

North Korean Human Rights (And Escape Routes)

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There are 35,000 refugees from North Korea living in South Korea today. In addition there are as many as 25,000 trapped or for other reasons still living underground in China. The human rights violations in North Korea are egregious. They classify the population into three distinct classes based almost entirely on ideological considerations.

The core class makes up 5-25% of the population. These are the ruling class, party cadres and others who are judged to be politically reliable. The wavering class are 50-75% of the population. This class is made up of low-level managers, technicians, small scale merchants and small farmers. This class also consists of the politically unreliable including those repatriated from South Korea, China, or Japan. The lazy, corrupt, bar girls, Confucianists and the practitioners of superstitions like shamans and fortune tellers also belong to this class.

Finally there is the hostile class. These are the people assigned to dangerous and hard labor due to their class. They make up 8-27% of the population. This class includes Christians, Buddhists, and

Chondo Kyo members. Anyone arrested or imprisoned and their families and all anti-revolutionary types as well as many other conditions will get you membership in this class.

This system is entirely ideologically driven. The root of the human rights abuses can be traced directly to the extreme ideology that exists in North Korea. The great famine of the late 1990s caused starvation for the lower classes and forced the people to resort to a black market economy to survive. This also pushed people to cross the border with China in search of food and hard currency. This is the genesis of the mass exodus of refugees into China.

By cooperating with North Korea in returning refugees to the regime and the oppression that drove them to flee in the first place, China is in the position of an abuser of human rights. By denying the status of refugee to those fleeing the regime of political and ideological forced starvation China is complicit in the human rights abuses suffered by refugees in its territories.

Most refugees fleeing the north cross the rivers that mark the border between North Korea and three north eastern provinces of China. The crossing is hugely dangerous and border guards have a shoot to kill order. The crossing is facilitated by smugglers, brokers, and human traffickers. The bribes necessary to cross were around \$300, a huge amount in the late 1990s. Today it will cost you \$10,000.

70-80% of those who flee North Korea are women. Once they arrive in China they often become the

victims of human trafficking. They are not recognized as refugees by China. They have no legal status or papers. If they are caught by Chinese police they are returned to North Korea to face harsh punishment. Therefore they are vulnerable to the organized gangs.

Due to economic and social conditions there is a great shortage of women in the rural provinces of China. Korean women refugees are exploited to fill this need. The young women are sold directly to brothels and the older women are sold to poor farmers by the very brokers that they paid a fortune to to escape North Korea. The only hope to get out of China is to find and pay another broker to get you out. Sometimes this takes seven or more years.

In the early 2000s christian missionaries, primarily South Koreans, became aware of the plight of these fellow Koreans and began to mount rescue missions to get them to South Korea. The brokers that knew the escape routes were for the most part ethnic Korean gangsters who demanded huge sums to guide the refugees out. The missionaries raised money to pay the fees and as much as possible made sure the brokers did what they were paid to do.

There are several main escape routes.

The best way is to enter a foreign embassy in China and claim political refugee status. The Chinese do whatever they can to block refugees from reaching friendly embassies. If the refugee is caught in Beijing near the embassies they are sent back to North Korea.

Another way is to reach Mongolia where they can be sent on to South Korea. In order to reach Mongolia a refuge must cross both internal and external borders closely guarded by Chinese border police. Again, if caught it's back to the gulag. Then the refuge has to cross the Gobi desert, a life or death journey itself.

The third way is to pass through the Chinese mainland and reach Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and eventually Thailand who will send the refugees to South Korea.

All three ways are dangerous and expensive and never sure. Along with the christian groups there are also other South Korean NGOs working on the ground in China to rescue refugees and get them to South Korea to be resettled.

The stories I've heard of the human rights abuses originated by the extreme Korean nationalism practiced in North Korea and the politically motivated indifference of the Chinese policy towards the refugees are horrific. The work being done by the missionaries and NGOs to rescue those trapped in China is heroic. The effort being made by the South Korean government and NGOs to resettle the refugees in South Korea is an example of humanitarianism in action. That being said, I can't help thinking that the human rights crisis as it pertains to the refugees is only the tip of the iceberg. There are 25 million folks living in North Korea and to one extent or another are suffering human rights abuses. If they all or a significant number decide to escape it would overwhelm the resources of any nation or group to help. The only solution is to address the ideology of the North Korean regime that has led to this situation. In the final analysis it is the extreme Korean nationalism of North Korea that needs to be addressed. This worldview and its extreme manifestation has its roots in Korean history and can be understood. The human rights issues can't be separated from the nuclear and ballistic missile issue. They have one root cause. In the short term, regime change may be needed. There are market forces at work inside North Korea that given time can produce regime change from the inside. The long term solution has to include ideological re education. We have to be ready when regime change does come to embrace and re educate the North Korean people.

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