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Re: North Korea human rights

May 7, 2018

The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President
United States of America
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Trump:

During your State of the Union ("SOTU") Address, the whole world watched as you elevated the role that human rights should play with respect to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea ("DPRK"). We were heartened to see that you highlighted stories from the North Korean community, showcasing how each of their stories "is a testament to the yearning of every human soul to live in freedom". We could not agree more. Now, as the United States discusses a proposed summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, we urge you to include human rights issues in all discussions with the DPRK including in the summit agenda.

We strongly believe that the United States and others in the international community should not hold back on condemning human rights abuses in an effort to support diplomatic dialogues. The US, in close collaboration with rest of the international community, should bring diplomatic engagement and pressure on behalf of the people of the DPRK with regards to human rights issues. This would be consistent with both the imperative to protect and promote human rights, and the United States' efforts to protect the Korean peninsula from the effects of nuclear weapons.

As you described during the SOTU Address, any discussion about the nuclear threat North Korea poses cannot be separated from how the DPRK treats its own people. The United Nations Security Council has recognized in several recent debates and resolutions that human rights abuses in the DPRK are an important element of any discussion on the DPRK's nuclear weapons [as the North Korean government continues to prioritize nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles over the basic needs of its own people](#). In December 2017, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad al Hussein, said that "the international security crisis regarding the DPRK's military actions is inseparable from concerns about the human rights situation of ordinary people in the country." On March 12, 2018, at the UN Human Rights Council, Tomás Ojea-Quintana, the UN Special

Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in DPRK, urged UN member states that “any advancement on the security dialogue should be accompanied by a parallel expansion of human rights dialogue.” Any resolution of security issues on the Korean peninsula should require addressing the DPRK’s repressive human rights record and pressing the North Korean government to commit to fundamental and wide-ranging reforms.

During 2017, there were some limited but important steps taken by the DPRK to re-engage with UN human rights mechanisms, creating a window of opportunity. According to Special Rapporteur Ojea-Quintana “the momentum is there for the negotiations to use and to bring the human rights issues into the discussion.” Mr. President -- we recommend that you use that opportunity, and urge the DPRK to improve its human rights record.

We ask that you include the following issues in the agenda of all meetings with the DPRK, including your summit with Kim Jong Un:

1. Acting on United Nations Human Rights Recommendations

The UN Commission of Inquiry on DPRK found systematic and widespread human rights violations in North Korea, in many instances constituting crimes against humanity, including:

- The existence of a prison camp system where individuals deemed political enemies of the state, sometimes along with their entire families, are held indefinitely;
- Torture, forced labor, starvation and other ill-treatment, as well as executions used routinely in these camps and other penal facilities;
- For the vast majority of North Koreans, the denial of universally recognized human rights, including police interfering with religious activities, and to freedom of movement, expression, and association.
- The deliberate and systematic closing off of North Koreans from contact with the rest of the world by preventing them from traveling, unsupervised communications, and denying them access to outside information.

We recommend that you urge the DPRK to immediately implement the following steps by:

- Opening all government detention facilities, reeducation and forced labor camps, and prisons to visits by international observers, and taking steps to release any detainees held for activities that should not, under international law, be criminalized, such as exercising their rights to freedom of speech and religion and belief, or attempting to leave or leaving the country without permission.
- Engaging with and responding to recommendations and opinions from the UN Human Rights Council and the Commission of Inquiry on the situation of human rights in the DPRK and engaging with the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK, including facilitating a country visit by him and other relevant UN special mechanisms.
- Continuing to engage with UN human rights mechanisms, including the upcoming Universal Periodic Review and under the Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; accepting UN recommendations and implementing changes on the ground; and signing and ratifying key human rights treaties, including International Labour Organization conventions and the Convention against Torture.

2. Appoint a Special Envoy for DPRK Human Rights Issues

We urge you to appoint a Special Envoy for North Korea Human Rights Issues. By elevating the issue to a Special Envoy role, the position would coordinate a whole-of-government US strategy on bringing international pressure to bear on Pyongyang for

improvements in human rights both at the summit and in conjunction with the United States' allies and partners. That responsibility should also include the following:

- To establish a regular US-North Korea human rights dialogue and ensure that it is principled, follows clear benchmarks, and is accountable. Such meetings should be followed by reports to Congress and public briefings about their content and agreements on next steps, which should include follow-up meetings at the highest levels of each government.
- Advocate further information and personal exchanges and promote the rights to freedom of expression, information and movement.

3. Separated Families and Abductions

An estimated one million Koreans have been separated or forcibly removed from their families through displacement during the war, enforced disappearances and abductions, or [following escape from the DPRK](#). The Japanese government has also identified several Japanese citizens who were abducted by the North Korean government and has stated that this remains the most important question for Japan during the US-North Korea summit. Currently, there are over 30,000 North Koreans in South Korea, Japan, and other countries with no legal way to communicate with family members in North Korea.

We recommend that you urge the DPRK:

- Press North Korea to respect the right of every person to leave any country, including his/her own, and to return to her/his country, including by granting exit visas to all persons who hold or have held South Korean or other foreign nationality and their family members who wish to leave North Korea for South Korea or other countries.
- Urge the DPRK to engage constructively on the issue of abductions and to commit seriously to investigate and respond to the allegations made against it.

4. Humanitarian Assistance

According to the UN World Food Program ("WFP"), around 70 percent of the population in the DPRK are food insecure. This affects children, and pregnant and nursing women the hardest. One in three children under five years of age, and almost half of the children between 12 and 23 months, were anemic. In October 2017, WFP said it needed US\$25.5 million for the following six months to [aid North Korean women and children](#).

Humanitarian aid is an international responsibility and is necessary to protect human life and rights. At the same time, oversight is crucial to ensure that aid goes to those who need it most and is not diverted to the DPRK military or others, regardless of whether it is provided directly by the United States, the United Nations, or through private institutions.

We recommend that you

- Provide necessary humanitarian aid and urge the DPRK government to accept [international or domestic humanitarian aid](#), with proper monitoring consistent with international standards of transparency and accountability. These standards include access throughout the country to determine needs and the ability to visit places where food and other aid is delivered.

Thank you for your consideration and we would be happy to discuss these issues further with you or your staff. If you would like to arrange a meeting please contact Francisco Bencosme, Amnesty International's Asia Advocacy Manager at FBencosme@aiusa.org.

Sincerely,

Amnesty International USA
ALTSEAN-Burma

Committee for Human Rights in North Korea
Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l (Brussels)
Korea Future Initiative

Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice
Liberty in North Korea
Midwest Alliance for North Korean Refugees
One Free Korea
People for Successful COrean Reunification
The Center for Victims of Torture
World Without Genocide

Over 1,000 North Korean workers slated for dispatch to China

By Ha Yoon Ah

Daily NK (12.04.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2FaR3MK> - Over 1,000 North Korean laborers are preparing to be dispatched to work assignments in Dandong, China, a source in the area informed Daily NK on Wednesday. This follows sightings earlier this month of over 400 North Korean workers in the Chinese city of Helong to the east, together suggesting the two countries may be cooperating to restart joint business ventures in China.

"There are already about 100 North Koreans working at one clothing factory in Dandong, and they are expecting 1,000 more after a recent conversation with a manager from the North Korean side," the source said on April 11.

The Chinese manager in the deal told the source that it is a popular opportunity among North Korean factory workers as they see it as a good chance to improve their skills, despite their expectations of low pay and long hours. "People around here are anticipating an influx of more North Korean workers in the near future," the source remarked.

A separate source in China confirmed the development, saying, "It is true that over a thousand North Korean workers are preparing for the assignment. The Chinese brokers who have engineered the deal for the jobs are working overtime right now."

He added that the workers are still receiving permits from North Korean authorities to cross into China, as per standard guidelines, though these permits only technically allow up to 30 days' stay abroad.

"[The Chinese companies] are trying to recruit more North Korean workers now as they feel sanctions may possibly be lifted and that the dangers have subsided. But they will just send them back in case they are not [lifted]," he said.

Following these developments, some are speculating that Kim Jong Un may have come to an agreement with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the matter during their meeting in Beijing last month.

Recent friction between China and the US over a brewing trade war may also be contributing to a sense of optimism among those affected in the region.

"We (Chinese people) are also hurting from sanctions, and now it seems like we are in a trade war with the US," an additional source in China said.

"Knowing this, it is possible that authorities, despite sanctions, are turning a blind eye to the arrival of the North Korean workers."

*Translated by Colin Zwirko

40 NGOs write to South Korean President Moon

April 9, 2018

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Seoul 03048
Republic of Korea

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E-mail: president@president.go.kr

Dear President Moon,

As your government discusses a proposed summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, we welcome the renewed inter-Korean dialogue and the recent progress in inter-Korean relations and urge your government to press for human rights issues to be included in all discussions with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), including in the summit agenda.

The United Nations Security Council has recognized in several recent debates and resolutions that human rights abuses in the DPRK and regional peace and security are [intrinsically connected](#). Any long-term resolution of security issues on the Korean peninsula will require addressing the DPRK's repressive rights record and pressing the North Korean government to commit to fundamental and wide-ranging reforms. On March 12, 2018, at the UN Human Rights Council, Tomás Ojea-Quintana, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in North Korea, urged countries to make it a priority to [keep pressure on the DPRK](#) to improve its human rights record and not allow it to be sidelined or upstaged by concerns about the DPRK's weapons proliferation, noting that "any advancement on the security dialogue should be accompanied by a parallel expansion on human rights dialogue."

We agree and urge you to include the following issues in the agenda of all meetings with the DPRK, including your summit with Kim Jong Un:

1. Acting on United Nations Human Rights Recommendations

During 2017, there was some limited re-engagement by the DPRK with international human rights mechanisms. We recommend that you urge the DPRK to enlarge the scope of its cooperation, including in the framework of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), such as:

- Undertaking immediate steps to address allegations about poor conditions and abuses in detention centers and prisons, including by opening all government detention centers, reeducation and forced labor camps, jails, and prisons to visits by international observers, and taking steps to release any detainees held for activities that should not, under international law, be criminalized, such as exercising freedom of speech and religion, attempting to leave or leaving the country without permission.

- Engaging with and responding to recommendations and opinions from the UN Human Rights Council and the Commission of Inquiry on the situation of human rights in the DPRK and engaging with the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK, including facilitating a country visit by him and other relevant UN rapporteurs.
- Continuing to engage with UN human rights mechanisms, including the upcoming UPR and under the Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; accepting UN recommendations and implementing changes on the ground; and signing and ratifying key human rights treaties, including International Labor Organization conventions and the Convention against Torture.

2. Inter-Korean Human Rights Engagement

The ROK's North Korean human rights act of March 2016 calls on the ROK to seek a human rights dialogue with the DPRK and exchange information "[to protect and promote the human rights of North Koreans](#)." We recommend that you press the DPRK to:

- Establish a regular inter-Korean human rights dialogue and ensure that it is principled, follows clear benchmarks, and is accountable. Such meetings should be followed by public briefings about their content and agreements on next steps, which should include follow up meetings at the highest levels of each government.
- Allow further inter-Korean information and personal exchanges and promote freedom of information and movement.
- Agree on mutual free and uncensored television and radio broadcasts across the peninsula. One proposed first step could be negotiating for mutual broadcast of ROK national television channel KBS and the DPRK's KCTV.

3. Involuntarily Separated Families and Abductions

Since the Korean War (1950-1953), an estimated one million Koreans have been separated or forcibly removed from their families through displacement during the war, enforced disappearances and abductions, or [following escape from the DPRK](#). According to the Ministry of Unification, about [130,000 ROK citizens](#) have applied to take part in reunion meetings organized by the two Korean governments since 1988. Only about 18,800 people have met their families in reunions, while approximately 60,000 are still waiting to meet their family members. More than 60 percent are now in their 80s or older.

The Korean War Abductees Family Union estimates that South Korean civilians abducted across the border during the Korean War range between 82,000 and 100,000 individuals. The South Korean government documented over 500 abductions of South Korean nationals since the 1953 armistice. Since 2013, seven South Koreans have been detained in North Korea. Currently, there are over 30,000 North Koreans in South Korea with no legal way to communicate with family members in North Korea.

We recommend that you:

- Continue to urge the DPRK to agree to regular reunion meetings of separated families, expanding its scope to any South Korean national with relatives in the DPRK, and allow regular exchanges of letters or phone calls and visits between them, at least on humanitarian grounds. Such meetings should not be held hostage to developments on security matters or inter-Korea relations.
- Press North Korea to respect the right of every person to leave any country, including his/her own, and to return to her/his country, including by granting exit visas to all persons who hold or have held South Korean or other foreign nationality and their family members who wish to leave North Korea for South Korea or other countries. The International Committee of the Red Cross should be asked to independently assess each individual's wishes in private interviews.

- Urge the DPRK to engage in broader exchange on the issue of abductions and to commit seriously to investigate and respond to the allegations made against it.
- Allow South Korean nationals to identify and collect the remains of deceased family members held by North Korea and vice versa.
- Lift existing legal restrictions on inter-Korean people-to-people contact in North and South Korea.

4. Humanitarian Aid

According to UNICEF, in December 2017 an estimated [18 million people](#) in the DPRK were experiencing food insecurity, while 200,000 children were acutely malnourished. One in three children under five years of age, and almost half of the children between 12 and 23 months, were anemic. In October 2017, the UN World Food Program said it needed US\$25.5 million for the following six months to [aid North Korean women and children](#). UNICEF faces a shortfall of US\$9.6 million to cover its programs in the DPRK in 2018. In September 2017, South Korea pledged to donate US\$8 million to these two organizations, at a time to be established.

Humanitarian aid is an international responsibility and is crucial to protect human life and rights. At the same time, it is crucial to monitor the distribution of aid to ensure it is delivered to its intended recipients, the most vulnerable, and not diverted to the DPRK military or others, regardless of whether it is provided directly by the ROK or through South Korean private institutions. Humanitarian aid for vulnerable populations is critical for young children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, persons in detention, and pregnant and nursing women. We recommend that you:

- Provide necessary humanitarian aid and urge the DPRK government to accept [international or domestic humanitarian aid](#), with proper monitoring consistent with international standards of transparency and accountability. These standards include access throughout the country to determine needs and the ability to visit places where food and other aid is delivered.

We are fully aware that raising human rights issues with the DPRK is a daunting task and note North Korea's comment on March 31, 2018, saying South Korea's support of a resolution on the situation of human rights in North Korea at the UN Human Rights Council, is "an open political provocation to the DPRK and an intolerable act of chilling the atmosphere for dialogue." However, we believe South Korea should maintain its "firm stance" as Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha said but should further press to bring up the subject. Your government's leadership is crucial in efforts to help improve human rights conditions in the DPRK while at the same time finding real, long-term solutions to the security crisis.

Thank you for your consideration and we would be pleased to discuss these matters further with your staff.

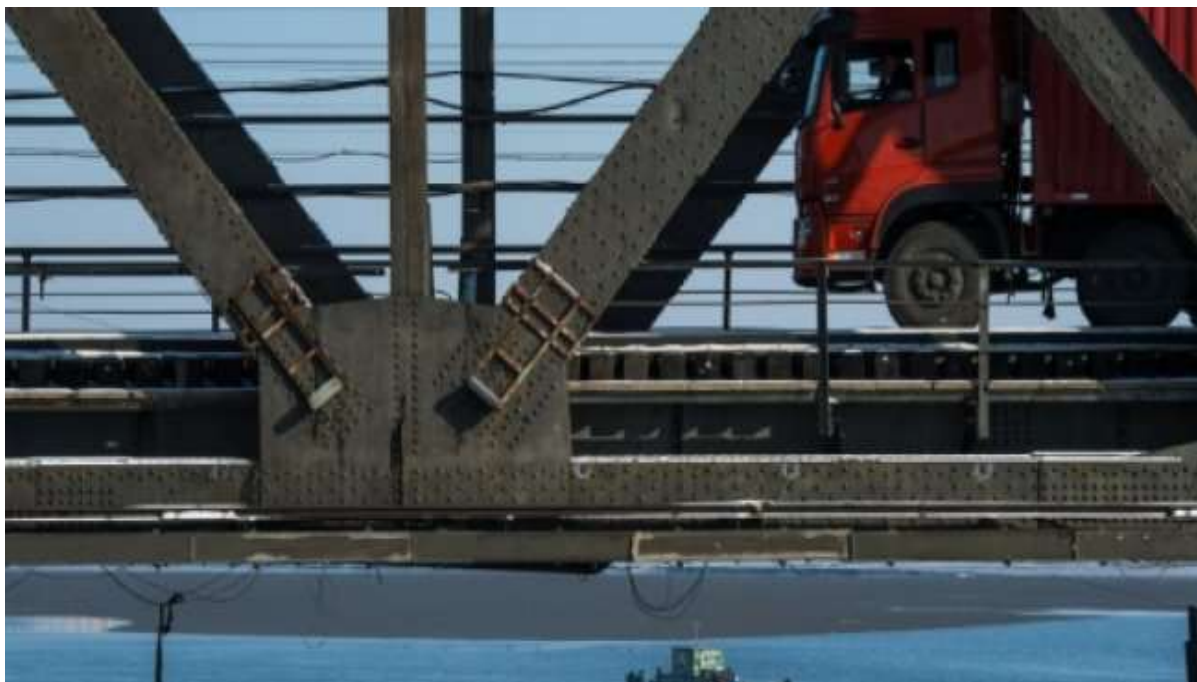
Sincerely,

1969 KAL Abductees' Families Association, South Korea
 ALTSEAN-Burma, Thailand
 Amnesty International
 Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR)
 Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD)
 Asociación Pro Derechos Humanos, Perú
 Centro para la Apertura y el Desarrollo de América Latina (CADAL), Argentina
 Christian Solidarity Worldwide
 Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights (NKHR), South Korea
 The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK), United States
 Han Voice, Canada

Helping Hands Korea_Catacombs, South Korea
Human Rights Watch
Human Rights Without Frontiers, Belgium
International Christian Concern (ICC), United States
International Coalition to Stop Crimes against Humanity in North Korea (ICNK)
International Commission of Jurists
International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights (JBI), United States
Korean War Abductees' Family Union (KWAFU), South Korea
Liberty in North Korea (LINK), United States
National Association for the Rescue of Japanese Kidnapped by North Korea, Japan
NKnet, South Korea
NK Watch, South Korea
No Fence, Japan
North Korea Freedom Coalition, United States
North Korea Strategy Center (NKSC), South Korea
Now Action & Unity for Human Rights (NAUH), South Korea
Open North Korea, South Korea
Peace and Hope International, United States
People for Successful Corean Reunification (PSCORE), South Korea
Refuge Pnan, South Korea
Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, United States
Saram, Germany
Southern Africa Litigation Centre (SALC), South Africa
The Association for the Rescue of North Korea Abductees (ARNKA), Thailand
The Korea Future Initiative, United Kingdom
Transitional Justice Working Group, South Korea
Unification Academy, South Korea
Unification Media Group, South Korea

US sanctions N. Korean, Chinese firms aiding Pyongyang

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© AFP/File | A truck on the bridge from Dandong, China into North Korea: Washington says Chinese companies in Dandong continue to trade with North Korea in violation of sanctions

AFP (24.01.2018) - The United States slapped new sanctions on North Korean and Chinese firms and individuals that it said support the Pyongyang regime of Kim Jong-Un and his nuclear weapons program.

The move comes as the US seeks to choke the flow of goods and materials crucial to North Korea's economy like oil, electronics and metals, and pressure Kim to halt the development of nuclear weapons that threaten the region and potentially the US mainland.

The new sanctions issued by the US Treasury included representatives of North Korean companies and banks mostly based in China and Russia; North Korean shipping companies and six specific vessels; and two Chinese trading firms.

"Treasury continues to systematically target individuals and entities financing the Kim regime and its weapons programs, including officials complicit in North Korean sanctions evasion schemes," Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin said in a statement.

Following UN sanctions, Mnuchin said, "the US government is targeting illicit actors in China, Russia, and elsewhere who are working on behalf of North Korean financial networks, and calling for their expulsion from the territories where they reside.

"We are sanctioning additional oil, shipping, and trading companies that continue to provide a lifeline to North Korea to fuel this regime's nuclear ambitions and destabilizing activities."

The sanctions seek to lock those named out of the global economy by banning US individuals and companies -- including foreign banks and trading firms with US entities -- from doing business with them.

North Korean traders and bankers

Ten of the individuals listed for sanctions were representatives of Korea Ryonbong General Corporation, a UN-designated company that makes acquisitions and supports sales for the North Korea defense industry.

Most were based in Chinese cities on the border with North Korea, nearby Russian cities, where they helped arrange shipping of materials and goods to North Korea.

One Ryonbong representative was based in Abkhazia, Georgia, where according to the Treasury he arranged to deploy North Korean workers, which Pyongyang uses to obtain foreign currency.

Five others worked for North Korean banks in the northern Chinese cities of Dalian and Shenyang, and in Vladivostok, Russia.

Two Chinese businesses, Beijing Chengxing Trading Co. and Dandong Jinxiang Trade Co., were placed on the sanctions blacklist sales of everything from high purity metals to used computers to North Korean businesses already named for sanctions.

Five North Korean shipping companies and six vessels were also blacklisted, as the US targets efforts by Pyongyang to obtain needed materials like oil and coal via ship to ship transfers from foreign vessels on the high seas.

The sanctions also included the North Korean Ministry of Crude Oil Industry, which could affect any foreign oil supplier doing business with the ministry.

Frustrated with China, Russia

The new sanctions represent Washington's frustrations that both China and Russia continue to enable or turn a blind eye to their own companies and shippers still doing business with North Korea.

That serves to erode the impact of sanctions designed to slow Pyongyang's nuclear weapons and missiles program, and press Kim into negotiations.

Earlier Wednesday a senior US Treasury official warned Hong Kong authorities Wednesday they must stop the city being used as a "safe harbor" for illicit trade with North Korea, in violation of United Nations sanctions.

Russia's hidden world of North Korean labor

By Emma Burrows & Matthew Chance

CNN (16.01.2018) - <http://cnn.it/2D6OWcK> - In pre-fabricated buildings, down a muddy track on the outskirts of St. Petersburg lies a world of hidden North Korean labor in Russia.

On a construction site near their shabby living quarters, a group of laborers building apartment blocks told CNN they are from North Korea. Working in conditions the US State Department calls "slave-like" labor, they are among an estimated 50,000 workers in Russia from the isolated state.

US diplomats say up to 80% of their earnings are sent back to Pyongyang to help prop up the regime of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

The United Nations has expressed concern that this money — totaling \$500 million a year from North Korea's expatriate workers globally — helps to fund Kim's missile and nuclear programs.

According to a UN Security Council resolution aimed at curbing North Korea's nuclear ambitions, countries are allowed to employ quotas of North Korean workers but not to authorize new work permits.

Under the most recent round of sanctions, Resolution 2397 states that all North Korean workers must be sent home by December 2019, cutting off a crucial source of income for Pyongyang. However, because it is unclear how many North Korean workers are currently in Russia, analysts say it is not clear whether all of them will go home.

The restriction placed on workers was part of a package of sanctions passed by the Security Council last December, which included limiting North Korea's oil imports and expanding bans on exports to the country of industrial equipment, machinery and metals.

The tougher sanctions were implemented following another North Korean missile test. Launched on November 29, the Hwasong-15 reached the highest-ever altitude by a North Korean missile, putting the entire US mainland in range, state media said.

Tighter sanctions

Although Russia backed the December UN resolution against North Korea, one senior Russian lawmaker has expressed doubts about the effectiveness of sanctions as a way to limit Kim Jong Un's ability to develop his weapons program.

"Like North Korea, Russia is also under economic sanctions. I am sure that these economic sanctions, including American sanctions, have never had any impact on our domestic or foreign policy," Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of the Russian parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs, told CNN.

"Sanctions are the wrong instrument. This is not the solution to the problem of North Korea," he said.

Tensions easing

North Korea dubbed the latest round of sanctions an "act of war" but since they were introduced, tensions have eased on the Korean peninsula with the start of the first face-to-face talks between North and South Korea in almost two years.

South Korean President Moon Jae-In credited US President Donald Trump's pressure campaign with producing the right environment for talks but North Korea's state news agency hit back, saying that the breakthrough came with better inter-Korean relations.

"It is unbearable to look at South Korea's servile attitude of thanking Trump as if the results of inter-Korean talks happened because of their international sanctions and pressures," [said the report](#).

Russia has been widely accused of undermining the spirit of the sanctions on Pyongyang by employing North Korean workers and the Russian Foreign Ministry has defended the country against reports that it has provided North Korea with shipments of fuel, saying, under the sanctions, countries are allowed to supply oil under a "quota."

Sen. Konstantin Kosachev denied any suggestion that Russia was not committed to the UN resolution on North Korea, telling CNN that Russia firmly adheres to "any sanctions which are supported by the Security Council."

Russian lifeline

However, according to Alexander Gabuev, chair of the Russia in the Asia-Pacific Program at the Carnegie Moscow Center, Russia's support of sanctions is begrudging and stems from a desire to prevent pro-western regime change in Pyongyang.

"I don't think Russia really believes in the sanctions," Gabuev said.

"There comes a point when Russia cannot afford to be the villain" and rip up sanctions against Pyongyang, Gabuev said, as "this may worsen an already bad relationship with the United States."

"While signing the international sanctions," he said, "Russia fights to make them as toothless as it can."

Ahead of the adoption of additional sanctions against North Korea last December, Russian President Vladimir Putin was [reported by the South Korean presidential spokesman](#) as saying that Russia was against cutting off oil supplies to North Korea.

"Keeping Pyongyang afloat is an important task," Gabuev said. "The country cannot do without imported fuel, which is why Russia concentrated its diplomatic effort on this, in order not to squeeze the regime too hard."

On the building site in St Petersburg, CNN approached camera-shy workers having their lunch in a canteen with signs in Korean on the walls.

Positions as overseas laborers are coveted, according to Gabuev, as workers can provide for their families as they take home better wages abroad.

But although Russia insists that the money earned by workers is used to help North Koreans to survive, critics believe the reason it continues to employ them is because it wants to avoid pro-western regime change.

"The uncontrolled collapse of North Korea means either refugee flows or war, but also ultimately a reunified Korea which is allied to the United States," Gabuev told CNN. "This could mean US troops on the Russian border which is definitely not something Russia would like to see," he added.

Moscow is engaged in a delicate balancing act — formally backing international sanctions to pressure the North Korean regime, but also extending Pyongyang a crucial lifeline.

Even in Poland, workers' wages flow to North Korea

By Peter S. Goodman, Choe Sang-Hun and Joanna Berendt

New York Times (01.01.2018) - <http://nyti.ms/2IjJ3H> - At an isolated shipyard on Poland's Baltic coast, men in coveralls used welding torches under a cold drizzle, forging

an oil tanker for a customer in the Netherlands. The scene was unremarkable, save for the provenance of a dozen of the workers.

“Yes, we are from the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea,” one of them said. “We have been here quite a while.” Then he hurried away, alarm seizing his face.

Four other welders confirmed that they were also from North Korea, the pariah state threatening the United States and much of East Asia with nuclear weapons. They, too, then scampered off.

For decades, North Korea has dispatched laborers to points around the globe, engaging tens of thousands in logging, mining and construction ventures while taking a hefty slice of their earnings. The United States has sought to shut down this enterprise, lobbying other countries to eject the workers and eliminate a source of hard currency for the North Korean economy.

But the continued presence of these workers in Poland — a NATO ally at the heart of the European Union — underscores how difficult it is to fully sever North Korea from the global economy, even as the nation accelerates efforts to build a nuclear missile capable of striking the United States.

In December, the United Nations Security Council adopted a resolution requiring all countries to expel North Korean workers within two years. The resolution, which followed the North’s launch of a new intercontinental ballistic missile in November, also imposed a sharp cut in oil shipments to the nation.

On Thursday, President Trump accused China of allowing fuel to be smuggled into North Korea, saying Beijing had been caught in the act. The assertion came amid reports of secret ship-to-ship transfers in international waters by Chinese and Russian vessels.

China and Russia, which host the majority of North Korea’s overseas workers, have long resisted American efforts to impose a global embargo on the nation. Even the European Union agreed only in October to stop renewing work permits for North Koreans.

Poland sent soldiers to fight alongside Americans in Iraq, but is nonetheless one of the few countries still hosting North Korean workers over Washington’s objections.

The State Labor Inspectorate, which regulates working conditions at Polish companies, said that perhaps 450 North Koreans remained in the country as of mid-2017, employed by at least 19 companies, including a complex of greenhouses growing tomatoes south of Warsaw.

But The New York Times found North Korean workers at two other businesses — the shipyard in Police, near the German border, and a factory that makes shipping containers in the town of Człuchów, 100 miles southwest of Gdansk.

In Poland, provincial governments issue work permits to foreign laborers, and there is little coordination with national agencies. As a result, no one appears to know precisely how many North Koreans are in Poland or what they are doing.

The Foreign Ministry has urged local governments to stop approving work permits for North Koreans, and new legislation taking effect in January will require them to do so. But until now, the provinces have persisted, illustrating the durability of commercial relationships forged during the Cold War, when Poland was a fellow member of the Communist bloc.

Relations between Poland and North Korea cooled after the fall of the Soviet Union, but Poland remains one of seven European nations to maintain embassies in Pyongyang.

The Times requested information on work permits issued to North Koreans from Poland's 16 provincial governments. Nine responded, reporting that they had given 124 new permits to North Koreans in 2017, and 253 the previous year.

Washington has intensified pressure on countries to stop hosting North Korean laborers, and the list of countries doing so has dropped to perhaps 16, including Austria and several Persian Gulf states, from about 40, according to human rights groups and United Nations reports.

The Polish government has repeatedly pledged to phase out work permits for North Koreans after negative attention in academic papers and news reports.

But the European Union has not pressed the issue, fearful of ratcheting up tensions over sovereignty issues after Britain's vote to exit the bloc. Poland's right-wing government has bristled at European criticism of its moves to exercise greater control of the courts.

"The E.U. has been afraid of driving Poland further away," said Remco Breuker, a historian and Korea expert at Leiden University in the Netherlands.

'Very Unusual'

In a warren of streets near the Oder River in Police, a dreary town of 40,000, North Korean workers are often seen walking near train tracks from the Partner shipyard to a grocery store.

Sometimes they squat on the sidewalks in front of their dormitory, smoking cigarettes while braced against a biting wind. In the evenings, they trudge to buy pastries or vegetables. On Sundays, they congregate at a local elementary school for soccer games.

"It's something very unusual," said Pawel Wieczorkowski, deputy director of the local unemployment office. "It's exotic."

The workers appear intent on maintaining a low profile. With few exceptions, North Korea's totalitarian government forbids citizens from mixing with outsiders. Those who fall under suspicion can face arrest.

"We are here legally. We pay taxes to the local government," a North Korean worker said after being approached outside the dormitory. Asked about reports that workers have been mistreated, he snapped, "They are all lies!" Then he got in a van and drove away, down a muddy alley.

North Koreans working elsewhere in Poland also keep to themselves.

At the greenhouse complex that employs North Koreans, the workers' dormitory was surrounded by a seven-foot-high concrete wall. But through a crack, a heavyset man in a thick parka could be seen directing six women to wash a blue Ford van in the winter chill.

In Koldowo, a speck of a village some 200 miles northwest of Warsaw, residents said a group of North Koreans arrived in early 2017 for jobs at Remprodex, a manufacturer of shipping containers in the nearby town of Człuchów.

During their first months, they slept inside empty containers despite the cold, residents said. Later, the workers rented half of a house tucked inside a walled compound.

Remprodex did not respond to questions, and Times reporters were turned away at the estate of the Kociszewscy family, which owns the greenhouses.

The countries hosting North Korean workers have defended the arrangements, arguing that they expose the laborers to the outside world and help them support their families.

Conditions back home can be so desperate that some North Koreans pay bribes to get these jobs.

But human rights organizations, North Korean defectors and United Nations monitors have described the assignments as forced labor because the workers are physically confined, under constant surveillance and deprived of most of their wages.

As many as 147,000 North Koreans now work abroad, according to a recent estimate by the Korea Institute for National Unification in Seoul, and the ruling Workers' Party in Pyongyang is said to seize anywhere from 30 to 80 percent of each laborer's earnings.

That amounts to a significant revenue source for a regime increasingly pinched by international sanctions — between \$200 million and \$500 million annually, according to most experts.

'Trade Secrets'

The call that would put her in business with North Korea came around 2007, Cecylia Kowalska recalled.

At the time, she ran a company in the port city of Gdansk that supplied electrical and welding services to the shipping and construction industries.

A shipyard in Gdansk needed someone to manage 10 North Korean welders who had worked there in the past, she said. They had been employed through another firm that had struggled to pay them on time.

Ms. Kowalska, now 67, said her company, Armex, assumed responsibility for the workers, and then established a relationship with the North Korean partners who had brought them to Poland.

She later began supplying North Korean welders to two other shipyards, run by Crist S.A. and Nauta S.A., both companies that make war vessels for NATO members.

"They were skilled and hard-working," she said of the North Koreans.

Ms. Kowalska also served as the legal representative of a company called Wonye that was established to supply workers to factories, shipyards, and fruit and vegetable wholesalers, according to Polish corporate records.

The records identify Wonye's president as a North Korean named Jo Chol-yong.

In the mid-1990s, a man of the same name and birth date worked for a North Korean company controlled by the ruling party department that oversees the nation's nuclear and missile programs, according to a registry of Pyongyang residents smuggled out of North Korea.

Wonye's vice president is listed as Kang Hong-gu, who appears to have previously served as commander of a unit involved in construction, the 8th Sokdojon Brigade, according to the Pyongyang registry.

Ms. Kowalska said she helped establish Wonye in 2015 as a favor to one of her North Korean partners but never took an active role and sold her shares the next year.

According to research by Mr. Breuker and his colleagues, Armex received its workers from the Rungrado General Trading Corporation, a North Korean supplier of overseas workers sanctioned by the United States in 2016 and accused of funding the department that oversees the nuclear weapons program.

Asked about her partners, Ms. Kowalska said she was uncertain of their names and promised to look them up. But she later declined to identify them, saying that doing so would divulge “trade secrets.”

Once, she recalled, one of the North Koreans suggested she buy a gift for officials in Pyongyang — a sword. “A sign of our thanks for this partnership,” she said. “I thought it was like buying someone flowers.”

The sword was later displayed in a hall for gifts to North Korea’s leaders and highlighted in a North Korean propaganda video that identified Armex by name.

Ms. Kowalska said the partnership proceeded smoothly until three years ago, when a North Korean welder without adequate safety gear burned to death at the Crist shipyard. The accident alarmed Crist’s customers, among them a Danish shipbuilder that had employed the Polish shipyard to handle work on a war vessel for Denmark, another NATO member.

Soon afterward, Ms. Kowalska said, she stopped hiring North Korean workers “because it became such a sensitive issue.” She added that she was now retired and no longer managed North Korean workers.

But her North Korean partners still appear to be active in Poland.

On a recent afternoon, Times reporters spotted two vehicles with Polish license plates parked outside the workers’ dormitory at the tomato greenhouses: the van that was being washed and a dark Mercedes sedan.

According to records seen by The Times, the van is registered to Wonye’s vice president, Mr. Kang, and the Mercedes to its president, Mr. Jo.

A Parallel Reality

Though the European Union maintains extensive labor protections, North Koreans who have worked there describe a parallel reality.

“Our girls lived as if they were in prison,” said Kim Tae-san, a North Korean defector who worked in the Czech Republic from 2000 to 2002 supervising 200 young North Korean women in a shoe factory.

He said the women were forced to remain during off-hours in their dormitory, where they attended ideological study sessions and could watch only movies and propaganda documentaries sent from home.

Once a week, he added, they were allowed out to go to the market — but only in groups.

North Koreans sent to work overseas are vetted for political loyalty, but the government also sends minders to watch them. Mr. Kim said the workers also “monitored each other.”

The women worked six days a week, earning \$150 a month but keeping only about \$25 for food and savings. Their supervisors took the rest, Mr. Kim said, spending some of the money on housing but sending most of it back to the authorities in North Korea.

Poles who have worked with North Koreans describe similar conditions. A shipyard worker at Crist, for example, recalled how a North Korean colleague fell ill on the job and was urged by a paramedic to stop working. Instead, the man became frantic, insisting he had to continue.

"This is slave labor," said Agnes Jongerius, a Dutch member of the European Parliament, who has urged European authorities to force Poland to stop admitting North Korean workers.

Ms. Kowalska scoffed at allegations of abuse and said the North Koreans she managed enjoyed "a normal life."

"They asked us for advice on what to buy their wives and kids," she said. "They liked to buy lingerie for their wives. It was a popular gift, and they would ask us about inexpensive shops."

She said her company paid the workers about \$780 per month. She acknowledged at first that Armex sent a portion of their wages to a North Korean company, but later said she had misspoken and no one took a cut.

As international scrutiny has intensified, the State Labor Inspectorate has vowed to investigate claims of abuse. So far, the agency has found "no signs of forced labor," said Dorota Gorajska, an official responsible for companies that employ foreign workers.

Officials acknowledged, however, that inspections have generally been confined to paperwork and that when interviews are conducted, investigators typically rely on translators provided by employers.

Given North Korea's reputation, does that not taint their findings? An official at the inspectorate, Michal Tyczynski, took a deep breath.

"It's a tricky question," he said. "There is no good answer to this question."
