East and Africa combined. The most common causes of death were illnesses like brain hemorrhage and heart attack, followed by safety accidents such as falls, and tropical diseases. An expert noted,⁴² this death rate is 320 times higher than the UK's and 53 times higher than the U.S.'s, based on ILO statistics, and pointed to poor heating/cooling conditions, over 15 hours of work per day, and inadequate medical treatment for injuries or illness as the main causes.

³⁷ [DPR Korea: Forced labour is institutionalized and dangerous, warns UN rights office](#), UN news

³⁸ Interview June 2026

³⁹ [Forced labour by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea](#), OHCHR

⁴⁰ [Qatari Construction Company Dismisses 90 North Korean Workers in Mass Layoff](#), VOA Yonhap

⁴¹ [Seven North Korean Overseas Workers Die Each Month on Average](#), RFA

⁴² *ibid*

Access to medical care is structurally denied to overseas workers. Injuries and illness are not treated as health issues but as obstacles to work. One worker testified that he was "living worse than livestock."⁴³

Contact with family back home is similarly restricted, occurring only a handful of times a year at most. Workers are generally unable to communicate directly; instead, letters can only be sent and received when another worker happens to be returning to North Korea, who then carries the letter home and brings back a reply on a subsequent trip.⁴⁴ This makes the frequency and timing of contact entirely dependent on the travel schedules of other workers, rather than anything resembling regular communication.

According to United Nations reports,⁴⁵ overseas workers endure extended deployments with their passports confiscated, their freedom of movement eliminated, their contact with family restricted, and their access to medical care denied. In most cases, repatriation is only permitted when a worker develops a serious health condition.

Among approximately 500 North Korean workers who returned from China, a significant number were found to be suffering from serious illnesses including tuberculosis, lung cancer, liver cancer, and mental health disorders.⁴⁶ North Korean dispatch companies had reported these workers' health status as "normal" to Chinese customs authorities and cleared them through border checkpoints using only a temperature check. This points to a broader pattern in which a worker's health is evaluated solely by whether they can continue to work, with workers effectively discarded once their labor has been exhausted.

Part II. The Pre-COVID Dispatch Structure

Chapter 3. The History and Structure of Traditional Dispatch Sectors

- **3.1 Russia (Pre-COVID)**
 - History and Structure of Russia–North Korea Labor Agreements

North Korea has been sending people to Russia for a long time. Long before North Korean soldiers picked up Soviet-era rifles on the battlefields of Ukraine, North Korean workers were already laboring on Russian soil.

Rather than integrating themselves into the local Russian community, these North Korean worker camps are essentially miniature North Korean villages. Sparsely dotting the empty landscapes of Siberia, in remote areas such as Tynda, Dipkun, and Tutaul, these camps are draped in North Korean propaganda and media, such as pictures, posters, and banners praising the Kim dynasty and buildings dedicated to indoctrination. For example, visitors to one abandoned camp discovered a building titled the Laboratory of Kim Il-sung Theory,

⁴³ Interview Lee Eun-seok June 2026

⁴⁴ Interview with Park Yoon Jae June 2026

⁴⁵ [Forced labour by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea](#), OHCHR

⁴⁶ [500 North Korean workers return from China with serious illnesses](#), RFA

where workers can learn about *juche* ("self-reliance") ideology and renew their commitment to the North Korean cult of personality.

In a 2011 VICE docuseries,⁴⁷ interviewed workers at these camps stated that many workers are middle-aged, in their 30s or 40s, sent on three-year contracts that can extend up to 10 years depending on skill level. Rather than coming here from personal motivation, they understand themselves as simply performing required labor to help enrich their struggling country. For example, at logging camps, they methodically cut down trees in the forest, bring the logs back, and put them into rail cars to ship out. The documentary filmmakers were denied entry into the camps, with the representative at an administration camp growing angry at their invasion of privacy and refusing to show them inside.

The chief of police governing one of these areas home to North Korean camps stated that the workers are paid and fed very little, living in smelly barns with dozens of people crammed together—akin to free labor. Some workers live in the mountains in "bang tongs," which are wagon-like campers, without ever getting days off for any reason. The workers uniformly claim that they are there to help their country. As time passed, the documentary noted that the camps had moved more infield, as if to escape such international notice and unwelcome visitors.

These camps did not appear overnight. Their origins date back more than half a century, to the height of the Cold War. North Korea began sending workers to Russia in a major way in 1967. That year, the two countries signed a timber logging agreement.⁴⁸ Under this deal, the sending of workers became a state-run system. North Korean laborers were sent in groups to logging camps in Siberia and the Far East. They were kept away from Soviet citizens. North Korean officials watched over them at all times. As payment, North Korea took a portion of the cut timber. At its peak, an estimated 15,000 to 30,000 workers were deployed at any one time.

The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, but the worker deployments did not stop. In fact, the program grew. North Korea was hit hard by the "Arduous March," a period of severe famine and economic crisis. Sending workers abroad became one of the most important ways for the regime to earn foreign currency. The types of jobs expanded too, from logging to construction, farming, and garment manufacturing. Workers spread across Russia. By 2016, an estimated 31,500 North Korean workers were living and working in Russia.⁴⁹

- Scale and Sectoral Breakdown of Pre-COVID Dispatch

Logging, the sector that first defined the Russia dispatch relationship in 1967, had declined by this period in relative terms, but had not disappeared. Workers in the Russian Far East and Eastern Siberia continued to be employed in timber operations, often in remote camps

⁴⁷ [2011 VICE docuseries](#)

⁴⁸ [Agreement between the Governments of the USSR and the DPRK on Cooperation in Timber Logging on the Territory of the USSR for the Needs of the DPRK National Economy](#), signed 2 March 1967

⁴⁹ [North Korean Labor Export to the USSR/Russia](#), Andrei N. Lankov

far from urban centers. These conditions, geographic isolation, minimal Russian-language contact, and dense surveillance remained the most extreme of any sector.

Construction, by contrast, had become the dominant sector by the 2010s. North Korean laborers were deployed to construct state infrastructure projects, commercial high-rise developments, and residential housing complexes across major Russian cities including Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Vladivostok.⁵⁰ Unlike logging camps, construction sites placed workers in closer proximity to Russian society, yet surveillance mechanisms ensured that meaningful contact remained strictly controlled.

Agriculture represented a smaller but notable channel, concentrated in the Russian Far East where labor shortages in farming and greenhouse operations created sustained demand. Mining also represented a limited but present channel during this period.⁵¹ Light manufacturing had also emerged as a sector by the 2010s, foreshadowing the warehouse and factory deployment patterns that would expand significantly after the COVID-19 period.

- **3.2 China (Pre-COVID)**

- Scale and Geographic Distribution of Pre-COVID Dispatch

North Korea's dispatch of workers to China had already reached a significant scale well before the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a 2013 estimate by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, approximately 19,000 North Korean workers were present in China at the time.⁵² That number grew considerably in the years that followed. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese quarantine authorities responsible for contact tracing showed that approximately 80,000 North Koreans were residing in Dandong alone, a major hub of the seafood processing industry as of 2022.⁵³ If 80,000 workers were concentrated in Dandong alone, the total number of North Korean workers across China is estimated to be at least 100,000.⁵⁴ The primary deployment regions include Dandong (seafood and food processing), Dalian, and Jilin Province, particularly Hunchun and Yanji, where workers are concentrated in textile and electronics manufacturing.⁵⁵ The majority of those deployed to these regions were women, many in their twenties and thirties seeking to save money for marriage.⁵⁶ North Korean workers are also widely distributed across the construction and IT sectors.⁵⁷

- Border Region Labor Conditions

⁵⁰ *ibid*

⁵¹ [Don't Let North Korea and Russia Successfully Evade Sanctions](#), Bruce Klingner

⁵² [North Korean Exports of Labor](#), PIIE

⁵³ Daily NK, ["Around 80,000 N. Korean Workers Reside in Dandong"](#)

⁵⁴ [North Korean Workers Officially Dispatched to China & Russia](#), HRNK Greg Scarlatou pg19

⁵⁵ [North Koreans in China: Marginalized, Exploited and Repatriated](#), CECC US Congress

⁵⁶ [Over 30 and You're a Spinster Who Can't Marry": Discontent Grows Among North Korean Women Dispatched Overseas](#), Dongallobo

⁵⁷ Ian Urbina, ["The North Koreans Behind Global Seafood,"](#) The Outlaw Ocean Project, 2022., CBC Marketplace, ["Canadian Brands Sold Clothing from Factory Suspected of Using North Korean Forced Labour,"](#) November 5, 2021.

Working conditions in the border areas around Dandong are essentially a form of imprisonment.⁵⁸ Workers are forced to work shifts of up to 16 hours a day, with less than one day off per month. Dormitories are locked at night, with 30 workers crammed into bunk beds in a single room. TV and radio are not allowed. Workers can only go outside in groups of three or more, and must always have a minder with them. Mail is read and monitored by North Korean security agents who write regular surveillance reports on the workers. *(There are accounts that in China, workers are able to communicate with their families by email).* Passports are taken away as soon as workers arrive. If anyone tries to escape or complains to outsiders, their family back in North Korea faces punishment. Of the 20 workers interviewed by The Outlaw Ocean Project,⁵⁹ 17 said they had been sexually assaulted by male North Korean managers. Wages are held by managers after deductions for food, electricity, housing, and loyalty fees. In many cases, workers end up receiving less than 10 percent of the pay they were originally promised.

- **3.3 Middle East (Construction)**

Since the 1960s and 1970s, North Korea has actively taken part in the Non-Aligned Movement, using the banners of anti-imperialism and national self-reliance to build strategic ties with countries across the Middle East and Africa. The diplomatic networks formed during this period went far beyond simple ideological solidarity. They later became key infrastructure for North Korea to earn foreign currency. When North Korea faced severe economic hardship after the end of the Cold War, the Middle East and Africa solidified into traditional dispatch destinations, reliable sources of the hard currency the regime needed to survive.

- Alleged Involvement in Qatar World Cup Construction Sites

In 2014, The Guardian⁶⁰ first reported that North Korean workers had been employed at construction sites in Lusail City, which would later host the final match of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. According to a report submitted by the Qatari government to the UN Security Council in January 2016, approximately 2,500 North Korean workers were present in Qatar at the time. By March 2019, that number had dropped to 70.

According to The Guardian's reporting, North Korean workers at the Qatar World Cup construction sites received as little as 10 percent of the wages they were owed or in some cases nothing at all. The North Korean government collects the workers' salaries directly. Workers are told they will be paid upon returning home, but the government diverts most of the money for state use.

The Qatar case illustrates how far North Korea's overseas labor system reached, extending even into construction tied to one of the world's most watched sporting events. Before international sanctions prohibited such labor exports in 2017, North Korean workers offered contractors in Qatar a cheap and highly compliant workforce, while providing the regime with a steady stream of foreign currency.

⁵⁸ Interview RFA defector reporter jieun kim

⁵⁹ Ian Urbina, "[The North Koreans Behind Global Seafood](#)," The Outlaw Ocean Project

⁶⁰ [Qatar's ambitious future driven on by North Korean 'forced labour'](#), The Guardians

- Sanctions Evasion and Use of Fake Identities

Before Choi Myung-chun, a North Korean defector who worked in Oman from 2017 to 2018, was dispatched,⁶¹ contracts there were signed under the North Korean company's own name ("Pyongyang General Construction Company"). But as international sanctions on North Korea intensified during that period, exposing North Korean personnel or company names became increasingly risky, prompting local operators in Oman to devise a workaround.

The method worked as follows: a North Korean official approached an individual from a family with strong connections to Oman's road construction authority, who was serving as camp manager for the company at the time. This Omani manager was installed as the nominal representative of a newly established local entity called "Wahatal Emarat." This entity then signed contracts with the actual construction firm carrying out the work, an Indian-owned company called "Kant-t" (or "Gant-t"). Worker visas were issued under Kant-t's name, and even airfare was covered through that company creating a layered structure in which North Korean companies and personnel never appeared on the surface at all. Choi stated that this arrangement effectively allowed the operation to circumvent international sanctions.

In terms of scale, the workplace in the Adam region, where Choi was assigned, alone had roughly 80 workers (growing from an initial 60). Despite this size, the local South Korean embassy in Oman was apparently unaware that North Korean workers were present in the country at all. Choi recounted that when he visited the embassy after defecting, officials there expressed surprise, saying they had "never seen anyone like this before."

- **3.4 Africa (Construction and Medical)**

- Historical Origins: Non-Aligned Diplomacy of the 1960s–70s

North Korea's dispatch of workers to Africa takes a distinct form compared to the Middle East. Rather than simply exporting construction labor, North Korea pursues a strategy of simultaneously seeking political influence and foreign currency through what is known as "Monument Diplomacy," the construction of national symbols and state monuments for African governments.

The key actor behind this strategy is Mansudae Overseas Projects (MOP). Originally established in the 1970s as the overseas division of the Mansudae Art Studio, MOP mobilizes thousands of artists and technicians to construct socialist realist monuments and public infrastructure. It has carried out projects in at least 17 countries. Most of these countries had ties to socialism in the past, and in some cases, MOP's monuments have also helped reinforce authoritarian governments in power there. Africa alone has generated hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue. The African Renaissance Monument in Senegal standing approximately 49 meters tall, making it larger than the Statue of Liberty, cost \$27 million to build.

At least 15 African countries have awarded construction contracts to MOP. Its projects include the Memorial Tower, Peace Park, and Praia Park statue in Angola; a statue of former King Behanzin in Benin; the Three Dikgosi Monument in Botswana; an independence

⁶¹ Interview June 2026

monument in the Republic of the Congo; and statues of Patrice Lumumba and Laurent-Désiré Kabila in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.⁶²

The UN Panel of Experts⁶³ on North Korea identified MOP as a major sanction evasion tool, estimating that contracts in Namibia alone likely channeled tens of millions of dollars to the regime. In 2017, the UN designated MOP, along with three other North Korean state enterprises, as sanctioned entities.

- Overview of Pre-COVID Dispatch Structure

In Africa, Angola had the largest number of North Korean workers at approximately 1,000, followed by Senegal, Algeria, and Equatorial Guinea at around 200 each, and Ethiopia at roughly 100.⁶⁴ These workers were concentrated primarily in the construction and public health sectors.

However, the majority of African countries ignored the December 2019 repatriation deadline set by UN Security Council Resolution 2397 (2017). Tunisia was the only African country to submit a final implementation report. Most African countries that hosted North Korean workers including Nigeria, Congo, Cameroon, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe did not submit any report at all.

Even after sanctions, North Korea's construction network in Africa was not fully shut down. Recent reporting indicates that North Korean artists and construction personnel continue to enter African countries by transiting through China, operating through front organizations or entities under different names in order to conceal their ties to sanctioned companies.⁶⁵

- **3.5 The Original Southeast Asia Restaurant Network**

- Expansion Period: 2000s–2010s

North Korea's overseas restaurant network is believed to be controlled through trading companies under Room 39. On the ground, local middlemen act as nominal owners and handle day-to-day operations.⁶⁶

At their peak, around 130 North Korean state-run restaurants operated across East and Southeast Asia, and as far as Dubai and Amsterdam. On the surface, they were presented as showcases of North Korean culture. In practice, women selected and sent abroad by the government waited tables and performed songs and dances to earn foreign currency. The UN Security Council's North Korea sanctions committee estimated the network's total revenue at around \$700 million.⁶⁷

Most customers were Korean expatriates and tourists. During the 2000s, when inter-Korean relations were relatively relaxed, visits to North Korean restaurants were even included in

⁶² [Uncovering North Korean Forced Labour in Africa: Towards a Research Framework](#) by Tycho A. van der Hoog

⁶³ UN PoE 2018 [S/2018/171](#)

⁶⁴ [North Korea in the World](#) by NCNK, EAST-WEST CENTER

⁶⁵ [North Korean Workers Remain in Africa Months After Sanctions Deadline to Repatriate](#), rfa

⁶⁶ Great Leader, Dear Leader: Demystifying North Korea under the Kim Clan, Bertil Lintner

⁶⁷ UN panel of expert 2024 [un/2/2024/215](#)

Chinese package tours, and locations in Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenyang appeared in Korean-language travel guides.

The management structure was strictly centralized. Staff were selected in Pyongyang. Air Koryo flights from Pyongyang to Beijing regularly carried young women bound for restaurants in China and beyond. Most came from elite Pyongyang families and were carefully vetted for political loyalty. Contracts typically ran three years, and workers lived inside the restaurant buildings.

Most of the revenue was sent back to Pyongyang.

Former waitresses who later defected say workers were never allowed outside alone and were frequently reprimanded. Some experts believe the interiors of the restaurants were under constant video and audio surveillance.

- Selection, Training, and Dispatch Process

Restaurant workers aren't volunteers. They're chosen through a multi-stage vetting process that screens for political loyalty, performance skills, looks, and family background. Since early 2019, North Korea has systematically gotten around sanctions by sending workers in on tourist or student visas. A former North Korean restaurant worker who escaped from Phnom Penh and resettled in South Korea told RFA this was standard practice in Cambodia.⁶⁸

For many North Korean women, working at overseas restaurants is a dream they can only hope to realize one day. Rumors and stories spread that such work can lead to glamorous pay and a chance to experience foreign life, which entices many young women into applying. To stand out among the intense competition, one must come from the right family background,⁶⁹ be tall and attractive, and possess extraordinary skill. If they believe they've got what it takes, they partake in auditions run by the restaurant managers, where selection rates can be as low as 1%.

Once selected, the workers receive language education, specialized training in arts such as dance or music, and hands-on work experience in upscale Pyongyang restaurants—as well as the requisite ideological indoctrination—before departing for their assignments.⁷⁰

- Wage Extraction Structure (75–90% State Take)

Wages don't go to the workers themselves—they go to the North Korean state, with up to 90% of each worker's pay taken by the regime. Most of the restaurants' earnings are sent back to Pyongyang, while the workers sing and dance to keep customers coming. In the end, these restaurants aren't really restaurants in any normal sense—they're a structured mechanism for extracting foreign currency, with the workers as the means to that end.

⁶⁸ [North Korean restaurants violate sanctions, but they make big bucks for Pyongyang](#), rfa

⁶⁹ [What Happens When a North Korean Defector Visits an Overseas North Korean Restaurant with South Korean Citizenship: "I'm Still Scared..."](#), Youtube Channel 식

⁷⁰ [A North Korean Woman's Reaction After Kissing a South Korean Man at a North Korean Restaurant in Cambodia!](#), Yomicar Youtube Cahnnel

- Surveillance and Restrictions on Movement

Once they arrive in their host countries, they're closely watched and monitored by state security agents, only allowed to leave once a month or less, and always in groups of three. The agents reside at the restaurant and closely observe and take notes on the workers and send reports to the North Korean government, watching CCTV footage, and fostering an atmosphere of surveillance through peer pressure. For example, if the agent reports that a worker appeared too close with customers, the worker will face additional reprimands and education upon returning to North Korea. The workers are required to volunteer any information about unusual customer behavior and hand over any gifts they receive. Though many workers leave North Korea excited to experience authentic foreign life, they live in a microcosm of North Korea, surrounded by scrutiny and propaganda, with barely any real freedom. Some analysts argue restaurants are, after embassies, the regime's most effective tool for managing workers abroad; they're a place to hold passports and control money. Workers can't come and go freely, can't talk to outsiders without being watched, and aren't even allowed to hold their own passports.

Part III. What COVID-19 Changed: Lockdown, Isolation, and Forced Extensions

Chapter 4. The COVID-19 Shock and the Reality Facing Dispatched Workers

- 4.1 Isolated Dispatch Groups After Border Closure

In January 2020, North Korea shut its borders completely in response to COVID-19. Almost all flights were canceled. Foreign nationals and North Korean citizens were banned from entering the country. Special quarantine facilities were set up along the border to handle cargo coming in from China and Russia.

UN Security Council Resolution 2397, passed in December 2017, required all countries to send North Korean workers home by December 2019. International sanctions on North Korea had been growing since its first nuclear test in 2006, tightening with each test that followed. Resolution 2397 was the strictest measure yet. When the COVID-19 border closure came shortly after, North Korean workers abroad were caught between two pressures: sanctions that had already ordered them home, and a border that made going home impossible.

- 4.2 Treatment During Quarantine and Communication Blackouts

After the border closed, conditions for workers stranded abroad got much worse. Factories shut down and work dried up. Workers in the Dandong area were left surviving on a little more than rice and kimchi, according to RFA.⁷¹ With nowhere to turn, some were reduced to begging Chinese employers for any work they could find. They had almost no personal

⁷¹ [North Korean Workers Stranded in China After Being Idled by COVID-19](#), RFA

savings; the system required them to hand over around 95 percent of their wages to the North Korean government.

Conditions in Russia followed a different rhythm. According to workers present during the pandemic, operations came to a complete halt at the height of the outbreak, though the disruption was often brief. In Russia, construction was suspended for roughly a week before work resumed as if nothing had happened.

Kim Jin-sung, who was dispatched in Russia at the time, recalled⁷² that security officers themselves were left unsure how to respond, uncertain whether an infected worker should be killed, transferred to the embassy, or simply isolated on-site. Because many workers already suffered from tuberculosis or hepatitis, taking anyone to a hospital risked exposing their conditions to the Russian medical system, which could have led to the entire company being expelled. COVID-positive workers, similarly, had no access to local hospitals at all.

Lee Eun-seok, who also was in Russia at the time, pointed⁷³ to a different set of pressures. Production quotas and work methods remained unchanged from the pre-pandemic period. Workers were initially instructed to wear masks, but masks themselves were in short supply and had to be purchased at inflated prices. A roughly one-week quarantine period was imposed, but even after it ended, chronic labor shortages at the construction site meant the pressure to meet quotas resumed immediately, forcing workers back to the job.

According to these accounts, none of the North Korean workers living and working together were confirmed to have contracted COVID-19—a fact that, ironically, underscores just how isolated these workers had already been living and working even before the pandemic began. Within his own unit, Lee, Park and Kim reported no confirmed cases, and no clear guidance existed on what punishment, if any, would follow an infection, beyond a vague instruction to "be careful not to catch it."

The disruption also gave North Korean authorities a new reason for alarm: that isolated, unpaid workers might use the chaos to flee. In December 2021, Daily NK reported⁷⁴ that authorities were tightening surveillance over stranded workers out of fear they might defect, describing the controls as increasingly brutal. In Russia, North Korean authorities reportedly offered bounties of up to \$10,000 for information leading to the capture of workers who had escaped, and asked Russian police to help track them down across cities including Vladivostok, Nakhodka, Khabarovsk, and Ussuriysk.⁷⁵

- 4.3 Inability to Return Home and Forced Contract Extensions

Even as the pandemic eased around the world,⁷⁶ North Korea was slow to reopen. The border restrictions were not officially lifted until August 2023. Contact with family back home was effectively cut off. North Korean authorities tightly controlled all outside communication throughout the lockdown. By that point, a North Korean worker that the author of this report

⁷² Interview June 2026

⁷³ Interview July 2026

⁷⁴ [Brutal North Korean Control Methods: 'Those Who Attempt to Defect Abroad Will Never Walk Again](#), Daily NK

⁷⁵ [Russia grounds plane, arrests North Korean mother and son on the run](#), RFA

⁷⁶ KCNA 2023 8.27

met in Senegal in 2024 had not been home in over eight years. Overseas contracts are typically two to three years long, five at the most, but the prolonged lockdown meant cases like this worker's became far from rare.

- 4.4 Post-COVID Re-Dispatch Flows (2022–Present)

Then Russia invaded Ukraine. As the war dragged on, Russia faced a serious shortage of male labor. What had started as weapons, supplies, and troop deployments from North Korea gradually expanded to include workers. Facing international sanctions itself, Russia initially brought North Korean workers in, under the guise of student visas, but has since moved to issuing work visas openly.

China has followed a similar path. Despite the international sanctions regime, Beijing has effectively looked the other way as North Korea resumed sending new workers using the broader global crisis as cover.

- 4.5 Structural Shifts in the Dispatch System: What Was Reinforced and What Emerged

The pandemic and sanctions hit at the same time, and the combination pushed North Korea's dispatch system in two directions. First, control over workers tightened. With the risk of defection higher than ever, the surveillance and punishment system became more severe. In particular, monitoring systems along the North Korea–China border were expanded, including the installation and upgrading of surveillance cameras, increased patrol coordination, and greater integration of digital monitoring technologies to detect and prevent illegal crossings.⁷⁷ Second, the regime's dependence on cash from overseas labor was reconfirmed. North Korean IT workers and hackers were raising funds for the nuclear and missile programs through cryptocurrency, but moving virtual assets directly into North Korea had its limits. Physical cash from dispatched workers remained irreplaceable.

The UN Security Council Panel of Experts reported⁷⁸ in March 2024 that approximately 100,000 North Korean workers were overseas as of 2023, earning around \$500 million a year across 40 countries. Despite everything COVID had disrupted, the dispatch system was still very much alive.

Part IV. Post-COVID Priority Destinations: Russia and China

Chapter 5. Russia: War-Driven Demand, North Korean Supply

- 5.1 Russia–North Korea Labor Agreements

Even earlier in the war, conditions were already emerging that made expanded North Korean labor deployment to Russia a plausible development, particularly given Russia's wartime labor shortages and North Korea's need for foreign currency. In June 2025, Russian

⁷⁷ [North Korea spent the pandemic building a huge border wall](#), Reuters

⁷⁸ UN Doc. [S/2024/215](#) (March 7, 2024)

Security Council Secretary Shoigu traveled to Pyongyang. Right after meeting with Kim Jong-un, he made an announcement: 1,000 combat engineers and 5,000 military construction workers, 6,000 in total, would be sent to Kursk.⁷⁹ The stated purpose was rebuilding war-damaged infrastructure and clearing landmines. Notably, this was separate from the combat troop deployment to Kursk that began in late 2024; this contingent was dispatched for labor, not warfare.

It had been six years since the UN Security Council banned the overseas dispatch of North Korean workers. This was, in effect, a public declaration that Russia and North Korea intended to ignore international sanctions entirely.

- 5.2 Covert Dispatch Operations Following UN Sanctions (UNSCR 2397)

Russia had been one of the six parties at the denuclearization talks between 2003 and 2007, and after the 2017 UN sanctions, it at least kept up the appearance of no longer accepting North Korean workers. In December 2019, ten days before the repatriation deadline, Russian Foreign Ministry official Pyotr Ilyichev told reporters: "We implement all resolutions on time. The process is underway."⁸⁰ Train tickets on the Russia-North Korea route sold out through year's end, and Air Koryo increased its Pyongyang-Vladivostok flights to five times the normal frequency. On the surface, it looked like compliance.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the situation. North Korea's unprecedented border closure temporarily halted worker dispatches, but North Koreans already in Russia stayed on through tourist visas and other workarounds, and Russian authorities looked the other way. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 sent its labor shortage into freefall, the two countries began bringing North Korean workers back in earnest, using student, family visit, tourism, and training visas as cover.

The labor shortage driving Russia's demand for North Korean workers runs deep. Since the invasion, more than one million Russians have left the country, and around 300,000 have been mobilized to the front. According to an analysis by the Higher School of Economics (HSE),⁸¹ Russia's labor shortage reached a record 2.6 million workers by late 2024, up 17 percent from the previous year. The worst-hit sectors are manufacturing (391,000 jobs), retail and wholesale trade (347,000), and transportation (219,000). Partial mobilization pulled some 300,000 working-age men into the military, another 650,000 to 1.1 million fled abroad to avoid conscription, and tightened immigration enforcement slashed the inflow of Central Asian migrant workers.⁸² The severity of the situation has been acknowledged at the highest levels. In July 2025, Labor Minister Anton Kotyakov told President Putin at a Kremlin meeting on demographic policy that "by 2030 we need to bring 10.9 million people into the economy," warning that even under optimistic projections, a shortage of 2.4 to 3.1 million workers is unavoidable.⁸³

⁷⁹ interfax [КНДР направит тысячи саперов и военных строителей для восстановления Курской области](#)

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ [Russia faces record 2.6 million worker shortage amid war recruitment](#), the Kyiv independent

⁸² ["Russia's Big Economic Problem: Not Enough Workers"](#), The Wall Street Journal, June 15, 2023

⁸³ [Russia's Economy Faces a New Crisis: A Demographics Time Bomb](#), National Security Journal

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) sees North Korean workers as playing a role that goes beyond simply filling vacant jobs. By taking civilian positions, North Korean workers free up Russian workers to be redirected to defense industries or deployed to the front—meaning Pyongyang's labor exports are becoming structurally embedded in Moscow's war economy.

Videos shot by South Korean travel YouTubers have provided vivid on-the-ground evidence that North Korean workers are still active across Russia. In January 2025, Lee Jong-hwa, who runs the YouTube channel "[Jongjiong Geoleum](#) (쫘쫘걸음),"⁸⁴ came across a group of 40 to 50 North Korean women at Vladivostok International Airport. Wearing portraits of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il on their lapels, they sat clustered together and appeared to be workers. "Their complexions looked really poor, and some of them had blank, unfocused eyes," Lee said. When two North Korean men noticed him filming, they approached and demanded to check his camera, telling him: "Show us the footage if you don't want trouble in Russia."

North Korean workers who have re-entered Russia are operating across a widening range of sectors under the cover of a sanctions regime that has effectively stopped functioning. From large-scale apartment construction to small interior renovation jobs to positions at local businesses, the forms of employment are becoming increasingly varied. Rather than being confined to specific industries or regions, these workers are seeping into the fabric of everyday Russian economic life.



[North Koreans working at Wildberries, by Russian Social Media]

The re-entry of North Korean workers into Russia is not limited to construction work. In 2025, there have been growing signs that their activities are expanding into distribution and logistics. In February 2025, information began circulating on a Telegram channel⁸⁵ in

⁸⁴ [North Korean Men Threaten South Korean YouTuber at Vladivostok Airport: "If You Don't Want a Funeral...", RFA](#)

⁸⁵ [RTVI, Осторожно, новости](#)

Russia's Ryazan region, 100 North Korean women were undergoing training for warehouse work under the supervision of five managers. Then on April 14, a video posted to a Telegram channel for employees of a warehouse in Elektrostal, Moscow Oblast, revealed that 180 foreign workers, most of them young women, had begun working there. Eyewitnesses reported Korean-language notices posted inside the warehouse. The workers were said to be living inside a facility owned by *Wildberries*, Russia's largest e-commerce platform, with a separate section reserved for them in the cafeteria. A Moscow civic group, citing former *Wildberries* employees, claimed that "hundreds" of North Koreans were working at the warehouse.

Pro-Kremlin Telegram channels followed on April 21 and 22 with posts openly praising *Wildberries* for bringing in North Korean workers. The tone was telling. According to ISW, Russian military bloggers praised North Korean workers as "more disciplined than Central Asian migrants, willing to work longer hours for less pay, and with no intention of settling permanently in Russia." ISW analyzed this as an extension of Russia's far-right, xenophobic discourse targeting Central Asian migrant communities. The fact that Russian authorities are using propaganda channels to publicly justify the influx of North Korean labor suggests this goes beyond private employment; it points to a state-level operation. *Wildberries* responded only with a boilerplate statement that its logistics centers "are operated by Russian citizens, and some facilities in Moscow Oblast may employ workers from Eurasian Economic Union countries." The company declined to answer whether it directly employs North Korean nationals.

- 5.3 Post-COVID Repatriation and Re-Dispatch Trends (2022–Present)

Under UN Security Council Resolution 2397 (2017), Russia was required to stop employing North Korean workers as of December 22, 2019. Russian authorities acknowledged that around 2,500 workers remained in the country at the time, citing limited flight options as the reason full repatriation was not possible.⁸⁶

But even as the number of workers officially declined, the number of people entering on student visas went up.⁸⁷ According to Russia's Ministry of Education and Science, North Korean students in Russia numbered 146 as of October 2019—up 70 percent from 84 the previous year—and in the third quarter of that year, more than 2,000 people entered under educational visas. The direct cause was a change in Russian law allowing student visa holders to work without a separate permit. The form was study. The reality was labor.

This pattern continued. The ISW cited official Russian statistics⁸⁸ showing that 13,221 North Koreans entered Russia in 2024—twelve times the figure from the previous year. More than half of them, 7,887, arrived on student visas. The peak period for these North Korean "students" entering Russia came just months before North Korean troops began deploying there.

⁸⁶ [Due to UN Security Council sanctions, around 2,500 North Korean overseas workers remain in Russia, while the number of students has actually increased](#), BBC

⁸⁷ *ibid*

⁸⁸ [Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment](#), February 9, 2025

That this student visa system was not a matter of individual brokers cutting corners, but a state-level operation, is confirmed by contract documents that have since come to light.

Договор

계 약 서

Номер: KTC-120325

Дата: 12.03.2025г

계약번호: KTC-120325

계약일자: 2025년 3월 12일

Корейская торговая компания «Кёнхын - 1», именуемая в дальнейшем Сторона "А", адрес юридического лица: Чилгол 2-дон, район Мангендэ, г. Пхеньян, КНДР в лице Директора Ким Чол Зин, и российская компания «Индивидуальный предприниматель Никифоров Иван Павлович» (сокращенное наименование - ООО «ИП Никифоров И.П»), именуемое в дальнейшем Сторона "Б", адрес юридического лица: Российская Федерация, Ивановская область, г. Иваново, ул. Сакко, д. 3, кв. 70, в лице директора Никифоров Иван Павлович, действующей на основании Устава, с другой стороны, совместно именуемые Стороны установили отношения о взаимном сотрудничестве в области обработки одежды и на учебно-производственной практики путем дружественных переговоров, основанных на принципах взаимного уважения и доверия, равенства и взаимной выгоды, заключили следующий договор.

조선민주주의인민공화국 평양시 만경대구역 칠골2동에 법적주소를 두고있는 조선경흥1무역회사 법인 김철진사장(이 아래부터는 《가》측이라고 함.)과 로씨야연방 이와노보주 이와노보시 짜크코저리 3번지 70호실에 법적주소를 두고있는 사영기업회사 니끼포르브 이완 빠블로위치(략칭-《이베 니끼포르브 이베》) 법인 니끼포르브 이완 빠블로위치(이 아래부터는 《나》측이라고 한다.)는 호상 존중과 신뢰, 평등과 호혜의 원칙에 기초한 우호적인 협상을 통하여 교육생산실습형태로 피복임가공에서의 호상협조를 위하여 다음과 같이 계약한다.

<Source: dallas park>A February 2026 report by Dallas Analytics,⁸⁹ a Ukraine-based private intelligence firm, offers a concrete example. Dallas obtained and analyzed email correspondence belonging to *Aliaksei Adamovich*, commercial director of a front subsidiary of *MAZ Belarus's* largest truck manufacturer. The emails contained a five-year contract between a North Korean state-owned company based in Chilgol, on the outskirts of Pyongyang, and a Russian private businessman named *Ivan Pavlovich Nikiforov*. But the payment structure written into the contract immediately raises questions. The contract called for dispatching 460 North Korean "scholarship students" learning garment manufacturing to Ivanovo, a Russian textile city. But despite being labeled as "scholarship students," the payment structure written into the contract bears no resemblance to a student stipend. It specifies a monthly pay of \$700 for a "director," \$600 for a "deputy director," \$550 for an "interpreter," and a minimum of \$500 for garment-trade "students"—figures that immediately raise questions about a legitimate vocational training program.

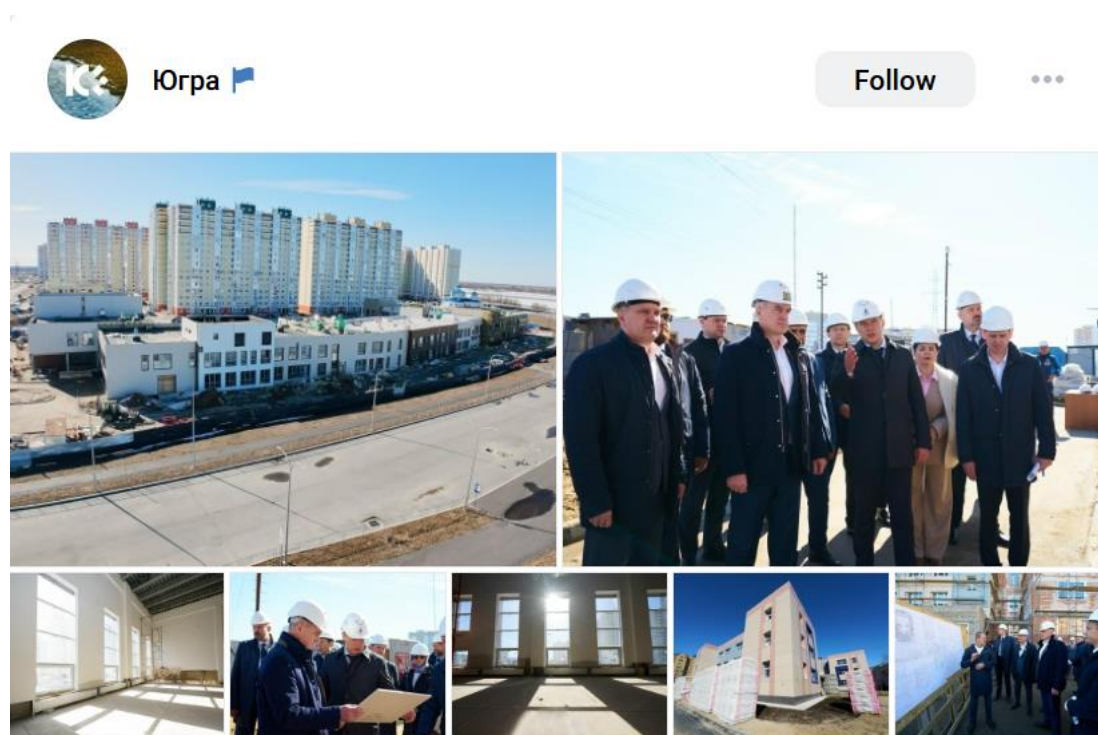
The organization running this system on the ground inside Russia is the Multifunctional Migration Center (MMC). According to a June 2025 investigative report by The Insider,⁹⁰ MMC openly operated a scheme bringing North Korean workers in under the guise of "students on internship." MMC director Sergei Tkachuk personally briefed potential employers on the terms: employers paid around \$1,600 per worker to the North Korean embassy, plus a separate fee of 20,000 rubles (\$260) to Tkachuk for arranging the labor. According to the migration company, workers put in 11-hour days, six days a week, with monthly wages of around 60,000 rubles (roughly 210 rubles) per hour.

⁸⁹ [The Ghost Engineer: How One Man From Minsk Lubricates the Wheels of War](#), Dallas Park

⁹⁰ [Работайте, братья. Как в Россию в обход запрета ООН завозят трудовых рабов из КНДР](#), the insider

I directly reviewed MMC's Telegram channel and found that as of June 2026, demand for North Korean workers showed no sign of letting up:

- [May 4] Gulyona: "Requesting a quote for 20 North Korean workers for a food production company in Khabarovsk."
- [May 5] Tarkhan: "Requesting a quote for 25 North Korean bricklayers for a Moscow construction site."
- [May 5] Tkachuk: "We cannot provide North Korean construction workers this year. Currently we can only place female workers—seamstresses, packers, sorters."
- [May 14] Art: "Requesting a quote for 50 North Korean workers for a shift rotation in Khabarovsk, June–September."
- [May 19] Anastasia: "Inquiry about North Korean seamstresses."
- [May 21] Pavel: "Requesting a quote for North Korean seamstresses, packers, and general laborers."
- [May 21] Jeka: "Requesting a quote for North Korean female workers for factory packaging."
- [May 26] Vlad: "Requesting a quote for North Korean female workers as filling operators at a large factory in Moscow Oblast."
- [June 2] Elena: "Requesting a quote for 30 North Korean workers for a food factory in Moscow Oblast."



[Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Okrug (Yugra), VK Post]

The reality behind the cover stories also shows up in official records. On April 28, 2026, the regional government of Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Okrug (Yugra) posted on its official VK social media⁹¹ account that "specialists dispatched from North Korea" were working double shifts including overnight at a construction site for a correctional boarding school in

⁹¹ [Югра](#) VK

Nefteyugansk. This was not a tip from an anonymous source or an investigative report. It was a statement published directly on a Russian regional government's official promotional channel.

By 2026, even the pretense of cover had disappeared. According to RFA,⁹² a source in Vladivostok said North Korean workers were now arriving on three-year official work visas. A source in North Hamgyong Province confirmed that work visas had started being issued as of March. The age range of those being dispatched had also expanded—from the previous 20s and 30s to include people in their 50s, a sign that both Pyongyang and Moscow were casting a wider net to meet growing labor demand. Russia, already under Western sanctions for the war in Ukraine, appears to have entered a phase of openly dismantling UN Security Council resolutions altogether.

- 5.4 Wage Extraction and Working Conditions

Interviews with former North Korean overseas construction workers who worked in Russia and defected after experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic reveal⁹³ the harsh working and living conditions endured by dispatched laborers. Their testimony is consistent with previous findings documented by the GRC on North Korean workers in Russia.

According to the interviewees, workers routinely labored for up to 18 hours a day, with New Year's Day serving as the only day off each year. Living conditions were equally poor. Workers were housed in overcrowded accommodations infested with bedbugs, while food quality was extremely poor. He recalled eating even steamed pork skin, which in Russia is considered fit only for dog food.

The interviewee also described the severe emotional toll imposed by the system. He recounted the case of a fellow worker who returned to North Korea after completing a five-year assignment, only to discover that his wife had died three years earlier. Because communication with family members was strictly controlled, he had remained unaware of her death throughout his deployment.

Conditions became even more severe during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to one interviewee, workers who contracted COVID-19 were stigmatized as "traitors" for allegedly failing to protect themselves from infection. He recalled hearing managers discuss how infected workers should be dealt with, including comments suggesting that they should be killed, illustrating the extreme atmosphere of fear and coercion during the pandemic.

These accounts highlight not only the exploitative labor conditions faced by North Korean overseas workers but also the extensive system of surveillance, isolation, and political control imposed on them throughout their overseas assignments.

- 5.5 The Alabuga Special Economic Zone (SEZ): Drone Assembly and Worker Conditions

⁹² "[North Korean Workers Head to Russia on Official Work Visas](#)", RFA

⁹³ Interview June, July

The Alabuga Special Economic Zone (Alabuga SEZ) is located near the city of Elabuga in the Republic of Tatarstan and has emerged as Russia's largest drone manufacturing hub. Its main product is the Geran-2, a suicide drone adapted from the Iranian-designed Shahed-136, which has been widely used on the battlefield in Ukraine.

Plans to deploy large numbers of North Korean workers to Alabuga SEZ have been shown through multiple independent sources. A Telegram post by Ukraine's military intelligence agency (HUR) reported⁹⁴ in November 2025 that Russia planned to bring approximately 12,000 North Korean workers into companies at the Alabuga SEZ by the end of 2025. That figure partly aligns with a June 2025 NHK report, citing Western and Russian diplomatic sources, which put the planned deployment at up to 25,000. Labor recruitment negotiations took place at Russia's Foreign Ministry in late October 2025. North Korea was represented by a delegation from Jihyang Technology Trade Company, a state-owned enterprise.⁹⁵

Satellite analysis⁹⁶ by the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) found that construction of a large dormitory complex began around February and March 2025, roughly 1.5 kilometers west of the drone factory. The two buildings, designated numbers 12 and 13, were planned as multi-story prefabricated structures with capacity for up to 56 and 22 units respectively, with a combined estimated capacity of 13,840 people. This closely matches HUR's figure of 12,000, and strongly suggests the facility was designed with North Korean workers as its primary occupants.



[North Korean Workers in Alabuga, pictures taken by a source]

This report made contact with foreign workers currently in Alabuga. For their safety, their nationalities and the nature of their work are not disclosed. These sources reported that a significant number of North Korean workers were present at the site. One source stated that they occasionally saw at least 100 North Koreans at the facilities. Some appeared to be men working in construction, while most appeared to be women working in the factories. Starting in early 2026, North Korean workers began to be spotted. One detail stood out to the sources: the North Korean workers were never alone, and they did not use smartphones at

⁹⁴ [Moscow Plans to "Import" 12,000 North Korean Workers for the Alabuga SEZ](#), HUR

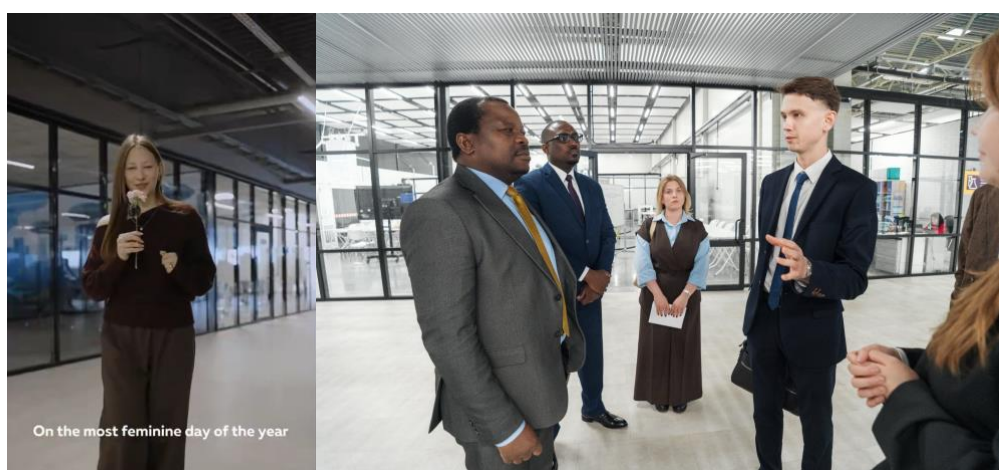
⁹⁵ [Alabuga: The Latest Destination for North Korea's Drone Ambitions](#), 38 north

⁹⁶ [Major Developments at Alabuga SEZ Point to Significant Expansion in Military Drone Production](#), ISIS

all. Everyone else at the facility used a smartphone except the North Koreans. However, no evidence was found that these workers are involved in drone assembly or drone manufacturing.

The Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Protection of the Republic of Tatarstan, a constituent republic of the Russian Federation and Alabuga Start Program, was contacted for comment but did not reply.

Nataliya Gumenyuk, a Ukrainian journalist and co-founder of the Public Interest Journalism Lab, said⁹⁷ "For many years, Russia has developed Alabuga as a zone for recruiting students and other workers, using deceptive tactics to lure in different kinds of people—both women and men, especially from Africa. Given this, there's no reason they wouldn't also bring in North Koreans, since it's cheap production and the work can be taught. Using that labor force is logical, particularly if the workers are paid little."



[Similar facilities to the one described above, as posted on Alabuga Start social media]

Chapter 6. China: Structural Complicity and Expanding Deployments

- 6.1 Official and Unofficial Dispatch Channels

As North Korea drew closer to Russia, sending troops and workers to support its war in Ukraine, analysts observed that its relationship with China appeared to cool. Some assessed that Beijing, wary of being sidelined and uneasy about the deepening Pyongyang-Moscow axis, was growing more distant from North Korea. Against this backdrop, in mid-2024, South Korean media reported that China had told North Korea to bring all its workers home.⁹⁸ China's Foreign Ministry quickly denied this, calling the reports "speculation and exaggeration." Less than a year later, the reality became clear: China accepted thousands of new North Korean workers, and deployments grew.

The reasons are structural. China faces a chronic shortage of low-wage factory workers due to an aging population. North Korean workers fill that gap. They live at the worksite, rarely

⁹⁷ Interview August 3rd 2026

⁹⁸ [China Orders North Korean Workers to Leave, Tightening Pressure on Pyongyang's Cash Lifeline Amid Closer Russia Ties](#), Dongallobo

miss work, never quit, and make no demands. Sanctions exist, but economic incentives are stronger. China's tolerance is a deliberate choice.

Deployments are ongoing. In early 2025, around 3,000 workers entered Hunchun, Jilin Province. In May, 500 more arrived in Dandong,⁹⁹ Liaoning Province. As recently as February 2026, local sources told RFA¹⁰⁰ that hundreds arrived in Dandong in separate groups, with another 200 placed at factories across Jilin Province. Most are young women between 17 and 25,¹⁰¹ many appearing to be recent high school graduates, assigned to garment and seafood processing factories. The garment sector alone accounts for an estimated 100,000 to 150,000 workers.

Several North Korean government agencies manage these deployments, including Office 39—the regime's secretive bureau overseeing money laundering, cyberattacks, and weapons programs. According to Ri Jong-ho,¹⁰² a former Office 39 deputy director who defected after running business operations in China, the standard monthly wage for a dispatched worker is around \$300, of which roughly \$200 goes to the North Korean government and \$100 to the worker, though supervisors sometimes take even that. By his estimates, China-based workers alone generate \$240~\$250 million annually for Pyongyang. Adding 2,000~3,000 IT workers operating across China and Russia brings the total to around \$300 million per year.

On the Chinese side, local brokers handle logistics openly. Recruitment ads seeking workers by the thousands have appeared on Douyin and online forums. At least one firm publicly described itself as "cooperating with the embassy."¹⁰³ In 2017, the Dandong Bureau of Commerce posted¹⁰⁴ official plans to build a garment factory complex using North Korean labor. Workers undergo up to one year of pre-departure training, with selection criteria covering political loyalty, employment record, marital status, and a minimum height of 155 centimeters.

The UN Security Council prohibits member states from employing North Korean workers. Yet the *Yomiuri Shimbun* cited sources saying local governments could not accept North Korean workers without central approval, suggesting Beijing's direct involvement. The paper assessed that the Xi Jinping government may be pursuing two goals at once: cheap labor and a stronger relationship with North Korea. Sanctions violations are continuing in plain sight.

- 6.2 Labor Exploitation in Border Regions

The reality of life for dispatched workers bears little resemblance to what their contracts promise. According to RFA sources, the standard monthly contract wage for workers in Dandong is 3,500–4,000 yuan (\$500–\$580), but most of this is taken by the party as a "foreign currency earning quota." Workers take home only 300–500 yuan (\$43–\$72). During

⁹⁹ [China Admits Thousands of New North Korean Workers This Year](#), Yonhap

¹⁰⁰ [North Korea Carries Out Sweeping Replacement of Female Workers Dispatched to China](#), RFA

¹⁰¹ ["North Korean Overseas Workers Shifting from China to Russia"](#), KINU Junguni

¹⁰² [INTERVIEW: Former 'Office 39' official on how North Korea finances nukes](#), RFA

¹⁰³ [The North Koreans Behind Global Seafood](#), The Outlaw Ocean Project

¹⁰⁴ [Canadian brands sold clothing from factory suspected of secretly using North Korean forced labour](#), CBC

the three-month probationary period, they receive just 200 yuan (\$29).¹⁰⁵ Field research by the Outlaw Ocean Project confirmed that workers receive less than 10 percent of their promised wages.

Working hours are brutal. Workers wake at 5:30 a.m., make their beds, clean their dormitory, wash, and eat—all before production begins at 7:00 a.m. Night shifts run past 9:00 p.m. and often continue until 11:00 p.m. The working day regularly exceeds 14 hours. During night shifts, workers receive a single piece of bread. Daily meals otherwise consist of rice and kimchi. Meat is served once a month as a special meal.¹⁰⁶

Control over workers' lives borders on imprisonment. They live in factory dormitories, thirty to a room, sleeping in bunk beds. Any outing requires a group of at least three people and a minder. Television and radio are prohibited. Passports are confiscated upon arrival. Mail is screened by North Korean security personnel. Workers who attempt to escape or voice complaints know that their families back home will face retaliation.¹⁰⁷

Sexual abuse is widespread and structural. Of twenty workers interviewed by the Outlaw Ocean Project, seventeen reported sexual assault by North Korean managers. Managers groped workers under the pretense of checking their uniforms, or summoned them to offices under false pretenses and coerced them into sex. Those who refused faced physical violence or additional wage deductions. Some managers forced workers into prostitution under the guise of state-assigned quotas.¹⁰⁸

At the end of this supply chain are Western markets. Field research identified at least fifteen seafood processing factories using North Korean labor. Since 2017, more than 120,000 metric tons of seafood have been shipped to over seventy U.S. importers. That seafood reached U.S. military bases, public schools, and the U.S. Capitol cafeteria through retailers and distributors including Walmart, McDonald's, and Sysco. Half of the factories identified held Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) sustainability certifications. In 2021, the U.S. State Department formally assessed that social audits conducted in China are generally inadequate for detecting forced labor.¹⁰⁹

In June 2026, President Xi Jinping visited North Korea, his first trip in seven years and the first since 2019. The visit marked the 65th anniversary of the Sino-North Korean Treaty of Friendship. In an essay published in the *Rodong Sinmun* ahead of the trip, Xi called for strengthening "communication, exchanges, and visits across multiple sectors and levels" and "friendly exchanges in flexible and diverse forms." This language suggests that practical cooperation between the two countries, including labor deployment, is set to expand. Additional placements of North Korean workers in China are expected to accelerate in the wake of the summit.

- The Helong Strike (2024): Background and Course of Collective Resistance

¹⁰⁵ ["North Korea Replaces Large Numbers of Female Workers Dispatched to China"](#), RFA

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*

¹⁰⁷ [Inside North Korea's Forced-Labor Program](#), NewYorker

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*

¹⁰⁹ *ibid*

On January 11, 2024, an estimated 2,000–3,000 North Korean workers at more than ten garment and seafood processing factories in Helong, Jilin Province, reportedly took collective action.¹¹⁰ According to major news accounts, workers dispatched by a trading company under the North Korean Ministry of National Defense learned that their wages during the COVID-19 lockdown period had been taken entirely by the North Korean side under the label of a "war preparation fund." They then seized managers as hostages and refused to return to work. Cho Han-bum, a senior researcher at the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), said¹¹¹ that unpaid wages totaled approximately \$10 million, representing four to seven years of earnings. This figure has not been independently verified.

According to the report, the strike lasted four days, ending January 14. One of the detained managers reportedly died. Some reports indicated that former female soldiers in their early twenties led the protest,¹¹² though this could not be directly confirmed given restricted access to the site. North Korean authorities reportedly dispatched consular officials and State Security agents, who were initially blocked from entering the factories. The situation was eventually resolved when authorities agreed to pay several months of back wages.¹¹³ Neither the Chinese nor the North Korean side has officially confirmed how the incident was resolved.

A protest of this scale among North Korean workers is considered virtually unprecedented. Researchers say the episode exposes a structural vulnerability in North Korea's overseas labor system: workers have no mechanism to recover wages withheld by the state, and no recourse when earnings are redirected as "war preparation funds." The full picture remains unclear. Media access inside China is restricted, and the parties involved have stayed silent. Much of what has been reported rests on indirect reporting and defector testimony.

- Beyond China: North Korean Workers in Chinese Belt and Road Projects

The labor cooperation between China and North Korea is not limited to Chinese soil. As China has expanded its Belt and Road Initiative across Africa and elsewhere, reports¹¹⁴ have emerged of North Korean workers being absorbed into those projects—workers already deployed in those countries who, cut off from legitimate employment by UN sanctions, have resorted to passing themselves off as Chinese nationals.

In Algeria, around 170 North Korean workers were reportedly deployed at apartment construction sites run by Chinese state-owned and private contractors, including Zhejiang Construction Investment Group and Oran-Beijing Construction. In Senegal, a state-owned enterprise from China, reportedly employed around 50 North Korean workers on an urban improvement project in Touba. In both cases, the workers were said to be posing as Chinese

¹¹⁰ [North Korean workers in China riot over unpaid wages, kill plant manager](#), sankei, yomiuri

¹¹¹ [Could reports of a North Korean workers' riot in China 'pose threats' to the regime?](#) SCMP

¹¹² [North Korean workers in China riot over unpaid wages, kill plant manager](#), Yomiuri

¹¹³ [Signs of rare unrest among North Korean workers in China, researchers say](#), Reuters

¹¹⁴ ["North Korean Workers Pose as Chinese to Get Jobs in Africa... 'Surviving on Salted Rice'", RFA](#)

nationals,¹¹⁵ the central claim in RFA Korean's reporting, though neither the Chinese nor the North Korean side has confirmed this officially.

Accounts of working conditions describe workers living in the basements of the apartment buildings they were constructing, with poor food. Monthly wages reportedly reached at most \$350, most of which was taken by North Korean authorities. These accounts were gathered under conditions of extremely limited direct access, and generalization based on individual cases has clear limits.

- 6.3 Defection Attempts and the Fear of Forced Repatriation

Even for North Korean laborers in China who have made the decision to defect, the path to freedom is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate and increasingly dangerous to attempt.

The most fundamental barrier is the border itself. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korean authorities¹¹⁶ have maintained a near-total closure of the country's northern frontier, effectively sealing off the route through which defectors once crossed into China. But for workers already inside China, the obstacles are no less daunting. Chinese authorities have intensified their crackdowns on undocumented migrants, while an expanding network of AI-powered surveillance technology¹¹⁷ has made it far harder for undocumented North Koreans to move freely or remain hidden. The financial cost of defection has also risen sharply, placing it out of reach for many who might otherwise try.

For those who do attempt to flee, capture carries a devastating consequence: forcible return to North Korea. In October 2023, Chinese authorities carried out¹¹⁸ a sudden, large-scale repatriation, sending more than 500 detained North Koreans back across the border. The move drew sharp condemnation from international human rights organizations, but did little to alter China's underlying posture. What awaits those who are sent back is grimly predictable. Defection is treated as a serious criminal offense under North Korean law, and returnees face the near-certain prospect of harsh interrogation, detention, or worse. For laborers weighing their options, this is not an abstract risk, it is a reality well known among those who work abroad, and it casts a long shadow over any thought of escape.

Against this backdrop, it is no coincidence that a significant portion of North Korean laborers deployed to China are women. Ju Seong-ha,¹¹⁹ a North Korean defector and journalist who has reported extensively on the regime's overseas labor system, offers a pointed explanation.

According to him, in earlier decades, Pyongyang dispatched tens of thousands of male laborers to Russia under the guise of logging work. Many of those men, willing to risk punishment, slipped away from their worksites and scattered across the country in search of better earnings. They were difficult to control. Women, by contrast, proved far more manageable. Before the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 2397, North Korea had

¹¹⁵ *ibid*

¹¹⁶ [North Korean defectors may face deportation by China as COVID border controls ease](#), NPR

¹¹⁷ Jang, Yang-gyu (2024). "Why Is the Number of North Korean Defectors Not Increasing?"

¹¹⁸ [China Forcibly Returns More than 500 to North Korea](#), HRW

¹¹⁹ [Over 30 and You're a Spinster Who Can't Marry": Discontent Grows Among North Korean Women Dispatched Overseas](#), Dongalobo

deployed more than 100,000 female workers to China and workplace defections among them were virtually nonexistent. The contrast with the male labor cohort is stark: while a meaningful number of men who worked in Russia have since made their way to South Korea, women who worked as laborers in China or Russia have almost never done the same.

Why women are less likely to defect is a question that invites multiple interpretations. Some point¹²⁰ to the strength of maternal bonds, the pull of children and family that makes separation feel impossible. The reasons, likely, are layered and complex.

But physical control also plays a decisive role.¹²¹ At light-manufacturing plants where women work in garment factories and similar cottage-industry operations, dormitories are typically located inside the factory compound itself. Workers live collectively under strict discipline, their daily lives confined to the same walled premises where they labor. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, contact with the outside world has become even more restricted, making escape or even unsupervised movement harder than ever.

But the calculus for Pyongyang is straightforward. Women are easier to manage. Women don't run. And in a system designed to extract maximum labor while minimizing the risk of loss, that calculation shapes who gets sent abroad in the first place.

This is not simply a matter of workforce composition. It is a window into how deliberately and methodically the North Korean state has engineered its overseas labor apparatus, selecting not just for who can work, but for who is least likely to leave.

Part V. Enduring Traditional Sectors: Dispatch That Continues After COVID

Chapter 7. Africa and Gulf: Dispatch That Persists Despite Sanctions

- 7.1 Post-COVID African Dispatch: Country-by-Country Analysis
 - Medical Personnel: Angola, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Democratic Republic of the Congo

¹²⁰ *ibid*

¹²¹ Interview with Kim Ji eun North Korea defector reporter RFA



[A North Korean doctor working in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and a North Korean anatomical chart displayed at the facility, Sources: Author]

Reporting¹²² by the author confirms that at least four North Korean medical facilities were operating in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), as recently as the time of reporting, staffed by more than ten medical personnel. The network began in 2006 with four workers and remained in place throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Operating under the banner of "traditional Korean medicine," these clinics charge \$10 per session or up to \$300 per month—effectively a foreign currency extraction operation targeting the wealthy, given that most Congolese live on less than \$2 a day.

The local medical association has flagged serious concerns. Problems include the use of unlabeled drugs with no manufacturer or expiration date, an inability to communicate with patients due to language barriers, and a risk of misdiagnosis from unfamiliarity with tropical diseases. The facilities are also unregistered with the local government, pay no taxes, and can relocate immediately if problems arise.

The deployment of North Korean medical personnel is a clear violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2397, adopted in 2017. Yet the DRC and a number of other African states continue to tolerate their presence, making no effort to enforce sanctions.

The DRC is not an isolated case. Several North Korean medical workers who later appeared in Libya have been traced back through multiple African countries, including Senegal and Sierra Leone. The same individuals moving across multiple African countries over several years were revealed by cross-referencing photos posted on a Senegalese health organization's social media in 2019–2020 with footage captured in January 2023 by local media upon their arrival at the Martyr Attia Al-Qassi Teaching Hospital in Kufra, southeastern

¹²² [Inside North Korea's Secret Medical Empire in Africa: The Kinshasa Report](#)

Libya.¹²³ Their activities included treating patients, performing administrative duties, and conducting joint surgeries alongside Libyan medical staff. The UN Panel of Experts has investigated these activities as a clear violation of Resolution 2397.

Their current whereabouts are unknown. The hospital's Facebook page shows activity following their January 2023 arrival in Libya, but posts related to the North Korean personnel disappeared around 2025. They may have moved to another country in the Middle East or Africa, or temporarily returned to North Korea before being redeployed, a pattern consistent with the rotating deployment cycle seen across Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Libya.

North Korean medical deployments present a distinct enforcement challenge compared to construction labor. Resolution 2397 mandates the repatriation of North Korean workers "earning income," but medical personnel can be framed as providing "technical cooperation" or "humanitarian assistance," creating interpretive ambiguity around sanctions applicability. North Korea has exploited this gap deliberately.

The DRC case, however, shows the reality bears little resemblance to humanitarian work. These clinics charge high fees and serve the wealthy, not the general population who are living on under \$2 a day. They operate outside government registration, pay no taxes, use drugs of unknown origin, and risk misdiagnosis due to language barriers. North Korea's medical deployments are, in substance, a foreign currency operation dressed in humanitarian clothing—another revenue channel designed to exploit the blind spots of the international sanctions regime.

- Construction Workers: Senegal, Mozambique, Namibia, and Gulf States



[Africa's Renaissance Status in Senegal Dakar, Sources: Author]

¹²³ ["North Korean Medical Personnel Operating Across the Middle East and Africa... UN Investigates 'Sanctions Violations'", RFA](#)

Senegal

Senegal has maintained construction cooperation with North Korea since the era of Non-Aligned Movement diplomacy. Between 2006 and 2010, Mansudae Overseas Projects—North Korea's state-run art and construction agency—built the African Renaissance Monument in Dakar, the largest statue on the African continent. The project has since become one of the most frequently cited examples of North Korea's overseas labor revenue operations.

Deployments continued in practice even after UN Security Council sanctions were adopted in 2017. Two North Korean construction firms operated in Senegal: Korman Construction and Kumrung. Korman has been identified as a renamed front for the sanctioned Mansudae Overseas Projects. According to VOA reporting,¹²⁴ at least 31 North Korean nationals were employed at Korman as of 2019. The UN Panel of Experts' 2021 report also noted that around 30 North Koreans who had entered Senegal may still have been present in the country. Multiple sources subsequently confirmed that North Korean workers were deployed at a luxury beachfront hotel construction site in Dakar.¹²⁵

Mozambique

Mansudae Overseas Projects was active in 17 countries as of 2015, and Mozambique was among them. The UN Panel of Experts raised concerns that Mozambique had contracted North Korean personnel to carry out maintenance work on surface-to-air missile systems.¹²⁶ The Mozambican government has not issued any official statement on the matter, and independent verification of the scale or conditions of any deployment remains extremely limited.

Namibia

Namibia represents one of the deepest and most contested cases of North Korean construction cooperation in Africa. During the Cold War competition for international recognition between the two Koreas, Kim Il-sung provided support to African liberation movements. SWAPO Party of Namibia leadership was invited to Pyongyang in the 1980s and received strong pledges of support. Namibia's founding president, Sam Nujoma, met with Kim Il-sung on multiple occasions before independence, and in return SWAPO publicly backed Kim's vision for Korean reunification.¹²⁷

This historical bond carried over into military and construction cooperation after independence. Mansudae Overseas Projects participated in the construction of key national facilities including the State House, Heroes' Acre, and the Independence Memorial Museum, as well as the Ministry of Defense headquarters and a military academy.¹²⁸ According to the UN Panel of Experts, Mansudae built an ammunition factory for the Namibian Defence Force (NDF) at the former Oamites Copper Mine site, approximately 40 kilometers south of

¹²⁴ [North Korean Construction Firms Operating Actively in Senegal... Deployed on Hotel and Housing Complex Projects](#), VOA

¹²⁵ [Stranded worker, closed embassy offer clues to lives of North Koreans overseas](#), RFA

¹²⁶ [Statues and ammunition: North Korea's Africa connections](#), cnn

¹²⁷ [A Monumental Relationship: North Korea and Namibia](#), East-West Center

¹²⁸ [Africa: North Korea Builds Munitions Factory in Namibia](#), all africa

Windhoek, between 2009 and 2014. Wages for workers on Namibian projects were paid through local banks, and Mansudae maintained an architecture and technical services office in Windhoek. The Namibian government agreed to terminate business activities with North Korean entities in 2016.

The Gulf Region

The Gulf states were a major hub for North Korean overseas labor. An estimated 6,000 North Korean workers were employed across the region, approximately 2,500 in Kuwait, 1,500 in the UAE, and 2,000 in Qatar under conditions amounting to forced labor.¹²⁹ Most were deployed at construction sites. Workers also staffed state-run restaurants, operated under surveillance by embedded informants, and were subjected to inadequate food and physical abuse. In the UAE, eight North Korean workers typically shared a 21-square-meter room and were provided minimal meals.¹³⁰

Wage extraction was systematic. Gulf-based North Korean workers earned around \$1,000 per month, of which roughly half went to the North Korean government and around \$300 to construction company managers, leaving workers with approximately \$200.¹³¹

Kuwait banned Air Koryo direct flights in 2016 and stopped issuing new labor visas. Qatar halted visa issuance for North Korean workers from 2015, acknowledged that "a small number of companies" had employed them, and stated that fewer than 1,000 remained, with no visa renewals to follow. By December 2020, 44 UN member states had submitted final implementation reports, with Russia, Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE among those reporting the repatriation of approximately 30,000 North Korean workers.

Common Patterns and Structural Features

Several patterns run consistently across these African and Middle Eastern cases. First, deployed personnel were recruited and placed almost entirely through Mansudae or its front companies. Second, historical and political ties between North Korea and host countries served as the entry point. Third, construction and military infrastructure were channeled through the same networks indicating a form of strategic cooperation that goes beyond simple labor export. Fourth, host governments have not permitted independent access to official records, making it extremely difficult to assess the true scale or conditions of deployments.

One notable finding from field reporting in Senegal is that the level of control over North Korean workers in Africa was relatively looser than in Russia or China. This appears to reflect both weaker oversight capacity on the part of host governments and a North Korean approach that prioritized maintaining relationships over managing exposure in friendly Non-Aligned states. Since COVID-19 and North Korea's subsequent total border closure cut off on-the-ground contact, the current state of these deployment networks across Africa has become blurred.

¹²⁹ [State-sponsored Slavery: a North Korean Export](#) by human trafficking search,

¹³⁰ [Thousands of North Korean Laborers in US-Allied Gulf Nations](#) The Associated Press

¹³¹ ["North Korean Overseas Workers ③: Backbreaking Labor in Kuwait, More Than 70% Confiscated"](#), RFA

- 7.2 Wage Theft and Labor Control in Africa
 - The Republic of the Congo Riot (2024): Collective Resistance Over Delayed Repatriation and Wage Theft

In early 2024, at a construction site in the Republic of the Congo, the word "repatriation" had long since ceased to be a promise for the North Korean workers stationed there; it had become something closer to a rumor. The deadline set by the UN Security Council in December 2019 for the return of all North Korean overseas workers had passed years earlier, and when the COVID-19 pandemic struck soon afterward, North Korea sealed its borders, extending the workers' stays indefinitely. For years, in some cases more than eight, they remained tied to worksites in a foreign land, unable to see their families' faces. For those who had set out on their overseas assignments with a single thought to endure a few years of hardship, collect their compensation, and return home as soon as possible to repay their families, the repeated postponement of repatriation tested the limits of endurance.

The Sankei Shimbun, citing multiple sources familiar with North Korean affairs, reported¹³² that it was precisely at this time that dozens of North Korean workers in the Republic of the Congo staged a disturbance in protest of unpaid wages and delayed repatriation. According to the report, although North Korean authorities were tightly controlling information, rumors of this first riot appeared to be spreading among the roughly 100,000 North Korean workers dispatched overseas, including those in China and Russia.

This report cannot, on its own, be treated as verified fact. That workers' repatriation was delayed for extended periods due to COVID-19 has been corroborated through multiple channels, and it is entirely reasonable to infer that discontent accumulated as a result. To date, however, no additional circumstances corroborating the report have been identified, nor have any tangible evidence, photographs, or video footage emerged. Neither the government of the Republic of the Congo nor the local media has confirmed the incident. In short, while the circumstances of the time lend the account plausibility, it cannot be established with certainty that the incident actually occurred. In this respect, it shares precisely the same evidentiary limitations as the large-scale unrest reported to have occurred in Helong, China, in January of the same year, discussed in Chapter 6.2 of this report. Notably, the two reports emerged just two months apart, from dispatch sites on different continents, pointing to the same underlying grievances: unpaid wages and delayed repatriation.

- 7.3 Host Government Awareness and Responses

Most host countries across Africa and Southeast Asia have shown little interest in enforcing sanctions on North Korean labor. From the perspective of local governments and employers, North Korean workers are competent, disciplined, and affordable, a combination that few other sources of foreign labor can match, and the political cost of hosting them is negligible. Violations are accordingly widespread, and they persist not because they are hidden, but because no local actor has an incentive to look.

¹³² [North Korean Workers' Riots Spread to Africa; Authorities Transfer 200 Home for Severe Punishment](#), *Sankei Shimbun*, KBS,

The author's own field research¹³³ tracing North Korean overseas workers in Africa confirmed this indifference firsthand. Attempts to communicate with host governments about the presence of North Korean laborers were met with a little more than polite disinterest. Part of the problem is structural: in many African countries, North Korean workers operate amid a far larger population of Chinese laborers and Chinese-run projects, and host authorities possess neither the capacity nor the will to distinguish North Koreans within that population, let alone to monitor or investigate them separately. But the deeper problem is one of preference, not capability. It was evident that locals and employers valued inexpensive, hardworking labor far more than they valued compliance with a distant and abstract UN sanctions regime. Nor did the conditions under which these workers lived and labored attract any official concern. Wage arrangements, freedom of movement, and working environments were simply not questions host authorities considered theirs to ask.

The result is an enforcement vacuum. In most cases, it is not the host government but the local U.S. Embassy that takes the initiative,¹³⁴ reaching out to host authorities and implicated entities with warnings about sanctions violations. Yet this substitute enforcement has clear limits: embassies must weigh North Korea-related sanctions against a long list of competing bilateral priorities, and their capacity to follow up to verify whether warned entities actually terminated their arrangements, or merely repackaged them is limited as well. In practice, the enforcement of UN Security Council resolutions on North Korean overseas labor in these regions has been delegated, by default, to the diplomatic missions of a single third country, operating with partial information and finite leverage.

Chapter 8. The Southeast Asia Restaurant Network: Diminished but Not Gone

- **8.1 Post-COVID Status of Surviving Restaurants and Geographic Shifts**

That changed with UN Security Council Resolution 2397, adopted in 2017, which required all North Korean overseas businesses to close and all workers to be sent home by the end of 2019. COVID-19 lockdowns then made it impossible to rotate staff, and a string of defections by restaurant workers drew international attention and pushed governments to crack down harder. Cambodia shut down six North Korean restaurants in 2019, and Vietnam's last one closed in the wake of the pandemic. Today only about 17 remain,¹³⁵ mostly in China, Russia, and Laos, plus one more in Hanoi, all operating in violation of sanctions.

The restaurants' approach to customers has also shifted. When inter-Korean relations sharply deteriorated in 2019, the Pyongyang Restaurant in Shenyang, China, posted a sign at its entrance stating it would not serve South Koreans. North Korean restaurants had quietly turned away South Korean visitors before, but posting an explicit sign like this was unusual. It's widely read as part of North Korea's broader shift toward treating South Korea as a hostile separate state, though no official explanation was ever given. Southeast Asian restaurants, however, told a different story. According to accounts from South Korean YouTubers who visited, North Korean restaurants in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos

¹³³ Interview with Africa entities who accused hiring north Korean workers, 2025

¹³⁴ *ibid*

¹³⁵ [Few customers but plenty of cash?: N Korean restaurants remain open in Laos](#), AlJajerra

remained fairly open to South Korean customers. In fact, they relied on South Korean tour groups as a key source of income.¹³⁶

Ironically, the taboo of a "no South Koreans allowed" restaurant became content fodder in its own right. Sneak-visit videos became something of a trend. YouTuber Captain Ttager (캡틴따거), who has 700,000 subscribers, posted one titled "Sneaking into a North Korean restaurant two years after the South Korean ban" and these videos ended up broadcasting the sanctions violations to a global audience.¹³⁷

The restaurants that survived responded by changing their appearance. Around 2022, the Pyongyang Restaurant locations in Vientiane and Vang Vieng, Laos, were rebranded as "Sindat BBQ," stripping away anything that linked them to North Korea. But inside, the staff were still North Korean workers speaking Korean.¹³⁸ In its 2018 UN compliance report, the Lao government declared that permits for North Korean workers "would expire by the end of 2018" and would not be renewed. Yet in March 2020, photos captured Lao Foreign Ministry officials and a North Korean delegation celebrating the signing of a "cooperation agreement" at that very Paktupha restaurant, a striking gap between official declarations and reality. The sign changed; the people working behind it didn't.

- 8.2 Links to IT Workers: The Restaurant as a Dual-Function Hub
 - Restaurants as Bases for IT Operations

The restaurants' role goes beyond just supplying labor. As customer numbers dropped after sanctions took hold, their role as financial infrastructure actually grew. According to Al Jazeera,¹³⁹ these restaurants function after embassies as the regime's main hub for managing workers abroad, holding passports and handling money, and were "always more than just restaurants." North Korea expert Joshua Stanton and Leiden University's Remco Breuker put it this way: the main reason these restaurants still exist now is money laundering, and IT workers are the best possible source of money to launder—it's a perfect fit.

- Restaurants as Cash Laundering Channels

The IT-restaurant connection isn't speculation. A 2022 UN Panel of Experts report documented the case of Oh Chung-song, a North Korean based in Dubai who concealed his identity to work through the freelance platform Upwork alongside fellow IT workers. When his identity was exposed in December 2021, he and his colleagues fled to Laos. The U.S. Treasury and South Korea's Foreign Ministry subsequently sanctioned related entities and individuals, including Jinyong IT Cooperation Company and the Laos-based Tongmyong Technology Trading Company. The Treasury estimated that each IT worker earns more than

¹³⁶ 캡틴따거, [한국인 금지 2년 후 북한식당 잠입기](#), [북한식당에서 생긴 일](#), Go Way, Jay itchy feet
[중국식당 간판을 걸고 영업하는 북한식당 방문기](#)

¹³⁷ ibid

¹³⁸ UN panel of expert 2024 [un/2/2024/215](#)

¹³⁹ [Few customers but plenty of cash?: N Korean restaurants remain open in Laos](#), aljazeera

\$300,000 a year, with the proceeds flowing directly into North Korea's weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programs.¹⁴⁰

Connections have surfaced at the level of individual restaurants too. A 2019 CNN report¹⁴¹ suspected that the Koryo Restaurant in Hanoi served as a base for a software firm called Future Tech Group, which sold IT products—including facial recognition software—to customers around the world. The restaurant has continued operating despite the allegations. A diplomatic source who spoke with Al Jazeera said cybercrime and cyber theft had surged sharply since around 2019 and now outstrip traditional revenue sources like coal, restaurants, and worker remittances. In his words: cybercrime proceeds have grown substantially, and there are signs that this has become North Korea's most important source of income.¹⁴²



[Security Alliance (SEAL) and Cookie Connoisseur]

There are also signs that North Korean IT workers operating under fake identities overseas have crossed paths with restaurant staff. The open-source cybersecurity research group Security Alliance (SEAL) and the researcher known as Cookie Connoisseur each posted¹⁴³ on social media showing North Korean IT workers who used fake LinkedIn profiles and forged resumes to seek jobs at foreign companies appearing alongside restaurant staff at a World Cup qualifier match involving North Korea's national football team, held in Laos.¹⁴⁴

North Korea's national team had been scheduled to host part of its 2026 World Cup qualifying campaign in Pyongyang, but for security and administrative reasons those matches were relocated to the neutral site of the National Stadium in Vientiane, Laos. The stadium became a rare public meeting point for North Korean IT workers and restaurant staff, and researchers have flagged this as a sign the two groups operate within the same overseas dispatch network.

¹⁴⁰ [2022 UN Pannel of Expert](#)

¹⁴¹ [The North Korean restaurant accused by a think tank of using software sales to bypass sanctions](#), CNN

¹⁴² [ibid](#)

¹⁴³ [Security Alliance](#) X, [Cookie Connoisseur](#) X

¹⁴⁴ [북 축구 대표팀, 카타르와 2-2 무승부...현지 식당 응원단 등장](#), rfa

Testimony from a former diplomat offers more direct confirmation of the link between the restaurants and North Korean intelligence. Ryu Hyun-woo, the former deputy ambassador to Kuwait who defected to South Korea in 2019, said on Channel A's program "Now On My Way to Meet You"¹⁴⁵ that North Korean restaurants abroad operated as outposts for the Reconnaissance General Bureau. He testified that the agency drove the opening of overseas restaurants as a way to earn foreign currency, and that the restaurants functioned not as simple eateries but as bases for intelligence and covert operations. North Korean IT workers are also believed to have substantial ties to the Reconnaissance General Bureau, and a structural link connecting restaurant

Part VI. Emerging Dispatch Sectors: Expansion Under Kim Jong-un

Chapter 9. IT Foreign Currency Workers: Digital Forced Labor

- 9.1 Structure and Scale of IT Worker Dispatch
 - Revenue and Workforce Estimates

North Korea's IT worker scheme operates on a substantial scale. The UN Security Council's Panel of Experts on North Korea sanctions put¹⁴⁶ the number of North Korean IT workers active abroad at roughly 3,000 to 10,000 as of 2023, while the Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team (MSMT), a coalition of 11 countries, estimated¹⁴⁷ the figure at 1,000 to 2,000 as of 2025. The financial scale is similarly significant: the UN Panel estimates the scheme has generated between \$250 million and \$600 million annually for the regime since 2018, with the MSMT separately putting each individual worker's monthly earnings at \$3,500 to \$10,000.

A CrowdStrike analysis¹⁴⁸ from August 2025 found that the number of foreign companies that unknowingly hired North Korean IT workers grew by 220% over the past year. This shows that even with stronger crackdowns, North Korea's infiltration is actually getting bigger, not smaller.

- Key Hubs: China, Russia, Southeast Asia, etc.

Most of these IT workers are based in China and Russia.

China repeatedly sent groups of hundreds of North Korean IT workers back home throughout 2024. Even so, China still has more North Korean workers staying there than any other country. Russia had an estimated 150 to 300 workers active as of early 2025. But North Korea planned¹⁴⁹ to send up to 40,000 workers (including IT workers) to Russia that

¹⁴⁵ [Now On My Way to Meet You](#), (이만갑) channel A

¹⁴⁶ UN Panel of Expert Pg 325 [2023 report](#)

¹⁴⁷ [The DPRK's Violation and Evasion of UN Sanctions through Cyber and Information Technology Worker Activities](#), MSMT 2025 Oct

¹⁴⁸ [crowdStrike investigated 320 North Korean IT worker cases in the past year](#), cybercoop

¹⁴⁹ [The DPRK's Violation and Evasion of UN Sanctions through Cyber and Information Technology Worker Activities](#), MSMT 2025 Oct

same year. Many of them entered the country using student visas meant for education, not work.

One key example is a North Korean IT company called "Song Rim," which is connected to the Munitions Industry Department. According to a 2023 UN Panel of Experts report,¹⁵⁰ Song Rim has an office in Dandong, in China's Liaoning Province. Since July 2020, the company has sold voice-phishing hacking apps and run many overseas servers and IP addresses to earn money. Dandong is the biggest trading hub between North Korea and China, and a major base for sending out IT workers. The Song Rim case shows that IT workers in this area have gone beyond simple outsourced work—they now develop and sell hacking tools directly.

Another company based in Dandong,¹⁵¹ "Kyonghung IT," made money by building gambling websites and illegally selling users' personal data. A company based in Shenyang and Dandong, "Korea Mangyongdae Computer Technology Corporation (KMCTC)," was found to have gotten jobs using fake identities even inside a Chinese regional hospital network.

In December 2024, the U.S. State Department named two companies as wanted, offering rewards of up to \$5 million through its "Rewards for Justice" program.¹⁵² The companies were accused of sending North Korean IT workers abroad and laundering money.

- Yanbian Silverstar Network Technology (also known as Eunseong Internet Technology): based in Yanji, Jilin Province, China. Led by Jong Song-hwa with Kim Ryu-song as head of Silverstar.
- Volasys (Silverstar) Technology: based in Vladivostok, Russia. Led by Ri Kyong-sik.

Both companies are accused of sending North Korean IT workers and managers to Yanji and Vladivostok. There, the workers posed as foreign freelancers and got jobs at companies around the world, including in the United States. The companies then laundered the illegal earnings and sent the money back to North Korea. Fourteen IT workers charged at the same time tricked six U.S. companies and two nonprofits over about six years. The U.S. Department of Justice estimated that around 130 IT workers from these two companies earned the North Korean government at least \$88 million in illegal profits during this period.

As mentioned earlier, North Korean IT workers are also believed to be operating out of restaurants in Southeast Asian countries near North Korea. Workers from a Laos-based company called "Chonsurim Trading Corporation" were found using stolen Ukrainian identities to get freelance jobs at U.S. and European companies, working on many blockchain and fintech projects.¹⁵³

One thing that sets IT workers apart from regular workers is how often they launder their identities through Southeast Asia (especially Laos, Cambodia, and other countries in the region), Africa, or even third countries outside Russia and China (using broker offices or

¹⁵⁰ UN Panel of Expert [2023 report](#)

¹⁵¹ [The DPRK's Violation and Evasion of UN Sanctions through Cyber and Information Technology Worker Activities](#), MSMT 2025 Oct

¹⁵² [Reward for Justice](#), Department of States

¹⁵³ [The DPRK's Violation and Evasion of UN Sanctions through Cyber and Information Technology Worker Activities](#), MSMT 2025 Oct

shell companies) before getting remote jobs at U.S. and European companies. In other words, their "physical location" is mainly China and Russia—but their "field of activity" stretches across the whole world through online platforms.

- 9.2 Distinguishing IT Workers from Hacker Operatives

One thing that often gets confused in news coverage about North Korea's overseas tech workforce is this: people tend to lump together two programs that are functionally different—even though they're becoming more connected over time. These two programs are the IT worker scheme and the state-run hacking organizations (most notably the Lazarus Group and its sub-clusters). This chapter explains how these two groups differ in how they operate, how they're organized, and how they're treated legally. At the same time, it also looks at growing evidence that the two are starting to overlap.

- ① IT Workers: Use of False Identities and Freelance Platforms

IT workers are basically sent out to earn foreign currency for the regime. In fact, even before COVID-19 and the UN sanctions on North Korea, these workers were already being sent to China, Russia, Southeast Asia, and other places to do IT work and earn money locally.

A North Korean defector, referred to here as "*Mr. A*" (*a pseudonym*), who used to work as an IT worker, shared¹⁵⁴ his experience of being sent abroad in the late 2000s to do freelance work, like editing and web development. According to Mr. A, workers at the time got legal stay visas and either took jobs at local companies through proper channels or found projects through freelance platforms (back then it was a site called "Elancer"; today it's more like Upwork).

The money they earned was collected by a team leader. Part of it was given back to the workers as living expenses or pocket money, and the rest was sent back to North Korea. Mr. A also recalled that, at the time, very few of his coworkers did hacking work directly. It was more common for people to act like "bounty hunters"—finding security flaws in software and getting paid a reward for reporting them.

United Nations Security Council Sanctions UNSCR 2397, which pressured member states into repatriating North Korean overseas workers, left the regime with little choice but to turn increasingly toward illicit online schemes as a source of income. This early style of work seems to have grown into a full identity-fraud model after COVID-19, when remote work became common worldwide. Today, the main method is using stolen or fake identities to pose as freelance developers on platforms like LinkedIn, Upwork, and Freelancer, in order to get official remote or contract jobs at U.S. and European companies. Inside this system, there's a multi-step chain: "recruiters," "local facilitators," "IT workers," and "collaborators/brokers." This looks less like a cyberattack group and more like an organized labor fraud scheme.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Interview 2023. July

¹⁵⁵ [Arizona Woman Sentenced for \\$17M Information Technology Worker Fraud Scheme that Generated Revenue for North Korea](#), DOJ

According to recently disclosed internal information from North Korean IT workers,¹⁵⁶ it has come to light that in recent years, various military and educational institutions within North Korea have been mobilizing the IT workers under their authority to expand these identity-fraud schemes, both securing budgets for their own institutions and remitting funds up to higher authorities.

- ② Hacker Operatives: Cyberattacks, Cryptocurrency Theft

Hacker operatives, on the other hand, run offensive cyber operations—things like cryptocurrency theft, ransomware, spying, and supply-chain attacks. The fact that North Korea trains an elite group of hackers separately first became widely known after the 2014 Sony Pictures hack.¹⁵⁷ These groups (Lazarus Group, APT38, TraderTraitor, and related designated entities) operate under North Korea's Reconnaissance General Bureau and North Korea military. They are blamed for major incidents like the 2025 Bybit hack (worth about \$1.4-1.5 billion)—the largest single cryptocurrency theft ever recorded. According to a Chainalysis report,¹⁵⁸ North Korea-linked actors stole about \$2 billion in cryptocurrency in 2025 alone (around 59-60% of the global total), bringing the total stolen since 2017 to about \$6.75 billion.

In the beginning, these two groups started out as separate tracks with clearly different training paths and missions: one group of workers earning foreign currency, and one group of elite cyber-warfare specialists. But as shown below, this line is getting blurrier in actual practice.

That said, this divide isn't absolute, and recent reports suggest the two are deliberately starting to merge.

Routes Aimed at Internal Access. Chainalysis's 2026 report¹⁵⁹ specifically points out a tactic where IT workers get hired at real crypto companies to gain internal access, which is then used later for theft. This is the point where the line between "worker" and "intruder" starts to blur.

Shared Infrastructure. It's hard to draw a clear line between where IT worker operations end and hacking operations begin. When both sides think infiltration is possible, they sometimes cooperate to carry out an operation—and in these cases, the hacking group tends to actually take the lead.¹⁶⁰

Shared Intelligence, But Separate Chains of Command. The IT worker organization and the hacking organization are not one single, unified group. However, they are likely connected at a higher level—the same parent agencies, issue orders or request information to both sides.

¹⁵⁶ DPRK IT worker salaries to Russia's war, DTEX

¹⁵⁷ [North Korean Regime-Backed Programmer Charged With Conspiracy to Conduct Multiple Cyber Attacks and Intrusions](#), DOJ

¹⁵⁸ [North Korea Drives Record \\$2 Billion Crypto Theft Year, Pushing All-Time Total to \\$6.75 Billion](#), Chainalysis

¹⁵⁹ *ibid*

¹⁶⁰ Interview with Cyber security experts, 2025

In other words, within North Korea's cyber-based foreign currency ecosystem, the two groups are organizationally separate, but coordinated from above by bodies like Office 39.¹⁶¹

Mr. A's testimony also supports this picture of convergence. He said, "I don't really think there's much point in drawing a strict line between IT workers and hackers." He explained that within the same team, people doing normal outsourced work could be pulled into a hacking attack if ordered to. He compared the mechanics of these hacking attacks to South Korean voice-phishing scam rings, saying that the real core skill isn't coding itself—it's the social engineering needed to trick someone into clicking a link. Because of this, he believes it's likely that program developers and the people in charge of distribution/social engineering worked together, with each handling a different role.

- 9.3 Living Conditions and the Coercive Nature of IT Worker Dispatch
 - Passport Confiscation, Movement Restrictions, and the Norma (Quota) Punishment System

Contrary to what's commonly believed, North Korean IT workers are exploited by the regime. Hackers are said to get somewhat better treatment than regular overseas workers, but the basic pattern of structural exploitation is the same for both. Testimony from a North Korean defector, interviewed by *Bloomberg*,¹⁶² backs this up. He said he lived in China with about ten coworkers, all graduates of top North Korean universities at the home of a wealthy Chinese businessman, where they made money by copying and selling commercial software. According to him, IT workers were given an annual earnings target (a quota, or "norma") of over \$100,000. Even if they hit that target, they were only allowed to keep less than 10% of it, about \$10,000 for themselves. Workers who met their quota got limited perks, like air conditioning in summer or time to play video games. But workers who missed their quota often faced forced repatriation, no pay, and in many cases hard labor. Every weekend, they were also required to study the ruling philosophy of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, plus the ideology of current leader Kim Jong-un. Living conditions were harsh. Workers often didn't get fed on time and went hungry, and some got tuberculosis. One IT worker in Yanji needed emergency treatment after a cockroach got stuck in his ear while he was sleeping. Another worker in Beijing was beaten badly by his coworkers, breaking all his ribs, simply because he had received kimchi from a South Korean businessman. All of this shows that under a system of passport confiscation, restricted movement, and strict quotas, IT workers are living in conditions close to forced labor.

*The New York Times*¹⁶³ also reported a case of a North Korean IT worker who tried to escape but was caught by Chinese police. He worked on online platforms for the North Korean regime and had to meet a monthly quota of \$4,000 to \$5,000, all while living under constant surveillance. At first, he hadn't thought about defecting. But after his boss beat him, he started longing for freedom. He eventually tried to escape with the help of a broker, but he was caught after a change in route and increased surveillance, and was reportedly sent back to North Korea by force. This shows that even skilled workers can be sacrificed for the regime's benefit if they don't come from a politically "approved" background. According to a UN Security Council sanctions committee report, North Korean workers abroad send up to

¹⁶¹ *ibid*

¹⁶² [Inside North Korea's Hacker Army](#), Bloomberg

¹⁶³ [For North Koreans in China, Seeking Freedom Is More Perilous Than Ever](#), NYT

80% of their wages back to the government, providing hundreds of millions of dollars to the regime.

However, unlike IT workers who face punishment like forced repatriation or hard labor if they miss their quota, top-level hackers are managed through a completely different recruitment and support system. The Kim Jong-un regime reportedly identifies children with talent in computers from a young age and trains them specifically to become hackers, offering significant rewards along the way to attract more applicants.¹⁶⁴ Pyongyang's Pioneer Palace has had a specialized hacking program for elementary school students who undergo intensive training, pointing out that North Korea has been systematically developing hacking talent for decades.^[OBJ] Once selected, these workers are placed into state-backed hacking groups under the Reconnaissance General Bureau, such as Lazarus and Kimsuky. Based on their performance, they ¹⁶⁵,^[OBJ] noting that some hackers are drawn directly from the graduating classes of computer science programs, including at the University of Foreign Studies, and dispatched abroad from there. According to an acquaintance of his who worked at customs in Sinuiju, hackers routinely declared bringing back roughly \$50,000 per person upon returning from overseas assignments—a figure that, by his account, likely understated the true amount smuggled back through informal channels. He also described a customary practice of hackers bribing customs officials with items such as watches to ease their passage through border checkpoints. In other words, North Korea's hacker workforce runs on a system of selective rewards for top performers, a more sophisticated method of mobilizing people than the exploitative system used for regular IT workers.

- 9.4 Laundering Routes, Revenue Estimates, and Links to Nuclear Programs

When North Korean hackers steal cryptocurrency, the money does not simply disappear into a digital void. It enters a meticulously engineered laundering system, one designed not by criminals operating in the shadows, but by a state with a clear strategic objective.

The clock starts the moment a heist occurs.¹⁶⁶ Stolen assets are immediately broken apart and converted into different forms of cryptocurrency to erase any traceable trail. This is where mixers come in. A mixer works by pooling funds from multiple sources, scrambling them together, and redistributing them in a way that makes it virtually impossible to determine who sent what. North Korea has cycled through a succession of these tools Tornado Cash, Sinbad, Wasabi Wallet, and others in a persistent game of adaptation. Each time the United States sanctioned or seized one service, Pyongyang's operators moved to the next. The infrastructure kept evolving; the objective never changed.¹⁶⁷

Once mixed, the funds undergo what analysts call chain hopping rapid movement across multiple blockchain networks. From Ethereum to Bitcoin, from Bitcoin to Tron. Because each blockchain operates under a different tracking architecture, every additional hop multiplies the difficulty of following the money. In one case documented by the MSMT,¹⁶⁸ laundered

¹⁶⁴ [Exposing DPRK's Cyber Syndicate and Hidden IT Workforce](#), Michael Barnhart

¹⁶⁵ Interview June 2026

¹⁶⁶ [The DPRK's Violation and Evasion of UN Sanctions through Cyber and Information Technology Worker Activities](#), 2025MSMT

¹⁶⁷ *ibid*

¹⁶⁸ *ibid*

funds passed through five separate blockchains via 48 distinct bridge transactions. What would have taken investigators days to trace manually can now be executed by North Korean operatives in a matter of hours.

The final destination often appears to be China. Laundered cryptocurrency is believed to be ultimately transferred to China-based over-the-counter (OTC) brokers, intermediaries who accept digital assets and return an equivalent value in cash. That cash is then thought to flow into North Korean-controlled bank accounts, reportedly via UnionPay cards issued by Chinese banks. Once digital assets are converted into physical currency, the trail tends to go cold.¹⁶⁹

What makes this system particularly difficult to disrupt is its speed. Transfers that would take days to process through traditional financial institutions happen in minutes within the cryptocurrency ecosystem. The faster funds move after a theft, the narrower the window for intervention. North Korea has made the exploitation of this asymmetry a cornerstone of its financial strategy.

The scale of what that strategy has generated is staggering. In 2025 alone, North Korea-linked actors stole at least \$2.02 billion in cryptocurrency, a 51 percent increase year-on-year and the highest annual total on record, bringing cumulative theft since 2016 to an estimated \$6.75 billion.¹⁷⁰ A single breach drove much of that figure: the February 2025 hack of Dubai-based exchange Bybit, in which North Korean operatives siphoned approximately \$1.5 billion in Ethereum—the largest single cryptocurrency theft in history. By that point, North Korea accounted for 76 percent of all cryptocurrency hack value globally. The UN Panel of Experts, in its final report before being dissolved following Russia's veto in 2024, estimated that approximately 100,000 North Korean workers abroad generate around \$500 million annually through the state's overseas labor program. Cyber theft has now eclipsed even that, emerging as Pyongyang's single largest source of illicit foreign revenue.

Where the money goes is not in dispute. According to the United Nations and multiple government agencies, the funds stolen through these operations are believed to play a critical role in financing North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile development programs, and the true figure may be even higher than what has been publicly documented.¹⁷¹ As international sanctions have progressively closed off conventional trade and financial channels, Pyongyang has responded by building an increasingly sophisticated alternative in cyberspace. The nuclear program has not slowed. It has found a new funding source.

Beyond Office 39, the Munitions Industry Department occupies a uniquely direct position in this funding chain; it is both the agency responsible for overseeing North Korea's nuclear and missile development, and the parent body to which much of the IT worker and hacking apparatus reports to. According to DTEX's research,¹⁷² the 313th General Bureau under the

¹⁶⁹ MSMT, Chainalysis

¹⁷⁰ [North Korea Drives Record \\$2 Billion Crypto Theft Year, Pushing All-Time Total to \\$6.75 Billion](#), Chainalysis

¹⁷¹ [UN Panel of experts 2022, The DPRK's Violation and Evasion of UN Sanctions through Cyber and Information Technology Worker Activities](#), 2025MSMT

¹⁷² [Exposing DPRK's Cyber Syndicate and Hidden IT Workforce](#) by DTEX Michael Barnhart

Munitions Industry Department is one of the organizations where North Korean IT workers are actually assigned, and graduates of institutions such as Kim Chaek University of Technology and Kim Il-sung Military University are in some cases channeled directly into IT-focused organizations under this department or the Ministry of National Defense. These units are required to fund their own operations against annual revenue quotas set by the regime, meaning wages from IT worker fraud and proceeds from cryptocurrency theft function directly as operating capital for units that answer to the very department overseeing weapons development. That said, no public transaction-level evidence currently shows exactly how much stolen cryptocurrency was applied to a specific missile test or nuclear facility procurement; what is documented is the organizational link of the Munitions Industry Department's dual role as both the ministry directing weapons development and the parent authority over these revenue-generating cyber units.

This is not cybercrime in any conventional sense. It is a state-directed financial operation engineered to circumvent the very sanctions architecture that the international community constructed to contain it.

Chapter 10. The Ukraine Front: Soldiers or Forced Laborers?

- 10.1 Non-Consensual Mobilization and State Capture of Wages

Testimony from North Korean soldiers captured by Ukrainian forces shows that many were mobilized without any real understanding of where they were being sent or why. According to interviews with North Korean prisoners of war (POWs) conducted by *The Chosun Ilbo*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *MBC's PD Notebook*, soldiers reportedly believed they were being moved abroad for study or training purposes, with no indication that their final destination was the battlefield.

Arriving at the front in this state, soldiers found themselves completely unprepared for modern drone warfare. North Korean units initially proved defenseless against drone strikes, suffering more than 6,000 casualties out of a deployed force exceeding 10,000. Ukrainian soldiers described these troops, who launched stealthy and relentless waves of attacks, as "zombie-like."¹⁷³ Even so, assessments suggest that over the course of roughly a year, North Korean forces adapted to drone warfare themselves, incorporating concealment, infiltration, and flanking tactics.

A similar gap between appearance and reality runs through the pay structure. South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) reportedly assessed that each North Korean soldier receives around \$2,000 a month (roughly 2.77 million won) in exchange for deployment.¹⁷⁴ Germany's public broadcaster Deutsche Welle reported¹⁷⁵ that foreign mercenaries in Russia are paid between \$2,000 and \$2,300 a month, and that North Korean soldiers were likely receiving a comparable amount. This figure, however, is only the nominal amount—whether the money actually reaches the soldiers or their families is an entirely separate question. This mirrors the same structure seen earlier among overseas dispatched workers:

¹⁷³ [Ukraine drones kill 50 North Koreans in battle in Kursk region](#), RFA

¹⁷⁴ [\\$200m a year, 700,000 tons of rice, space tech: The deal for North Korea in joining Russia's war](#), Korean Herald

¹⁷⁵ [How Russia is recruiting foreigners to fight in Ukraine](#), DW

a vast gap between the wage stated on paper and what is actually received, now extended to soldiers sent to the battlefield.

- 10.2 Treatment of Casualties and Next-of-Kin Notification

"Long Live General Kim Jong-un"

According to South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS), some North Korean soldiers reportedly shouted this phrase as they took their own lives in the middle of the Ukraine war rather than be captured.

The North Korean regime's official posture toward its war dead carries a dual character, treating fallen soldiers simultaneously as objects of mourning and as instruments of state propaganda. Footage released by Korean Central Television presented soldiers who detonated grenades to avoid capture in battle as having acted heroically. On April 26, 2026, North Korea unveiled the Memorial Museum of Combat Feats at Overseas Military Operations in Pyongyang's Hwasong district to honor this deployment. At the opening ceremony, Kim Jong-un personally praised soldiers who chose self-destruction over capture.

This climate of coerced self-destruction is corroborated by testimony from surviving prisoners of war. In an interview with PD Notebook, one POW expressed a complicated mix of emotions, saying that other comrades had blown themselves up rather than be captured, while he had not. Another POW said that the moment he became a prisoner, he felt he had become a "traitor." This suggests that self-destruction was not simply an individual soldier's choice, but the product of systematic ideological indoctrination that frames capture itself as shameful and treasonous.

At the same time, North Korea has established and actively promotes a separate, propagandistic process of consoling bereaved families. Korean Central Television has aired programming honoring fallen "heroes," and Kim Jong-un has personally met with bereaved families, presenting them with portraits wrapped in the national flag and pledging to raise the children of the fallen as "core elements of the revolution."

Even so, the combination of pressure toward self-destruction and the frequent incineration or non-identification of bodies on the battlefield likely makes it difficult to determine the true scale of casualties and captures. The regime's willingness to glorify self-destruction as heroism, going so far as to construct an elaborate memorial complex, ironically suggests just how much of the real toll in deaths and captures may remain concealed behind the official narrative. Compounding this, enlistment in the North Korean military often cuts off contact with parents and family almost entirely, meaning many soldiers' families may have no knowledge at all that their child or spouse was deployed to the Russian-Ukrainian front.

- 10.3 Applicability of ILO Forced Labor Conventions

Any attempt to address the deployment of North Korean troops to Kursk within the legal framework of forced labor must begin with the strongest objection that will be raised against it. The ILO Forced Labour Convention (No. 29, 1930)¹⁷⁶ defines forced labor as "all work or

¹⁷⁶ [Forced Labour Convention](#), 1930 (No. 29), Ohchr

service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily," yet Article 2(2) expressly excludes from this definition "any work or service exacted in virtue of compulsory military service laws for work of a purely military character." In other words, a state's deployment of conscripts into combat does not, in itself, constitute forced labor under the Convention. Given that the North Korean soldiers were formally dispatched to Russia as servicemen of the Korean People's Army, this exception constitutes the first line of defense against any characterization of the Kursk deployment as forced labor.

This report concludes, however, that the Kursk deployment cannot claim the protection of that exception, on three grounds.

First, the military service exception rests on the requirement that the work be "of a purely military character," a formulation premised on ordinary conscription for national defense. The Kursk deployment does not satisfy that premise. Even though Article 4 of the June 2024 North Korea–Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty requires mutual military assistance in the event of armed attack, North Korea's involvement was not an act of self-defense but participation in a foreign war, with Russia providing compensation to the North Korean regime in return. The remuneration for the soldiers' service is understood to be collected not by the individual soldiers, but by Pyongyang. This is precisely the same mechanism as the wage-collection structure of overseas dispatched workers documented in the preceding chapters of this report: the labor is performed by the individual, and the payment is collected by the state. Viewed in this light, the North Korean soldiers in Kursk are not an exception to North Korea's overseas labor-export system, but its newest category. They are dispatched workers bearing arms, heirs to the lineage of the loggers and construction workers who preceded them. The mobilization of labor for the state's economic purpose of foreign-currency acquisition is, moreover, precisely the type of conduct targeted by the ILO Abolition of Forced Labour Convention (No. 105, 1957),¹⁷⁷ which expressly prohibits forced labor "as a method of mobilising and using labour for purposes of economic development."

Second, there was no consent. The statements of North Korean soldiers captured by Ukrainian forces demonstrate that the element of voluntariness was absent at every stage of the deployment. Prisoners stated that they were transported without knowing their destination; some testified that they believed they were being sent for training or study rather than combat. This corresponds directly to deception, one of the eleven indicators the ILO has established for identifying forced labor. Other indicators are confirmed as well. The issuance of Russian military identification documents and Russian names to the soldiers constitutes the concealment and control of identity. The circumstances of their collective management, cut off from outside communication, constitute isolation. The presence of family members remaining in North Korea constitutes a hostage structure foreclosing desertion, or in the language of the indicators, intimidation and threats. The fear that desertion or surrender would result not only in punishment of the individual but in reprisals against his family means that the defining element of the Convention's definition, service exacted "under the menace of any penalty," governed the deployment from beginning to

¹⁷⁷ [Abolition of Forced Labour Convention](#), 1957 (No. 105)

end. In short, even if the threshold of the military service exception were conceded, the indicators of forced labor are confirmed, layer upon layer, on the far side of that threshold.

At this point, the Kursk deployment reaches beyond forced labor into the legal framework of human trafficking. The UN Trafficking in Persons Protocol¹⁷⁸ defines trafficking as the recruitment, transportation, or transfer of persons, by means including deception, for the purpose of exploitation. The Kursk deployment satisfies all three elements: recruitment and transport under false pretenses as to destination and mission, an exploitative purpose in the state's acquisition of foreign currency, and a coercive structure vitiating the consent of those involved. It is distinguished from ordinary trafficking only in that the perpetrator is a state rather than a criminal organization. The U.S. Department of State has consistently ranked North Korea at Tier 3,¹⁷⁹ the lowest classification in its annual Trafficking in Persons Report, on the grounds of a "government policy or pattern" of trafficking, a determination resting on this same logic.

Third, the final objection to be anticipated concerns treaty membership. North Korea is not a member of the ILO and has ratified neither Convention No. 29 nor No. 105; it may therefore be argued that no direct treaty violation can be attributed to it. But this objection sees only half the problem. Russia, the recipient of this labor, is an ILO member state and a ratifying party to both Conventions, and it is not free of its obligations under them when it pays for and uses the labor of foreign personnel mobilized through deception. Moreover, the prohibition of forced labor is customary international law binding on all states irrespective of ratification, and substantial scholarly and judicial authority recognizes it as a peremptory norm (*jus cogens*) from which no derogation is permitted. North Korea's refusal to ratify does not place it outside this norm.

Taken together, the Kursk deployment, though clothed in the form of a military dispatch, is in substance the militarized extension of the North Korean overseas forced labor system documented throughout this report: a transactional structure under which the state collects the compensation, a mobilization carried out by deception, and a system of control founded on the menace of penalty.

Part VII. International Responses and Legal Frameworks

Chapter 11. The International Sanctions Regime and its Implementation

- 11.1 The UN Security Council Sanctions Architecture (UNSCR 2270–2397)

The primary multilateral legal framework targeting North Korea's overseas labor networks is anchored in the UN Security Council's 1718 Committee. Following Pyongyang's fourth nuclear test in early 2016, the Council adopted a series of escalating resolutions most notably UNSCR 2270, 2371, 2375, and 2397 that progressively tightened restrictions on North Korea's access to foreign currency.

¹⁷⁸ [The United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime](#)

¹⁷⁹ [2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: North Korea](#), State Department

What distinguished this later generation of resolutions was their explicit targeting of overseas labor as a revenue stream for weapons proliferation. Paragraph 8 of UNSCR 2397 (2017) mandated the repatriation of all North Korean nationals working abroad within 24 months, reflecting the Council's formal acknowledgment that wages remitted by overseas workers were directly financing Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs.¹⁸⁰ In doing so, the sanctions regime evolved from a passive trade restriction framework into a targeted campaign against transnational revenue extraction.

- 11.2 U.S. Unilateral Sanctions (OFAC, Executive Order 13722, et al.)

Washington's unilateral measures have functioned as a critical force multiplier alongside the UN framework—yet in practice, they carry a coercive reach that the UN framework cannot match. Executive Order 13722 (March 2016)¹⁸¹ imposed a blanket prohibition on financial transactions involving the North Korean government and Workers' Party, while the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act (NKSPEA) of 2016 made secondary sanctions mandatory—legally compelling the executive branch to penalize any foreign entity facilitating North Korea's revenue-generating activities, including overseas labor deployment. The Korean Interdiction and Modernization of Sanctions Act (KIMS Act),¹⁸² folded into CAATSA in 2017, further tightened this framework by explicitly penalizing foreign employers who exploit North Korean labor and the networks that profit from it. Once U.S. secondary sanctions enter the picture, the calculus shifts sharply. Under the North Korea Sanctions Regulations (31 CFR Part 510),¹⁸³ any foreign bank that knowingly facilitates a significant transaction on behalf of a designated North Korean entity faces the loss of its U.S. correspondent banking access, without which it cannot clear U.S. dollars. Because global trade remains predominantly dollar-denominated, dollar payments clear through U.S. correspondent banks, briefly entering U.S. jurisdiction and OFAC's line of sight, regardless of how the transaction is routed or denominated. If a firm's local bank is dropped from U.S. correspondent networks, other banks follow, effectively making the firm unbankable in any market that touches the dollar system. For companies seeking project financing from international lenders, that risk is existential in a way that a UN censure is not.

- 11.3 EU, South Korean, and Japanese Sanctions on North Korea

The EU, South Korea, and Japan have each maintained autonomous sanctions regimes that reinforce the UN architecture. South Korea's approach has been the most politically volatile: the "May 24 Measures" of 2010, the permanent closure of the Kaesong Industrial Complex in 2016, and after a half-decade pause the resumption of independent cyber-targeted sanctions from 2022 onward, including coordinated trilateral designations with the United States and Japan against North Korean cybercrime actors.

Following Russia's 2024 veto blocking renewal of the UN Panel of Experts, the three allies established the Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team (MSMT) as an independent

¹⁸⁰ [https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2397%20\(2017\)](https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2397%20(2017)), United Nations Security Council

¹⁸¹ [Executive Order 13722—Blocking Property of the Government of North Korea and the Workers' Party of Korea, and Prohibiting Certain Transactions With Respect to North Korea](#), National Archives

¹⁸² https://www.ncnk.org/sites/default/files/Kims_Act_Summary_HFAC_Markup.pdf, The National Committee on North Korea

¹⁸³ [31 CFR Part 510](#)

successor body, a shift toward minilateral enforcement that signals the fracturing of the post-2006 multilateral consensus.

Japan, operating primarily through its Foreign Exchange and Foreign Trade Act (FEFTA),¹⁸⁴ has maintained a zero-tolerance posture since imposing a total trade ban in 2009, and has more recently pivoted to targeting crypto theft networks and the Russia-North Korea military supply chain. While Japan does not directly host North Korean overseas workers, a key target of this regime has been illicit financial transfers to North Korea channeled through Chongryon, the pro-Pyongyang organization for ethnic Koreans in Japan. Chongryon historically operated a network of *pachinko* parlors,¹⁸⁵ which have been alleged to serve as a front for gambling and other illicit activity, and its affiliated credit unions, known as *chogin*, are reported to have played a significant role in illegally remitting funds to North Korea through fraudulent loans and other improper practices. Japan's 2016–2017 sanctions banned remittances exceeding \$880, and Tokyo has also imposed travel restrictions specifically targeting Chongryon officials, barring their re-entry into Japan if they travel to North Korea.¹⁸⁶

- 11.4 Gaps in Sanctions Enforcement and Evasion Routes

On paper, UNSCR 2397 represented the most ambitious attempt yet to sever the financial lifeline connecting North Korean overseas labor to Pyongyang's weapons programs. In practice, its outcomes proved more complicated. Alongside its intended pressure on Pyongyang, the ban had unintended effects: parts of the labor system moved further out of view, workers were left more vulnerable, and the North Korean state found an opening for propaganda.

Park Yoon Jae, a former North Korean construction laborer who worked in Russia before defecting, described¹⁸⁷ the immediate aftermath of the resolution's passage in terms that no policy document captures. The moment word came down, he recalled, holidays were cancelled without notice. The state quota—the monthly "loyalty remittance" workers were required to hand over—was raised. Supervisors began conducting headcounts more frequently, sometimes multiple times a day. The message from Pyongyang, conveyed through the party officials embedded in every labor brigade, was unambiguous: the window was closing, and anyone who fell short would answer for it.

What Park and his fellow workers did not know at the time was that the window was not actually closing, at least not for the state. It was simply being reframed.

How Russia and China Engineered a Workaround

After the adoption of Resolution 2397, the most significant evasion unfolded in the two countries where the overwhelming majority of North Korean overseas laborers were concentrated: Russia and China.

¹⁸⁴ https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_00339.html, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan

¹⁸⁵ Nicholas Eberstadt, "[Pachinko Woes in North Korea](#)," The Wall Street Journal, May 1996

¹⁸⁶ [Japanese Sanctions](#), Steph Haggard PIIE

¹⁸⁷ Interview June 25th

In Russia, work visa issuances to North Korean nationals began declining in early 2018 and ceased altogether by 2020. In a telling reversal, however, student visa numbers surged from just 41 in 2017, to 3,124 in 2018, and 10,876 in 2019. Then, in February 2020, just weeks after the repatriation deadline passed, Russia enacted Federal Law No. 16-FZ, newly allowing foreigners enrolled full-time at state-accredited universities to work without separate permits, effectively codifying the workaround into domestic law.¹⁸⁸

China followed the same playbook. North Korean restaurants in major cities including Beijing, Shanghai, Shenyang, and Dandong continued operating normally well past the December 2019 deadline, and North Korean workers remained on factory assembly lines in border cities like Dandong.¹⁸⁹

The geographic dispersal of workers was equally deliberate. Rather than concentrating laborers in major urban centers where international monitors and journalists were more likely to take notice, North Korean managers, with the acquiescence of both host governments, shifted deployments to smaller provincial cities and remote industrial zones. The result was a workforce that was simultaneously more exploited and less visible.

The costs of this evasion scheme were ultimately deducted from workers' wages, which were already heavily expropriated through mandatory loyalty remittances, coerced contributions to company operating expenses, and outright wage theft by managers. Workers in construction reported average monthly earnings of approximately \$200 a fraction of the \$2,000 to \$3,000 they should have earned for workweeks of 80 to 120 hours.¹⁹⁰

An Unintended Consequence: Evasion and Its Human Cost

The use of North Korean labor abroad persisted and, in some respects, became even more exploitative as Russia and other host countries responded to sanctions with evasion tactics that diminished transparency and international oversight—an unintended consequence of the blanket ban on work authorization—which drove North Korean labor into increasingly opaque arrangements while sustaining the financial pipeline for Pyongyang.¹⁹¹

Park put it bluntly.¹⁹² Among the workers he knew in Russia, the prevailing sentiment toward the UN sanctions was not gratitude. It was anger. The resolution had not freed them. It had eliminated what little margin they had for the occasional day off, the small informal income that sometimes slipped past the quota system, or the possibility of a legitimate visa status that at least created a paper trail someone in the outside world might one day follow. All of that was gone. What remained was the labor, the quota, and the surveillance.

For workers like Park, the resolution felt less like relief than like the closing of a door.

¹⁸⁸ [Beyond the Blanket Ban: Reframing the International Response to North Korea's Overseas Labor](#), 38 North

¹⁸⁹ [North Korean Workers Officially Dispatched to China & Russia](#), HRNK Greg Scarlatoiu

¹⁹⁰ [Beyond the Blanket Ban: Reframing the International Response to North Korea's Overseas Labor](#), 38 North

¹⁹¹ *ibid*

¹⁹² Interview June 25th

Pyongyang's Political Exploitation

What made this dynamic especially corrosive was how skillfully the North Korean state turned it to its advantage. Party officials within the labor brigades did not hide the sanctions from workers; they weaponized them. The message delivered to workers, consistently and deliberately, was that it was the international community, not Pyongyang, that had locked them in place. The state was merely the victim of hostile foreign pressure.¹⁹³

It was, in effect, a propaganda gift. The very mechanism designed to constrain the regime became a tool for consolidating its control over the workforce. Workers who might have harbored grievances against the state found those grievances redirected outward toward the UN, toward the West, toward an abstraction. The quota increases, the holiday cancellations, and the tightened surveillance: all of it could be attributed to external enemies rather than internal exploitation.¹⁹⁴

Meanwhile, the underlying security concern of the diversion of labor revenue to WMD development remained unresolved. Remuneration continued to be paid in lump sums to North Korean managers rather than directly to workers, ensuring that the state's cut was extracted before any individual ever touched the money.¹⁹⁵

The sanctions regime pursued a legitimate aim: cutting off revenue that helped fund Pyongyang's weapons programs. Its record, however, has been uneven. In practice, much depended on the willingness of host states to enforce it, and where enforcement gave way to evasion, the burden appears to have fallen heaviest on the workers themselves, even as parts of the system slipped further from view.

Chapter 12. International Labor Standards and North Korean Forced Labor

- 12.1 Analysis of ILO Forced Labor Conventions (No. 29 and No. 105)

The International Labor Organization (ILO) is a United Nations agency known for setting international standards for labor rights since 1919 and for producing resolutions such as the “Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work”. Importantly, the ILO’s legal architecture against state-sponsored exploitation is based on two foundational documents: the Forced Labor Convention, 1930 (No. 29) and the Abolition of Forced Labor Convention, 1957 (No. 105).

The Forced Labor Convention (No. 29), adopted in 1930, was an international treaty that sought to define and eradicate the use of all known forms of forced or compulsory labor. Some examples of these violations include debt-induced forced labor, forced labor in prisons, resulting actions of human trafficking, and forced labor linked to exploitative contract systems.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ *ibid*

¹⁹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁹⁵ [Beyond the Blanket Ban: Reframing the International Response to North Korea's Overseas Labor](#), 38 North

¹⁹⁶ [Employers' Frequently Asked Questions](#), ILO

Whereas the Abolition of Forced Labor Convention (No. 105) acts as a complementary piece of legislation to Convention No. 29 by further identifying and outlawing purposes for forced labor which state-actors must abandon. These five state-specific purposes in relation to forced labor account for the means of political coercion or education as a punishment for holding opposing views, along with the economic development of that respective state. Discrimination or punishment for strikes (or similar expressive activities) and for the maintenance of labor discipline are the other possible purposes for forced labor that state-actors must ban.¹⁹⁷

These foundational conventions provide a stable legal framework for identifying and challenging state-sponsored exploitation in contemporary society across all 187 ILO member states.¹⁹⁸ By standardizing a unilateral definition of forced labor, they give international actors and human rights organizations the power to hold member governments accountable for their actions. With this in mind, former ILO Director General, Guy Ryder, said in a 2021 statement that, "If we want to achieve social justice we must simply have to eliminate forced labour. This is not negotiable."¹⁹⁹ In the contemporary world, these core treaties remain vital tools for exposing transnational labor violations and enforcing compliance.

- 12.2 The Legal Definition of Modern Slavery and the North Korean Case

'Modern slavery' has no single, established definition in international law; it functions as an umbrella term encompassing various forms of exploitation such as forced labor, debt bondage, and human trafficking. Forced labor, by contrast, carries a precise legal definition. The ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29) defines it as "all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily."²⁰⁰ Whether North Korea's overseas labor system meets this legal standard, therefore, must be judged not against the vague language of "slavery" but against the constituent elements of Convention No. 29.

The non-membership objection and the responsibility of host states. Before turning to the substance, one fundamental objection must be addressed. North Korea has never been a member of the ILO and has ratified neither Convention No. 29 nor No. 105, so it may be argued that no direct treaty violation can be attributed to it. But this sees only half the problem. First, the prohibition of forced labor is a principle of customary international law binding on all states irrespective of ratification, and the ILO itself treats it as a fundamental principle that member states must uphold regardless of whether they have ratified the relevant conventions. Second, Russia and China, where this labor actually takes place, are ILO member states that have ratified both conventions. Those host states, which benefit from and acquiesce in this labor, are therefore not free of their obligations under the conventions. It is not North Korea alone that abandons the prohibition on forced labor. Since the formality of non-membership does not foreclose a substantive assessment, the remaining question is whether North Korea's overseas labor in fact satisfies the elements of forced labor.

¹⁹⁷ [Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957\(No.105\)](#), ILO

¹⁹⁸ ILO [Website](#)

¹⁹⁹ [ILO Director-General calls on governments to take action to end modern slavery](#), ILO

²⁰⁰ [What is forced labour?](#), ILO

First, the three elements are met. Under Convention No. 29, forced labor consists of three elements: work or service, the menace of a penalty, and involuntariness. North Korea's overseas labor system satisfies all three. Workers perform genuine labor, ranging from construction, logging, garment work, and seafood processing to, more recently, remote IT development. They operate under the threat of repatriation, punishment, and reprisals against the families they leave behind in North Korea. And the two elements the ILO identifies as central to involuntariness, the free and informed consent to take a job and the freedom to leave at any time, are both denied. With their passports confiscated, their movement controlled through group housing, and their lives under constant surveillance, these workers have no freedom to leave.

Second, the indicators of forced labor appear in combination. The ILO sets out eleven indicators²⁰¹ for identifying forced labor, a cumulative diagnostic tool in which the presence of several indicators together confirms a forced labor situation rather than any single one. In North Korea's overseas labor, these indicators appear layer upon layer: false representations about the destination or working conditions (deception), confiscation of passports and identity documents (retention of identity documents), control over movement beyond the accommodation (restriction of movement), severance from outside contact (isolation), a structure in which the state collects most of the wages (withholding of wages), workweeks reaching 80 to 120 hours (excessive overtime), and the threat of reprisals against family (intimidation and threats). Any one of these alone signals forced labor; their simultaneous presence strongly confirms that the case qualifies as such.

Third, the economic purpose and the violation of Convention No. 105. The Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105) expressly prohibits the use of forced labor "as a method of mobilising and using labour for purposes of economic development." North Korea's overseas labor falls squarely within this category, because its purpose lies not in the livelihood of the individual worker but in the regime's acquisition of foreign currency. One objection may be raised here: some workers actually bribe officials to secure an overseas posting. Yet this apparent voluntariness does not disprove coercion. Within a structure in which the regime monopolizes the domestic economy and its opportunities, an overseas posting becomes one of the few paths to a livable income, and a choice made under such deprivation of alternatives constitutes the "abuse of vulnerability" the ILO identifies. That workers compete for these postings even though the state ultimately takes most of their wages is not the product of free will, but of economic desperation turned into a weapon.

In the end, although "modern slavery" remains an umbrella term, North Korea's absolute control over the lives and labor of individuals plainly satisfies the legal criteria for state-sponsored forced labor as defined by Conventions No. 29 and No. 105.

- Agency Under Coercion: Do Victims Really Have No Choice?

The law on forced labor tends to portray victims as people with no choice at all. But the reality of North Korea's overseas labor is not that simple. As the previous section showed,

²⁰¹ [International Labour Organization, ILO Indicators of Forced Labour](#) (Geneva: ILO, 2012; revised 2025)

some workers actually pay bribes to land these very jobs, exploitative as they are. How should we make sense of that?

The answer is this: they do make choices, but every option is a bad one. Inside North Korea, there is almost no way to feed a family, and an overseas posting is one of the few paths to earning any real money. So workers compete for these positions even knowing the state will take most of their wages. This is not a free choice. It is a forced pick between a bad road and a worse one.

Recognizing this does not lessen the state's responsibility. If anything, it does the opposite. The fact that a worker wanted the job must not be misread as evidence that the system is voluntary, because it is the state itself that eliminated every other option in the first place. The responsibility lies not with the individual who paid the bribe, but with the structure that made paying the bribe necessary.

- 12.3 Corporate Supply Chain Due Diligence Obligations and the Risk of North Korean Labor Exposure

North Korea's labor and goods are controlled by the state, and when they slip into global trade networks, two problems arise at once. One is that a company that traded without knowing becomes legally liable. The other is that the transaction ends up financing serious human rights abuses. As earlier chapters have shown, these labor practices directly violate not only the multilateral standards set by the ILO and the UN, but also the benchmarks established by individual states through their own unilateral sanctions.

To prevent this, trade policy in many countries has shifted course. Instead of governments policing every shipment, the burden has been placed on companies themselves to prove that their supply chains are free of forced labor. Building on the U.S. CAATSA framework discussed earlier, enforcement agencies now use market access, the right to enter a market, as leverage to compel corporate accountability. In the United States, Section 307²⁰² of the Tariff Act blocks the import of goods made with forced labor, and in the specific case of North Korea, any product suspected of involving North Korean labor is barred from entry unless the importer can prove otherwise. The European Union²⁰³ has created a similar centralized mechanism, the Forced Labour Regulation (FLR), to keep products made with forced labor out of its single market: to get in, you must show evidence that your supply chain is clean. In effect, these rules turn the gateway of trade into a human rights checkpoint, and at the same time they squeeze the North Korean regime's revenue streams.

The problem is that no matter how tight the rules are, the abuses are hard to catch in practice. There is a wide gap between sweeping trade policy and what companies actually comply with, and closing it demands a rigorous, multilateral system of supply chain verification. North Korea does not export its labor and raw materials openly. It buries them in multi-country subcontracting chains, runs them through a processing plant in a third country, or quietly transfers cargo from ship to ship on the open sea to erase their origin. By the time

²⁰² [Section 307 and Imports Produced by Forced Labor](#), Library of Congress (U.S.)

²⁰³ [Forced Labour Single Portal](#), European Commission

a product is finished, the trail of where it came from has often vanished, and ordinary due diligence is not enough to filter it out.

Chapter 13. Responsibilities of Host Governments and Corporations

- 13.1 Structural Complicity: Employing Workers with Full Knowledge

The North Korean overseas labor system is not one that Pyongyang can sustain alone. It requires governments willing to admit the workers, companies willing to employ them, and markets willing to consume the goods and services their labor produces. The exploitation documented in the preceding chapters of this report including wage theft, passport confiscation, collective surveillance, and denial of freedom of movement, occurs in observable forms at every link of this chain. In assessing the responsibility of host governments and employing corporations, therefore, the central question is not whether they knew. That they could not have failed to know is a structural feature of the system itself.

First, the question of legal notice has long been settled. UN Security Council Resolutions 2375 (September 2017) and 2397 (December 2017), adopted under Part VII of the UN Charter, are binding on all member states, prohibiting the issuance of new work authorizations and mandating the repatriation of all North Korean workers by December 22, 2019. From 2019 until its dissolution, the UN Panel of Experts identified violating states and implicated entities by name in its annual reports. A member state government cannot plead ignorance of a Security Council resolution, and a company operating in that state's jurisdiction can hardly plead ignorance of the implementation obligations imposed on its own government.

Second, factual knowledge is equally undeniable, because the very contract structure of North Korean labor displays the indicators of forced labor on its face. Employers contract not with individual workers but with North Korean dispatch companies; wages are paid in lump sums not to the workers but to company accounts. The workers carry no passports, live in collective quarters, and cannot leave the worksite without an accompanying supervisor. These conditions correspond directly to the ILO's indicators of forced labor: withholding of wages, retention of identity documents, restriction of movement, isolation and, critically, they are conditions the employer witnesses daily and, as a contracting party, enforces itself. A company that employs North Korean workers is not a passive bystander to forced labor; it is an active participant paying for it.

Even so, the layers of responsibility must be distinguished. This report identifies four tiers of complicity. (1) Direct state contracting: where governments contract directly with North Korean state entities for monuments and statues, military and police training, or the construction of presidential palaces and government buildings. Here the state itself is the commissioner of forced labor. (2) State acquiescence: where governments enable private-sector employment through visa issuance, business licensing, and extensions of stay. (3) Direct corporate employment: where private companies contract with North Korean dispatch companies. (4) Supply-chain incorporation: where intermediate goods and products made with North Korean labor enter third-country corporate supply chains through subcontracting and re-export, with seafood processing in China being the paradigmatic case. The directness of knowledge diminishes at each descending tier, but the obligation of due diligence does not disappear.

- 13.2 Comparative Review of Responses by Key Host Countries

Host-country responses have not been uniform. This report evaluates them along a spectrum running from active complicity through willful blindness and capacity deficit to genuine implementation. Three variables largely determine where a given country falls: its geopolitical relationship with Pyongyang, its economic demand for North Korean labor, and its exposure to U.S. secondary sanctions.

Russia—active complicity. Russia occupies one extreme of the spectrum. Beyond circumventing the 2019 repatriation deadline through the issuance of student and tourist visas, Russia in March 2024 vetoed the renewal of the Panel of Experts' mandate at the Security Council, dismantling the sanctions monitoring regime itself; since the conclusion of its Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty with North Korea later that year, it has expanded its intake of workers virtually openly. Reports of workers dispatched to reconstruction sites in occupied Ukrainian territory indicate that Russia's violations have moved past the stage of concealment into the stage of display.

China—persistence behind denial. The strategy of China, the largest host country, differs from Russia's. Rather than publicly justifying its violations, China denies their existence. Workers are reclassified under various designations trainees or short-term border-pass holders while the government maintains its official position that it "faithfully implements its international obligations." With an estimated 20,000 to 80,000 workers concentrated in the garment and seafood-processing industries, and with their output flowing into international supply chains, China represents the case in which all four tiers of complicity described in Section 13.1 operate within a single country.

The Gulf states—compliance under pressure. Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE, and other Gulf states employed North Korean construction workers in the tens of thousands before 2017, but following the adoption of the resolutions and bilateral pressure from the United States, they substantially reduced and repatriated those workforces. The Gulf experience suggests two things: that pressure genuinely works in states with deep security relationships with the United States and high exposure to secondary sanctions and, conversely, that where such leverage is absent, implementation cannot be expected.

Africa—the zone of indifference. As detailed in Section 7.4, most African host states have demonstrated neither the will nor the capacity to implement. Many have never submitted an implementation report to the Security Council at all. Yet a spectrum exists within the region as well. Namibia, which phased out its projects with Mansudae Overseas Projects and the Korea Mining Development Trading Corporation (KOMID) after international exposure, stands as a rare regional example of implementation. By contrast, in the Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Senegal, and elsewhere, dispatches continued in altered forms, and host-government responses were absent.

The conclusion this comparison yields is simple. What separates implementing states from non-implementing ones is not the existence of norms but the structure of incentives. Security Council resolutions apply equally to all member states, yet implementation has occurred only where the cost of violating sanctions exceeded the benefit of North Korean labor.

Part VIII. Conclusions

Chapter 14. Conclusion

Under UN Security Council Resolution 2397, all North Korean overseas laborers were to be repatriated in the wake of COVID-19, yet this requirement has gone unenforced. On the contrary, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, North Korea has dispatched workers to a labor-starved Russia in numbers believed to far exceed previous levels. China, too, has taken in North Korean workers as its provinces contend with labor shortages. Beyond these deployments, North Korea has developed a new avenue for earning foreign currency through its IT workers. Throughout all of this, the workers themselves continue to be exploited.

But endurance has its limits. The further these workers got from home, the more they were exposed to the outside world: its freedoms, its possibilities, and the life that existed beyond the reach of the state. For many, defection became not a choice so much as an inevitability, the slow accumulation of years spent living in contradiction.

What made the decision hardest was never the danger. It was the separation. Nearly every one of them left believing it would be temporary. They would get out first, find their footing, and then find a way to bring their families across. That was the plan. That was the promise they made to themselves.

For Kim Jin-sung, the decision to defect was his alone. His family remains in North Korea, and bringing them out through a broker would cost as much as 100 million won, a sum that puts escape out of reach, leaving him to wait for the right moment. With all of his former coworkers now repatriated, his family likely remains unaware that he defected at all, presuming him instead to be missing or dead.

Park Yoon-jae had originally planned to persuade his family in advance, defect first himself, and then bring them out through a broker. When UN sanctions led to the denial of home leave, he lost any chance to communicate with them and was forced to act alone. Burning the site photographs, ledgers, and other materials he had prepared remains a source of regret to this day. He defected in July 2020 and endured three years of psychological suffering afterward.

But the world did not cooperate. After COVID-19, the border between North Korea and China, once porous enough to allow a clandestine crossing with the right connections and the right price, tightened in ways that may now be permanent. China has intensified its crackdowns on defectors and those who help them, and the path that once existed, however dangerous, has narrowed to almost nothing.

And so, the separation that was supposed to be brief has stretched on. The families these workers left behind remain out of reach, not just geographically but legally, politically, and structurally. The men and women who made it out carry that knowledge every day: that freedom, for them, came at a cost their families are still paying.

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