

Congressional-Executive Commission on China
Hearing on
**North Korean Refugees and
the Imminent Danger of Forced Repatriation from China**
June 13, 2023

Statement of
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The flow of ethnic Koreans back and forth from what is now North Korea to adjacent border areas in Northeastern China is a centuries old phenomenon. As international boundaries are now configured, North Korea has a population of some 25 million people, essentially all of whom are ethnic Koreans. The adjacent areas of Northeastern China (the Chinese province of Jilin, and to a lesser extent the provinces of Heilongjiang and Liaoning) are primarily ethnic Han Chinese, but that area also includes a Korean minority population of some 2 million people.

Historically, there has been a considerable flow of ethnic Koreans back and forth between China and northern Korea. From the 1950s to the 1990s China was undergoing the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, while North Korea was relatively stable and more prosperous. There was a modest flow of ethnic Koreans from China to North Korea for employment during that time. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, assistance for North Korea was cut back, and North Korea went through serious economic difficulty, particularly in the 1990s with the North Korean famine. At that same time, post-Mao China was undertaking significant economic reforms, and the Chinese economy was flourishing. Over the last couple of decades, many North Koreans have gone to China seeking work.¹ Many have gone with the approval of the North Korean government, but others have gone without Pyongyang's sanction.

That economically-driven population movement of ethnic Koreans is still going on in the border areas of China and Korea. During the time that I was Special Envoy from 2009-2017, I made a point of visiting ethnic Korean areas of Northeastern China to get a feel for what was happening in the border area. I found it very interesting that ethnic Koreans who were Chinese nationals were getting work permits for employment in *South* Korea. There were direct flights from the largest "Korean" city in China, Yanji in Jilin Province, to Seoul. That flight was packed with ethnic Koreans with Chinese nationality and passports, but who were working in South Korea.

I also saw some of this labor flow in the Chinese city of Dandong, which is located on the west side of the Yalu River, directly across from the North Korean city of Sinuiju. At the train station in Dandong rail passenger cars were loaded with travelers going to North Korea. I was there just before the Korean autumn harvest holiday of Chuseok, and more than a hundred North Korean

¹ See Hazel Smith, "Explaining North Korean Migration to China" including 11 translated Chinese documents on cross-border migration between China and North Korea," The Wilson Center Publication, online at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/explaining-north-korean-migration-to-china>.

young women were boarding the train to return to their homes in North Korea for the holiday. All were dressed in matching clothes. They were apparently working as seamstresses at a Chinese clothing factory, but they were clearly North Korean.

The point I want to make is that historically, culturally, and economically for centuries there are and have been extensive ties between ethnic Koreans who have lived in Northeastern China with Koreans living in the northern part of the Korean Peninsula. Those ties continue.

North Korean Escapees Go Through China

In addition to North Koreans who have found employment opportunities in China and are working abroad with the knowledge and approval of the North Korean government, there is a second group of North Koreans who seek employment in China without going through official North Korean government channels. There are also North Koreans who go without official approval to Northeast China in order to escape from the repressive North Korean regime and seek opportunities to live and work elsewhere. This third group of North Koreans seek to escape the repressive Pyongyang government, and the vast majority seek ultimately to resettle in South Korea.

For Koreans who want to leave North Korea, the easiest and safest route out of the North is through China.

- The 160 mile long Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) boundary between North and South Korea is heavily fortified. Tens of thousands of troops guard both sides of the border. For North Korean citizens to get into border zone many miles from the actual border requires special documentation. Furthermore, getting through the heavily guarded DMZ is difficult. An estimated 2 million explosive land mines are located in the border zone
- Exiting through the 10 mile long Russian-North Korean border is also not easy. It is too small a boundary to be significant. It is in the remote northeast corner of North Korea, and Russian troops guard that border and immediately return escapees they capture to the North Korean government.
- Leaving by boat from the east or west coast of North Korea is difficult. Coastal areas are closely guarded, access to boats is difficult, and naval vessels patrol the sea boundaries.
- The 850-mile border with China includes river boundaries and some forested mountainous areas. While this is by far the most accessible escape route, it is illegal to leave North Korea, and it is also illegal to enter China without proper documentation.

North Koreans who reach Northeast China are able to find assistance, mostly from other Koreans, to help them cross Chinese territory from the Northeast corner of the country to the Southwest border. They are able surreptitiously to cross into more hospitable countries, including Laos, Thailand, and others. From there they are able to find help eventually to reach South Korea, the United States or European countries. Traveling through more densely populated parts of China makes it easier to blend in with crowds and avoid detection. Escape is

difficult and dangerous, but there has been some success in getting out of North Korea and China.

The Disruptive Impact of COVID

The COVID pandemic, however, has changed conditions and made it much more difficult for North Koreans to escape the North. In dealing with the pandemic, countries around the world have limited travel, tightened restrictions on movement, and increased border controls. The North Korean government has significantly tightened its already strictly guarded borders to prevent the return of potentially infected individuals to North Korea. Although tighter border controls due to COVID are focused on North Koreans returning illegally from China and elsewhere, the tighter border controls and the increased presence of North Korean police in border areas have also made it far more difficult for escapees to leave the North.

China has likewise tightened its borders because of COVID, and this has made it more difficult than in the past for getting into China. Furthermore, to prevent internal COVID spread, the Chinese government has also made travel inside the country even more difficult and restricted than in the past. Getting from the North Korean border to the southwest of China has become even more difficult now than it was before.

Statistics show the precipitous decline in the numbers of escapees arriving from North Korea who are able to reach South Korea.² The total number of escapees arriving in South Korea since counting began in the year 2000 has been about 34,000 North Koreans

- 2011—Highest one-year total was 2,706 escapees
- 2012-2016 annual average number of escapees—1,500
- 2017-2019 annual average number of escapees—1,100

The first COVID case was diagnosed in China in November 2019. Since that time, the number of North Koreans reaching South Korea has plummeted:

- 2020—229 individuals
- 2021—63
- 2022—67
- 2023 (partial year—1st quarter)—34

North Korean escapees going to South Korea are significantly more numerous than those going to other countries. By legislation the United States has sought to make clear our willingness to welcome North Korean escapees to our country. The numbers who have come, however, have been modest. The largest number admitted in one year to the United States was 12—admitted in

² Figures from Republic of Korea, Ministry of Unification, “Policy on North Korean Defectors,” https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/.

2017 and 2021. North Korean refugees admitted to the U.S. number around 200 over the last two decades.³

About a thousand North Koreans have been admitted to European countries in the last two decades, with the largest number going to the United Kingdom, which has admitted somewhat over 600.⁴

Chinese Treatment of North Korean Escapees

Chinese government agencies carefully guard entrance to and exit from China. North Koreans who enter China illegally are apprehended and imprisoned in China. They are not permitted to leave China, and they are handed over to the government of North Korea.⁵ But because of COVID restrictions, the North Korean government has apparently only accepted a small number of its citizens who have been apprehended by Chinese authorities since 2020 when the COVID outbreak began. The Chinese have unsuccessfully sought to return these North Korean citizens.

In March of this year, Elizabeth Salmón, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in North Korea, told the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva: “Due to border closures, over a thousand North Korean escapees have been detained in China indefinitely,” and she added that forcibly repatriated individuals are at severe risk of being sent to North Korean political prison camps if they are returned to the North.⁶

Since the beginning of the COVID pandemic, however, the North Korean government has refused to accept its own citizens back when the Chinese government seeks to return them. The Chinese government appears to be detaining North Korean citizens who are found in China illegally. In July 2021, Human Rights Watch suggested that some 50 refugees were repatriated to North Korea by Chinese officials.⁷ This appears to be a single instance and not the beginning of a return of all escapees who were apprehended in China.

In the various reports on North Korean escapees being detained in China, there has been no effort to distinguish between North Koreans seeking to leave the North and find refuge in South Korea or elsewhere and North Koreans who were seeking economic opportunities in China.

³ Robert R. King, “Number of North Korean Defectors Drops to Lowest Level in Two Decades,” <https://www.csis.org/analysis/number-north-korean-defectors-drops-lowest-level-two-decades>.

⁴ Eve Watling, “Inside London’s community of North Korean defectors,” *Independent*, February 13, 2020, online at <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/photography/north-korea-defectors-london-traces-left-behind-catherine-hylland-new-malden-a9333311.html>

⁵ Roberta Cohen, “China’s Forced Repatriation of North Korean Refugees Incurs United Nations Censure,” Brookings, 7 July 2014, online at <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/chinas-forced-repatriation-of-north-korean-refugees-incurs-united-nations-censure/>.

⁶ “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Elizabeth Salmón,” United Nations Human Rights: Office of the High Commissioner, Document A/HRC/52/65.

⁷ “China Restarts Forced Return of Refugees to North Korea,” Human Rights Watch, July 22, 2021, online at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/22/china-restarts-forced-returns-refugees-north-korea>.

As the U.S. Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights, I met with Chinese diplomats at the United Nations in New York and others at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. I also made official visits to China on several occasions where I met with officials of the Chinese Foreign Ministry and the Chinese Communist Party's International Liaison Department to raise United States concerns regarding North Korean refugees. The Chinese officials were polite, but they showed no concern for the humanitarian impact of Chinese treatment of North Korea escapees.

The Chinese government would not discuss North Korean escapees with United Nations officials who were resident in China or who were traveling to Beijing from Geneva. UN officials were able to deal with Chinese government officials regarding refugees from South Asia and Southeast Asia, but Chinese government officials refused to discuss North Korean refugees with UN officials.

Mr. Chairman, I very much appreciate the Congressional-Executive Commission's interest and attention to the treatment of North Korean refugees by Chinese officials and the humanitarian tragedy that China's policy is creating.