

## **About the “defection” of twelve North Korean waitresses from a restaurant in China: South Korea’s version of the facts lacks credibility**

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HRWF (26.05.2016) - On 7<sup>th</sup> April, 12 North Korean waitresses of the Ryugyong North Korean restaurant in the Chinese coastal city of Ningbo and their male manager arrived in Seoul, South Korea’s capital, in circumstances that were then described as mysterious. Two days before, the women had shopped for backpacks at a local store where they paid, relatively expensive, full prices, an unheard-of and impossible practice among North Korean overseas workers. They were obviously preparing a trip, but did they know their destination?

North Korea accused South Korea of kidnapping its citizens and demanded their repatriation. It said the South's intelligence agents "lured and abducted" the 12 young North Koreans by using "all sorts of appeasement, deception and gimmicks". Pyongyang threatened Seoul with "unimaginable serious consequences and severe punishment."

The 12 waitresses are daughters of North Korean party and administration elites, according to Daily North Korea, a website based in Seoul, which quoted sources within the North.

### ***Is a mass defection of North Korean overseas workers possible?***

Up to now, cases of defection of individual North Korean overseas workers have been very rare, and there have not been any cases of collective defection. The reasons are simple.

Overseas workers are supposed to watch and report on each other, and a North Korean “security member” is in charge of the overall surveillance.

For these and other reasons, it is difficult to believe South Korea’s official version of a voluntary, spontaneous and simultaneous defection of the twelve young North Korean waitresses from the Chinese restaurant in Ningbo in early April. Although the women were not family members and came from different backgrounds, they would have all needed to agree together on the operation without any conflict or internal denunciation despite the high risks of reprisals against each of their families. Such a proposition is highly improbable.

### ***The itinerary of the twelve North Korean waitresses and their manager***

The waitresses left their restaurant in Ningbo on 5<sup>th</sup> April, went to Shanghai by land, and arrived in Malaysia in the morning of 6<sup>th</sup> April. On 7<sup>th</sup> April, it was announced in Seoul they had arrived in Incheon Airport. Some media outlets also reported that they were accompanied by the Chinese manager of the restaurant, who had taken 1.2 million yuan with him.

For such young North Korean women who lack any international travel experience, traveling through three countries in forty-eight hours would have been impossible without any external intervention. Assistance was certainly not provided by human traffickers as the women could not have paid them. Human rights activists in South Korea previously involved in the exfiltration of North Korean defectors were consulted by *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l*. They all deny any involvement in this operation, do not believe in a voluntary defection as such, and hold the South Korean authorities responsible for a "planned defection" of the North Korean waitresses without their consent. It is also noteworthy that after international media coverage of the incident and the furious reaction of Pyongyang, the Chinese authorities confirmed that the women had left China with valid documents. Therefore, it can be legitimately concluded that the North Korean waitresses travelled to their final destination, South Korea, without their knowledge or consent.

### ***From the contextualization of the South Korean narrative to...***

In the last few years, Seoul has particularly campaigned on the exploitation of the North Korean overseas workers by their own state and suspects that the financial benefit (around two billion USD per year) of this slavery-like activity is used for Pyongyang's military nuclear program.

In short,

- North Korea's labor export is organized, managed, and overseen as a matter of state policy;
- Workers are not paid directly by their foreign employers but receive their wage - between 120-150 dollars a month - from the North Korean state which gets much higher amounts from the employers;
- Earnings are not sent back as remittances, but appropriated by the state and transferred back to the country in the form of bulk cash, in clear violation of UN sanctions;
- Work hours range between twelve and sixteen hours a day, sometimes as much as twenty hours, and laborers are only provided one or two days of rest a month;
- Workers are not allowed to return to North Korea until their contract expires, which usually lasts three years.

It is estimated that sixteen countries are currently hosting North Korean laborers, including some EU member states, such as Poland and Malta.

The circumstances of the incident and the publicizing of it rightfully raise a lot of suspicions all the more as it coincided with the legislative elections campaign in South Korea.

While defections do not usually enjoy a lot of publicity, the South Korean government hurriedly announced the defection this time, and it can reasonably be inferred that by raising a "North Korean issue" the ruling party expected some positive impact on the outcome of the election. This was finally not the case as on 13<sup>th</sup> April the conservative Saenuri Party was defeated by ... one seat.

### ***to a possible alternative scenario***

A possible alternative scenario to the official narrative involves the deep involvement of the South Korean National Security Services (NIS) in a meticulously prepared operation with the help of the restaurant manager as part of a political strategy. Indeed, only the manager could handle the complex logistics of such a "defection" and had the moral authority to convince the waitresses to accompany him.

The manager may have been identified by the NIS as a vulnerable target to be bought or blackmailed for that spectacular operation. He could defect with a large amount of money coming from his restaurant and NIS promise of a special treatment and financial benefits in South Korea. A period must have been chosen when the North Korean security member was not around. The manager must have given back the North Korean women their passports – an unusual practice -, and told them that they were going to another restaurant in Malaysia and there that would be a stopover. The final destination after the stopover was, however, to be in... South Korea.

Noteworthy is the fact that the twelve women failed to appear in public or make statements confirming their voluntary defection. According to some sources, this is not unusual as the South Korean authorities habitually keep defectors away from the public, in a specific location, to organize their adaptation to their new life, but also to keep their identity secret and, thereby, protect their families in North Korea safe from reprisals. However, due to the exceptional circumstances of the case and the uproar made by Pyongyang on the international scene, Seoul should have released some evidence that the waitresses, whose identity is known by the North Korean authorities, were in South Korea on their own will. This was not the case. They will probably use the transition and adaptation period to try to convince each of them to stay 'on their own will' in South Korea. This is a challenging and risky bet with an uncertain outcome.

Some South Korean lawyers have started a procedure to force the South Korean authorities to clarify the situation.

### ***Seoul owes the truth to its public opinion and to the international community***

*Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l* urges

the South Korean authorities

- to allow lawyers to get access to the North Korean waitresses and to interview them;
- to grant the waitresses legal assistance if they request it;
- to clarify publicly the circumstances of the arrival of the twelve waitresses in their country;

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon

- to use its power in order to establish the facts;
- to check the legality of the situation of the North Korean waitresses.