

# North Korean Workers Return to China as Coronavirus Epidemic Spreads

RFA (05.02.2020) – <http://bit.ly/31K1Zy3> – Despite the novel coronavirus (nCoV) epidemic in China, North Korean workers who returned home for the Lunar New Year holiday are returning across the border in large groups, sources familiar with the situation told RFA.

Sources say that the workers are being placed in harm's way because North Korea is desperate for foreign currency.

"A group of young women who looked like North Korean workers arrived here in China at about 3:00 p.m. yesterday," a resident of the city of Dandong, on the Sino-Korean border, told RFA's Korean Service Wednesday.

The source, who lives in an apartment building across from the Dandong maritime customs office, said the office was totally empty when they arrived because of the coronavirus outbreak.

"About 50 of the workers got on a large bus and a van that was waiting in front of the customs office and left for somewhere," the source said.

"Their legal status in China should have expired sometime before the Lunar New Year (Jan. 25), so they probably returned

to North Korea. So they are believed to be reentering China," the source added.

### ***New Year's Exodus***

Prior to the Lunar New Year holiday, the source said there was a mad dash for many North Koreans in China to get home.

"An average of more than 500 North Korean workers per day were returning to North Korea between Jan. 20 to 24," said the source.

"They went home to renew their visas to stay in China, even though the coronavirus situation [exploded]," the source said.

The source believes that a steady stream of North Koreans will continue to show up in Dandong in the coming weeks.

"I expect that North Korean workers that complete the visa renewal process will continue to come to China," said the source.

"Even though people are prohibited [by the North Korean government] from traveling to and from China, because of the virus, it seems that workers who earn foreign currency will be granted exceptions," the source said.

RFA reported on Jan. 29 that trade was suspended between Dandong and Sinuiju, the North Korean city on the southern side of the Yalu.

A Chinese citizen living in Sinuiju told RFA Wednesday that the group of female workers had been spotted there prior to the Lunar New Year.

“They entered Sinuiju en masse about a week before the New Year, and they were put in isolation, nine to a single hotel room,” the second source said.

“The reason they are going back to China in the middle of the coronavirus epidemic is because they are in a hurry to earn foreign currency. On top of that, they need to vacate the isolation rooms for the next group of workers,” said the second source.

The second source was critical of North Korean authorities, who have very publicly tightened up the border and placed many people in quarantine over the past few weeks.

“I would like to ask why they are sending the workers to China when the virus is still totally out of control. Are they not interested in the safety of these young women?” said the second source.

“It seems pretty obvious at this point that the authorities are only initiating quarantine procedures to protect Kim Jong

Un and the Pyongyang elite [rather than the people.]”

After the initial breakout in the central Chinese city of Wuhan, China has seen the number of confirmed nCoV cases nationwide balloon to 24,405, with 492 deaths as of Wednesday afternoon. Outside of China there are 226 confirmed cases and two deaths.

North Korea has not reported a confirmed case.

*Reported by Joonho Kim for RFA's Korean Service. Translated by Leejin Jun. Written in English by Eugene Whong.*