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North Korea arrests citizens for thought crimes after anti-exile protests

By Hyemin Son, Leejin Jun and Eugene Whong

Radio Free Asia (12.06.2020) – <https://bit.ly/3fBQ8b9> – North Korea's State Security Department is hunting down and arresting residents who spoke positively of defectors and refugees who have escaped to South Korea after those arrested were forced to participate in recent protest rallies against the escapees, sources inside the DPRK told RFA.

RFA's Korean Service reported that one such rally, occurring over the weekend in Pyongyang, was a response to defector and refugee groups in South Korea sending propaganda leaflets by balloon into North Korean territory from a launching point south of the inter-Korean border.

Leaflet campaigns are a common tactic of opponents of the North Korean regime and human rights groups in the South. They contain information that the Pyongyang government withholds from its citizens, as well as items such as U.S. dollars or USB flash drives containing videos that are banned in North Korea.

Sources told RFA that although the government's objective was to denounce the activities of the escapees in the South, by forcing citizens to participate in the protest they had inadvertently made them aware that the former North Koreans enjoy more freedoms now as citizens of South Korea.

Sources in North Korea told RFA Thursday that the State Security Department secretly monitored participants of the protest rallies, which apparently occurred in places other than Pyongyang. The department has arrested citizens who avoided the rallies and those who made complaints or spoke positively of the escapees.

"A worker at a chemical complex in South Pyongan province who was called in by an official from the State Security Department has not returned home after two days," a South Pyongan resident who requested anonymity told RFA on Thursday.

“After participating in a rally condemning North Korean defectors on the 6th, he told a close acquaintance that the defectors [in South Korea] are people who seriously do important work. This caught the ear of a security official,” the source said, using the politically charged term “defector” which colloquially refers in both North and South Korea even to refugees from the North.

Western human rights organizations like to make a distinction between defectors, who had connections to the North Korean government or military at the time they escaped North Korea, and refugees, laypeople who left the North usually for economic reasons.

The source said that the security officials had been investigating participants at the rally held at the chemical company.

“After the rally in the chemical complex’s front yard, which was mandatory for all the factory workers to attend, there was another demonstration by the Kimilsungist-Kimjongilist Youth League the next day,” the source said.

The league is the country’s main youth organization, modeled after the Soviet Komsomol.

“After the demonstration, the security department official at the factory secretly investigated the responses of the rally participants and arrested the absentees and three young men who talked about the rally,” the source said.

“Authorities are responding sensitively to public opinion on

the rally because they want to protect the authority of the highest dignity," said the source, using an honorific term to refer to Kim Jong Un, who was highly criticized on the leaflets that sparked the government-organized demonstrations.

"No one knows who else may be caught by the State Security Department's investigation," the source said.

But the source said that rounding up participants for thought crimes would only cause the people to resent the cult of personality centered on the Kim family even more.

"The stronger the authorities crack down on the residents who criticize demonstrations against defectors and continuously hold these forced demonstrations [where we must] call for the elimination [of those] critical to the highest dignity, the colder the public sentiment toward the highest dignity is," said the source.

"Residents are questioning the authorities' overreaction, saying that the power of North Korean defectors in South Korea has grown large enough [that we are being told to] deal with them as 'enemies,' [of the state]" the source said.

Demonstrations were held in North Pyongan province as well, according to a local source who requested anonymity for security reasons.

“On the 7th, a local party organization called in farmers who were busy finishing rice planting to criticize North Korean defectors, saying they had the audacity to ‘punch the sun in the sky,’” the second source told RFA Friday.

North Korean leaders are often compared to celestial objects as a matter of deep reverence.

“[Authorities] urged [the farmers] to concentrate on [their work] in the spirit of crushing traitors,” said the second source.

The sudden shift in government rhetoric was jarring for the farmers.

“Some are dumfounded by the propaganda, saying it is as if our enemy has suddenly been changed from the U.S. to North Korean defectors,” the second source said, suggesting it is uncommon for the government even to acknowledge people who have escaped from the country, as they want to hide their existence from the public.

They found it especially uncharacteristic of authorities to be critical of escapees because in areas of the province near the Chinese border, they are able to extract bribes from persons connected with former citizens who now reside in South Korea.

“Authorities, including the State Security Department, love

the people in the Ryongchon area because there are a lot of smugglers and families of North Korean defectors who bribe them often,” said the second source.

Even the language used by the authorities to refer to escapees has now become harsher, the source said.

“Prior to now, the authorities usually called residents who went to South Korea ‘illegal border crossers,’ but I don’t know why they are [suddenly] using the new term ‘defectors,’” the second source said, saying that the switch in language makes their crimes sound more serious.

“Illegal border crossers” can refer to anyone who has fled the country by crossing the Sino-Korean border, regardless of where they end up. The term has a much less treasonous nuance to it than “defector.”

“Residents who have heard the new term ‘defectors’ are envious of the fact that the defectors [are able to] successfully settle in South Korea, not only because they are able to help their families still [in North Korea,] but also because they enjoy the freedom to criticize the highest dignity.”

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