

China vs. North Korea's Refugees

By **MELANIE KIRKPATRICK**

An important piece of North Korea's system of control over its own people is finally being exposed: China's complicity. On Monday, Seoul raised the issue of Beijing's policy of repatriating North Korean refugees in the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva.

Every year the Chinese authorities arrest an unknown number of North Koreans who have fled to China. Some of the refugees are trying to escape North Korean tyranny permanently by making their way through China to third countries, from which they can travel to the South. Beijing forcibly repatriates these unfortunates without giving them a chance to apply for asylum.

North Koreans who are suspected of having met Christians, South Koreans or Americans while in China are executed or shipped off to the gulag. The rest of the returnees are sent to other prisons, where conditions are little better. Pregnant women are forced to undergo abortions, even in their third trimester, for the crime of carrying "Chinese seed."

Until now, the South Korean government has not spoken out publicly about this ongoing atrocity, in part because it doesn't want to incur the wrath of its largest trading partner and in part because it realizes that Beijing could make life much harder for those North Korean refugees whose presence it chooses to overlook. Seoul's silence was China's price for allowing some North Koreans to escape.

Last year, 2,727 North Koreans reached safety in South Korea, according to the Unification Ministry in Seoul. Most fled through China, traveling on an underground railroad that Beijing could shut down in an instant.

Nevertheless, China's repatriation policy is a blatant violation of the International Convention on Refugees, to which it is a signatory. The Convention bars "refoulement," the diplomatic term for returning refugees to places where their lives would be endangered.

Beijing argues that the North Koreans are not refugees but "economic migrants." It likes

to make an absurd comparison with illegal Mexican immigrants in the United States, conveniently ignoring the fact that the Mexican government does not imprison, torture or kill its citizens who are sent home from Texas or Arizona—much less deliberately starve them before they flee.



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China has gotten away with its inhumane repatriation policy for years, with only international human rights organizations criticizing it from time to time. But South Korea is finding its voice. In Seoul this week, the National Assembly passed a resolution urging China to stop sending North Korean refugees back to the totalitarian state.

A member of a minority political party, Rep. Park Sun-young, is calling attention to China's repatriation policy by staging a sit-in and hunger strike in front of the Chinese Embassy. The public, too, is waking up to the fate of its North Korean brothers

and sisters hiding in China.

The number of North Koreans hiding in China at any given time varies, depending on conditions at home and the extent of the crackdown in China. There are at least tens of thousands of North Koreans there today. And at the height of the severe food shortages in the late 1990s and early 2000s, there were as many as half a million. More than half of the North Koreans who flee—perhaps as many as 70% or 80%—are women, many of whom have been sold to Chinese men as "brides."

Now Pyongyang is stepping up its campaign to scare its citizens so that they won't attempt the journey.

Reports from South Korean and American activists who work in China near the border with North Korea are chilling. After Kim Jong Eun took power last December, one of his first acts was to issue a shoot-to-kill order to North Korean guards patrolling their side of the border. There are further reports that he ordered land mines to be buried on riverbanks to stop people from fleeing. North Korean security agents are said to be flooding

into China, where they spy on the refugees and the people who help them, and report them to the Chinese authorities.

According to the Venerable Pomnyun Sunim, a Buddhist monk and activist in South Korea, Kim Jong Eun has exiled the relatives of fugitives to remote regions of the country. Knowing that their families will be punished serves as a powerful disincentive to anyone who is thinking of fleeing. The Venerable Pomnyun also says that Kim Jong Eun has intensified the crackdown on possession of illegal Chinese cellphones, which allow North Koreans to communicate with the outside world and arrange passage on the underground railroad.

If China can be convinced to change its repatriation policy, it would save thousands of lives. As Seoul's new outspokenness raises international awareness of this tragedy, other governments should raise their voices in support.

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