

## **Poland: Ending the exploitation of North Korean workers (2019)**



*HRWF statement at the OSCE/ODIHR (© HRWF)*

**After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall, Poland continued to have many overseas workers from North Korea, which had been a common practice when both countries had a Communist regime. However, after 1989, it was not the state that was their employer, but private Polish and foreign companies.**

**Since Kim Jong-un became the Supreme Leader of North Korea in 2011, he has sought out foreign currencies to finance his military nuclear program. One of the sources he uses for this is a scheme where North Korea sends its citizens to work abroad and then confiscates 80 - 90% of their salaries. Current estimates are that over 50,000 North Koreans are working in approximately 20 countries. Poland was one of them. It is estimated that between €1.2 – 2.3 billion is collected by the North Korean regime from this exploitation of their overseas workers.**

**Since the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, Poland - a Member State of the European Union and a participating State of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) - has been second only to Russia in providing North Korea with foreign income by issuing work permits to thousands of North Korean workers. This practice lasted for close to three decades as North Koreans were sent to shipyards, orchards and other worksites. There they were subjected to various forms of exploitation by their own political regime, with**

**the passive approval of the Polish authorities and the private companies hiring them.**

**Examples of unlawful exploitation of these workers included:**

- **Upon arrival in Poland, workers' passports and visas were confiscated by a North Korean so-called 'supervisor';**
- **Work hours ranged between 12 and 16 hours a day, with only one or two days of rest a month;**
- **They received an average monthly wage of \$120-150 per month, which is only 10-20% of their actual labour value in the contracts. As they were not allowed to have a bank account or to receive this money in cash, they were given a small stipend for personal use. They were only able to collect the total amount of their \$120-150 monthly wages upon return to North Korea;**
- **While in Poland, North Korean workers were denied freedom of movement. Every day they were transferred to and from their worksite and dormitories by bus and were under constant surveillance by North Korean security agents. They often did not have any contact with the local population and were separated from non-North Korean workers in their workplaces.**

**An exceptional TV report was aired on this issue on 27 February 2017 by VICE news:**

[https://www.vice.com/en\\_asia/article/yepa8j/cash-for-kim-north-korean-forced-laborers-in-poland](https://www.vice.com/en_asia/article/yepa8j/cash-for-kim-north-korean-forced-laborers-in-poland)

Willy Fautré, the director of HRWF, raised this issue every year from 2015 to 2018 at the annual OSCE / ODIHR Human Rights Implementation Meeting. HRWF was the only NGO to advocate against this exploitive practice at the OSCE level and to urge Poland to stop delivering visas to North Korean workers as long as they were not being paid properly.

Additionally, the UN Human Rights Council enforced sanctions against North Korea's nuclear program which included a ban on recruiting new North Korean workers worldwide.

This coupled with pressure from HRWF and the OSCE / ODIHR resulted in Polish authorities finally addressing the labour exploitation occurring in their territory. Poland progressively stopped issuing or prolonging visas for North Korean workers until, in 2019, there were no more North Korean labourers in Poland.