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Six North Korean soldiers cross river border to escape to China

Military sources say life as a border guard is no longer as cushy as it was before coronavirus.

By Yonggun Shin

Radio Free Asia (24.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3rEc1fa> - A group of six North Korean soldiers guarding the Yalu River border with China abandoned their posts and escaped across the river early this month, sources in the North Korean military told RFA.

The six soldiers were stationed near at the border in the country's northern Ryanggang province, near the city of Hyesan. Sources told RFA that their increased work schedule and meager supply since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020 left them hungry and overworked, but authorities have yet to identify the motive for their escape.

"On the 3rd... six soldiers of the 25th Border Guard brigade escaped with their weapons. It's caused quite the stir among not only the border security bureau, but also the troops near the Hyesan area," a military official from Hyesan told RFA's Korean Service Monday.

"The six were on nighttime stakeout at the border on the night of the 2nd and did not show up after their scheduled return time in the early morning. A search team combed the entire border area looking for them. It was determined that the six had crossed the river with their weapons and escaped to China," said the source, who requested anonymity for security reasons.

Soldiers in the North Korean military are not adequately supplied by the government. It is not uncommon to see soldiers in uniform working on farms to make enough food to supply their unit.

But under normal circumstances, soldiers posted at the border are in a relatively privileged situation and can easily find ways to make enough money to support themselves. Many accept bribes to look the other way when smugglers shuttle goods into and out of the country, while others do the smuggling themselves.

However, smuggling came to a near halt at the start of coronavirus pandemic. In January 2020, Beijing and Pyongyang shut down the Sino-Korean border and suspended all trade, with disastrous effect on the North Korean economy.

To further deter people from crossing the border Pyongyang in the summer established a kill zone, warning that anyone found within one kilometer of the border would be shot on sight.

Authorities also ordered border security to lay land mines along some parts of the border and sent special forces to keep a watchful eye on the border guards.

"Usually, border guard soldiers are in collusion with professional smugglers and bundle merchants, and they live better than soldiers in other regions. But the coronavirus outbreak has been raging for more than a year, so smuggling has completely stopped, and they are suffering from hunger these days," the source said.

"Both professional and amateur smugglers can't even approach the border in times like this. There's a shoot-to-kill order from the General Command, and the intensity of border security is much higher than in the past. The soldiers are all tired," said the source.

Another military source from Ryanggang Tuesday confirmed that the six soldiers from the 25th Brigade had escaped to China by crossing the Yalu River with their automatic rifles.

"As this incident was reported to the Central Committee, the area around Hyesan and the border area was completely turned upside down," said the second source, who requested anonymity to speak freely.

"Border security command and a search team from the State Security department searched the border area and the city of Hyesan, but they concluded that the six border guard soldiers had already escaped to China," the second source said.

The second source said that the border guards are in such a privileged position that only those with good connections can join their ranks.

"They are better supplied, and they can more easily make extra income than other military units. Border guards don't actually guard the border, they take money from

Chinese and North Korean smugglers who illegally cross the border. They lived quite well before the coronavirus," said the second source.

"The soldiers' motives for escaping North Korea are still unknown, but people assume that they either accidentally crossed the river to steal food because they were hungry, or they might have been planning to escape the country and finally executed their plan while on nighttime stakeout duty," said the second source.

The second source said that the border security bureau is in a state of chaos over the escape. One soldier escaping would be a problem, but six escaping together makes the case serious enough that the Central Committee of the ruling Korean Workers' Party is paying close attention.

"The General Command notified the Chinese border guards and requested cooperation in the search and arrest of the escaped soldiers, and China seems to be taking this case very seriously. Since the six soldiers are armed and dangerous, the Chinese guards must be very nervous about what could happen," said the second source.

"Residents of the border area have had a very difficult time making a living in the era of the coronavirus. The escape of the six soldiers has only increased tension in the border area with more frequent and thorough inspections," the second source said.

The six escapees are not the only ones responsible for their escape, according to the second source.

"Even if they are caught, their entire company will be disbanded, and their commanders and anyone else involved will have to take responsibility, so it will be a bit of a bloodbath here for a while."

Photo credits: Reuters

S. Korea declines to co-sponsor UN resolution on NK human rights violations

By Ji-Sun Choi

The Dong-A Ilbo (23.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2NKqCrE> - The South Korean government has decided to decline to co-sponsor a United Nations resolution condemning North Korea's human rights violations, which will be adopted at the 46th session of the Human Rights Council on Tuesday. South Korea has not joined the resolution as a co-sponsor since 2019. The Joe Biden administration, however, put human right issue on top of its North Korea policy, heavily condemning North Korea as an "oppressive regime." Predictions are out that there could be friction between Seoul and Washington over how to deal with human rights violations in North Korea.

A South Korean government official said on Monday that South Korea will not join this year's UN resolution on human rights violations in North Korea as a co-sponsor but will only support a resolution adopted by consensus. South Korea had co-sponsored the resolution for 11 straight years from 2008 to 2018 but the Moon Jae-in administration refused to co-sponsor the UN's North Korea human rights resolution since 2019, saying it made the decision by comprehensively considering the situation on the Korean Peninsula.

On the other hand, the Biden administration returned to the UN Human Rights Council this year in three years and joined the resolution as a co-sponsor along with 43

countries, including Japan and the European Union. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken denounced North Korean leader Kim Jong Un by saying the North Korean people are being subject to widespread and systematic abuses under the oppressive regime during his visit to South Korea on Wednesday and Thursday.

Presumed North Korean' caught by South Korean military at inter-Korean border

The man was caught Tuesday morning and a probe is currently underway, Joint Chiefs of Staff says

By Min Chao Choy

NK News (16.02.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2LSyITA> - A "presumed North Korean man" was found by the South Korean military near the East Sea side of the inter-Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) on Tuesday morning, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said.

The man was detected on military CCTV at around 4:20 a.m. moving North-to-South and was taken into custody by the ROK military around 7:20 a.m. An investigation is underway on whether or not the man crossed to defect, messages from the JCS to reporters stated.

"So far, there has been no unusual trend from North Korean troops," a follow-up message read.

The detection is the first publicly known land border intrusion in 2021, after several high-profile detections on both sides of the border in 2020. Two North Korean defectors living in the South separately attempted to re-defect back to the DPRK last [September](#) and [July](#), with the latter succeeding by going through a drain near the border in western Ganghwa-eup and swimming to the North.

[In Nov. 2020](#), a North Korean man crossed the eastern border in Gangwon province and was found by the South Korean military around 10 hours later. Follow-up [media reports](#) alleged that the North Korean was a former gymnast who vaulted over the 3-meter barbed-wire border fence.

[In Sept. 2020](#), North Korean soldiers shot dead and burned a South Korean Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries official after they found him floating overboard in DPRK waters, sparking an inter-Korean crisis.

The killing is one of the few confirmed examples of North Korea's "shoot on sight" policy to those detected along a 1 to 2-kilometer "buffer zone," created [in response](#) to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kim Jong-un bans South Korean style music and TV

A new law against "reactionary thinking" has been in place for some time. Fines for parents who allow their children to have fun with music; 15 years in prison for those who watch southern television; life sentence for non-registered foreign cell phones; death penalty for products imported from the US and Japan.

By AsiaNews

AsiaNews (21.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3pjhiZk> - North Korean leader Kim Jong-un is carrying out a campaign that bans listening to music, watching soap operas on TV, and expressing oneself in South Korean style, under pain of high fines or imprisonment. It is yet another attempt to combat "reactionary thinking", and to privilege the national (and controlled) media.

The law provides fines for parents for allowing their children to violate the ban. Up to 15 years in prison in forced labor camps are imposed for those caught watching South Korean television; for those who produce or distribute pornography, for those who use unregistered foreign televisions, radios, computers, cell phones.

According to some sources, Southern-style writing and speaking is also prohibited. The Daily NK, a Seoul-based agency that monitors the North, says anyone caught importing prohibited material from South Korea faces life imprisonment. and whoever imports it from the United States or Japan faces a death sentence.

Various experts see in this new law and in the harsh punishments connected with the government's attempt to curb information that comes from outside, including from China, which is gaining more and more respect, especially among young people.

Tae Yong-ho, the first North Korean exile elected to the Southern Parliament, said: "During the day the people shout 'Long live Kim Jong-un', but at night everyone watches South Korean dramas and films".

An important fact is that, while information is blocked from the outside, Kim Jong-un promised **at the recent party congress** to expand the wifi network throughout the country and improve local television production.

South Korea bans balloons carrying leaflets to the North

CSIS (22.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/38zJa4e> - The South Korean National Assembly last week approved legislation that imposes stiff fines and jail terms for sending leaflets, USB sticks, Bible verses, and even money across the 38th parallel into North Korea via balloons. Under the legislation, South Koreans could face fines of up to \$27,000 (30 million South Korean won) and up to three years in prison for violating the law.

The **legislation was adopted** by the National Assembly in a partisan vote supported overwhelmingly by the ruling Democratic Party but boycotted by the opposition party. Opposition lawmakers refused to participate in the vote as a symbol of protest. The opposition parliamentarians attempted to delay passage of the legislation by nonstop speeches against the bill. Assemblyman Tae Yong-ho, who had been a North Korean diplomat and was deputy chief of mission at the North Korean embassy in London before he defected to the South, spoke for 10 hours. Tae said the law was "aimed a joining hands with Kim Jong-un and leaving North Korean residents enslaved for good." But the Democratic Party used its three-fifths parliamentary supermajority to stop the speeches and bring the issue to a final vote.

The legislation now awaits the signature of President Moon Jae-in, and there seems to be little doubt he will sign it. The National Assembly is dominated by Moon's political party, and his government has voiced its support for the bill. Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha **defended passage** of the legislation arguing that freedom of expression should be limited because balloon leaflets "endanger the safety of people living in border regions." She said, "Freedom of expression, I think, is absolutely vital to human rights, but it's not absolute. It can be limited."

Despite some claims that the balloons were endangering the safety of those living in the border region, little concrete evidence has been supplied about the danger. In recent years, in fact, the most common danger reported along the border has been North Koreans firing into the South to prevent a soldier from defecting or simply harassing South Korean border troops.

North Korean Pressure to End Balloon Launches

North Korea's leaders are adamantly opposed to the balloons carrying leaflets and other information. In their April 2018 meeting, President Moon and North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong-un agreed to end their psychological warfare and lower animosity at a time when both sides seemed positive about the possibilities of reconciliation.

Six months ago, Kim's powerful sister Kim Yo-jong gave a **furious denunciation** of "South Korea's inability to halt civilian balloon leafleting and demanded it ban the activity." She called North Korean defectors involved in the balloon leafleting "human scum" and "mongrel dogs," and she challenged the South to deal with the problem: "Now that the mongrel dogs are doing others harm, it is time to bring their owners to account. I would like to ask the South Korean authorities if they are ready to take care of the consequences of evil conduct done by the rubbish-like mongrel dogs who took no scruple to slander us while faulting the 'nuclear issue' in the meanest way at the most untimely time."

Kim Yo-jong threatened that should Seoul not act as Pyongyang demands, it "had better get themselves ready for the possibility of the complete withdrawal of the already desolate Kaesong Industrial Park following the stop to tours of Mt. Kumgang, or shutdown of the north-south joint liaison office whose existence only adds to trouble, or the scrapping of the north-south agreement in military field which is hardly of any value." [In North Korean usage, "south" and "north" are never capitalized in reference to the two Koreas.]

Just hours after Kim Yo-jong issued her tirade against the leaflet balloons, the **South Korean government responded** that it would take immediate action to prohibit the sending of fliers via balloon because they caused "tension" with the North. The spokesperson of the Ministry of Unification **said**, "most leaflets have been found in our territory, causing environmental pollution and increasing burden on local people to get rid of them."

But the real risk for the Moon government is that by responding so quickly to the derisive dressing down from Kim Yo-jong, it may give Seoul the appearance of being overly eager to accede to Pyongyang's demands. Such a response weakens Seoul's ability to negotiate with the North. The quick capitulation by the South only encourages Pyongyang to take a tougher stance in the future.

North Korea underlined that it was less interested in rapprochement with the South than in getting its own way by force when a few days after these events, the North **destroyed the large building** in Kaesong built by the South Korean government as a joint liaison office where the two Koreas could maintain offices for better communication and cooperation. The two-year-old building reportedly had cost the South some \$70 million, but it was, in the words of the North Korean official media, "tragically ruined with a terrific explosion." The "tragic" action was, in fact, deliberate North Korean action.

The South Korean National Assembly took six months to adopt the legislation prohibiting balloons on the border, but it is clear that both the Kim family in the North and Moon in the South are concerned that time is short to make progress on reconciliation. Moon was chief of staff to South Korea's president Roh Moo-hyun (February 2003-February 2008). Roh held his only summit with North Korea's then-supreme leader Kim Jong-il in October 2007, and his term as president ended four months later. Moon himself has been anxious to make progress with North Korea so that he will not find himself out of time before making significant progress in engaging the North. His single five-year term ends in May 2022—in just 18 months. The sense of urgency appears to be driving the South Korean government.

The Impact of Balloons in Getting Information to the North

Balloons carrying leaflets, USB flash drives, and money are periodically launched into the North by South Korean human rights organizations. Their effectiveness is debated. Proponents argue that balloons are an important way of getting external information into the North, while opponents

argue that they are an environmental problem and can be dangerous. The North's crocodile tears for the environmental damage caused by balloon-carried leaflets are not matched by concern for the **economic impact on the environment** in the North.

A RAND Corporation study of publicly available information assessed the state of balloon and drone technology for delivering information into North Korea. The study compared efforts in Korea with early Cold War efforts using balloons to deliver information in Central Europe. Based on modeling, it concluded that balloons launched under favorable wind conditions could potentially penetrate deep into North Korea, but based on anecdotal reports, they do not get far beyond the border region. The study suggested that balloons are "saturating" the border area with leaflets, but they do not reach further into the country.

Studies conducted by U.S. international information organizations have assessed how North Koreans are getting external information based on interviews with refugees and travelers recently arrived from North Korea. There are limitations on access to information because of North Korean hostility to anyone seeking information about the country, but these studies represent the best currently available sources of information. This first study was done in 2012, but **more recent information** continues to suggest that balloon-delivered leaflets are not a principal source of external information.

The balloon launch events do have value to North Korean human rights groups in South Korea. They provide valuable media attention with frequent photographs and video images of huge balloons carrying information leaflets and other information to the North. For such groups, the media events are very useful in calling attention to their cause. The fact that the two North Korean defectors who have been elected to serve in the National Assembly were very vocal in their support of the balloons indicates their view of the value of such actions. While they may not be the best means of getting external information into the North, they do serve a very important role in the North Korean human rights community in the South.

Negative Reaction against the Ban in the United States and Elsewhere

South Korea is obviously sharply divided over the issue of banning balloons, but vocal disapproval from South Korea's allies has been harsh. The United States, which by tradition has given particular emphasis in its political culture to freedom of speech and expression, has been most critical of the legislation. There have been no statements of support from the United States for stopping balloon launches.

Reportedly, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun confidentially expressed concern about the balloon prohibition during his recent visit to South Korea. Due to the strong alliance relationship between the two countries, however, the former U.S. special representative for North Korean policy did not express these concerns publicly, but several sources indicate that he did convey them in private to senior South Korean officials. U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Harry Harris also reportedly expressed U.S. concerns to South Korean officials. South Korean newspapers have also **reported** such expressions of concern.

In response to a press query on the leafleting ban, a **State Department spokesperson said** on Monday, December 22, "With regard to the DPRK, we continue to campaign for the free flow of information into the DPRK," and "As a global policy, we advocate for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms." While South Korean government officials have argued that the balloon ban does not infringe on freedom of expression, the legislation is clearly identified that way by opponents and some foreign governments.

Justice Michael Kirby of Australia, the former chair of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK, also **suggested** that the incoming Biden administration is likely to have similar freedom of information concerns about prohibiting balloons. In an interview, Kirby cited Americans' strong commitment to the freedom of information even when individuals disagree with what is being said. The Australian jurist expressed his opinion that the incoming U.S. president is "likely" to strongly oppose limiting freedom of expression.

Members of Congress have also spoken out critically of South Korea's ban on balloons, including Representative **Gerald Connolly** (D-VA), a senior member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and co-chair of the Congressional Caucus on Korea, an organization of members who are generally very supportive of the South. Representative Michael McCaul (R-TX), another senior member of the

House Foreign Affairs Committee, issued a **statement** saying that the legislation could “deepen the brutal isolation imposed on millions of North Koreans by the dictatorship in Pyongyang.” Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ), the Republican co-chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission of the U.S. House of Representatives, said that the Commission **will hold hearings** on the South Korean law in the next few weeks.

Leaders of U.S. human rights organizations have likewise **expressed concern** about the new South Korean legislation. Manpreet Singh Anand, regional director for Asia-Pacific programs at the National Democratic Institute said, “Criminalizing those who are merely facilitating access to information can do irreparable harm to human rights defenders and will likely embolden the regime in Pyongyang to make more anti-democratic demands.”

Critics of the balloon ban legislation, in addition to Justice Michael Kirby of Australia, include Lord David Alton, an important human rights voice who is a member of the British House of Lords. Alton in a letter to the British foreign secretary said that “The purpose of this bill is to silence North Korean human rights and religious activities and voices from South Korean soil, in pursuit of the development of improved inter-Korean relations.”

Unfortunately, the balloon legislation has become a partisan political issue in South Korea rather than a serious effort to deal with North Korean human rights abuses or the inter-Korean relationship. There is no assurance that even with the silencing of freedom of expression in banning balloons that the North Koreans will take any action to improve inter-Korean relations. The consequence, however, could be erosion of the South Korean relationship with the United States, which is important for the people of both countries. If previous experience gives us any expectation for the future, the North is more likely to blow up another building, even if balloon-carried information is halted, than it is to make a significant positive gesture toward reconciliation with the South.

Ambassador Robert R. King is a senior adviser with the Korea Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C. Previously, Ambassador King served as special envoy for North Korean human rights issues at the U.S. Department of State from November 2009 to January 2017.

Diplomacy over human rights

By Gabriela Bernal

DailyNK (30.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/38M2z2a> - A former human rights lawyer as president, the former UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights as foreign minister, and a long-time pro-democracy activist as unification minister; the current ROK government should be a human rights-advocating dream team, right? Wrong.

Despite the backgrounds of many cabinet members, this government’s approach to human rights, particularly concerning North Korea, has been questionable at least and dismal at worst.

Although this government’s main goal since day one has been to improve inter-Korean relations, the way they have gone about achieving this aim has rubbed many the wrong way. Diplomacy is indeed important, but where is the red line?

Diplomacy Above All Else

Human rights groups have long [criticized](#) the South Korean government's stance of putting diplomacy and engagement with North Korea before human rights. Since taking office, President Moon Jae-in has made it his administration's clear priority to increase engagement with North Korea, no matter what. Although this seemed to yield some positive results in 2018, inter-Korean relations have been more or less stalemated since last year.

Nevertheless, this government has not given up on reaching out to its northern neighbor. Although diplomacy should always be pursued instead of confrontation or conflict, the current South Korean government made some questionable choices this year that have further worsened its record on human rights.



Kim Jong Un, Ri Sol Ju, Moon Jae In, and Kim Jong Suk at a welcome ceremony in Pyongyang for this year's third inter-Korean summit. / Image: Pyongyang Press Corps Pool

For example, the government did nothing after North Korea blew up the inter-Korean liaison office in June. Things then got worse in September after North Korean soldiers killed a South Korean civil servant at sea. Again, the South Korean government's response was disappointing to these incidents.

Instead of reprimanding North Korea, the government [thanked](#) Kim Jong Un for his apology letter and accused the South Korean man of attempting to defect. The government's inaction on the matter resulted in a wave of [criticism](#) by the victim's own [family](#), various human rights NGOs, the [opposition](#), and North Korean [defectors](#).

The Perspectives of Defectors

Besides the political opposition, some of the most active voices criticizing the current South Korean government's human rights record are North Korean defectors. According to a [2020 report](#) by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Seoul, recent defectors (who defected in 2018-2019) have expressed concerns that Pyongyang's human rights abuses have been ignored.

Besides just ignoring North Korea's human rights abuses, however, the South Korean government has actually gone after human rights NGOs. For instance, after the June liaison office incident, South Korea decided to [punish](#) many NGOs run by defectors for spreading flyers across the border. "Many of the NGOs have said the crackdown risks stifling the entire North Korean human rights movement in South Korea," VOA reported at the time.

Besides NGO workers and activists, many defectors on YouTube have also been sharing their views on North Korean human rights.

The following are just a few of the defectors who have spoken out on the issue.

[Kang Cheol Hwan](#)

Kang's perspective is a particularly valuable one given his past experiences concerning human rights: He spent ten years in a labor camp in North Korea before being able to defect to South Korea in 1992. During his time in the camp, he witnessed and experienced unspeakable human rights abuses of all kinds, all recorded in his book "The Aquariums of Pyongyang."

Kang is a staunch critic of the current Moon Jae-in administration, accusing it of constantly turning a blind eye to North Korea's human rights abuses and, instead, putting politics above everything. During one of his [recent live streams](#), he once again laid out why many defectors like him are unhappy with the current government's North Korea policies.

"Not a single word regarding human rights" has ever come out of the mouths of any Democratic Party member or from the Blue House under this current administration, he argued, adding, "This government has proven time and again that they are willing to do anything to keep the opportunity for engagement with North Korea open."

He also criticized the government for not [co-sponsoring](#) the 2019 UN resolution on North Korean human rights and for repeating the same action [this year](#). In the same video, he also accused President Moon of "violating the South Korean Constitution" since, according to Article 3 of the [document](#), South Korea's territory comprises the entire Korean Peninsula and the South Korean government is therefore responsible for protecting the human rights of all individuals living on the peninsula, including North Koreans. As such, the government has failed in its basic duty of protecting the Korean people, according to Kang.

[Yeonmi Park](#)

Another well-known defector, Yeonmi Park, shares this same opinion. Apart from the DPRK government, she [argues](#) that South Korea should hold the Chinese government

accountable for forcibly repatriating North Korean refugees, as they are technically committing a crime against South Korea too due to the wording in the constitution, she argues.

[Lee Hyeon Seung & Lee Seo Hyeon](#)

The Lee siblings offer another interesting perspective among defectors given their elite background in North Korea. Before they defected, they and their family were part of the upper-class in Pyongyang and lived, by North Korean standards, a rather luxurious life. Nevertheless, after [witnessing](#) the execution and imprisonment of various friends they defected in 2014.

According to Lee Hyeon Seung, the human rights situation in North Korea deserves much more attention than it is getting. He also [mentioned](#) how the North Korean military could only afford to eat around two meals per day before progressive South Korean governments started providing North Korea with food aid in the early 2000s. In effect, this South Korean aid was indirectly helping the North Korean army.



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un (left) and South Korean President Moon Jae In announcing the Panmunjom Declaration during the Inter-Korean Summit April 27, 2018, in Panmunjom, South Korea. / Image: South Korean Joint Press Corps

His sister, Lee Seo Hyeon, also says not enough is being done to tackle the human rights issue: “We can’t properly solve the North Korean problem without solving the human rights problem.” They expressed their hope that the incoming Biden administration would put more effort into improving North Korean human rights and change the unconditional engagement policy towards North Korea that has been dominant in the past two years.

Change on the Horizon?

President Moon does not have much time left in office, with general elections scheduled to be held in South Korea in March 2022. With a new president in the White House, South Korea is unlikely to be able to make much progress on inter-Korean relations in such a short period of time.

Although it remains to be seen whether another left-wing government will be elected in South Korea in 2022, there is an opportunity to change North Korea policy under the Biden administration. Both Joe Biden and Kamala Harris have repeatedly criticized the unconditional engagement approach towards North Korea that has been prevalent under Trump and Moon.

One way to show commitment to improving the human rights situation in the DPRK would be if Biden restores the position of special envoy for Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues. Trump failed to nominate anyone for the position during his time in office. However, given that Biden was the ranking member of the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations in 2004 – when the North Korea Human Rights Act was first adopted – he is highly likely to nominate someone for the position.

Still, given the pandemic and many other US domestic issues, any progress on North Korean human rights is likely to take some time. Until then, the South Korean government must not forget who it is dealing with up in the North. Kim Jong Un is not your average state leader: He is responsible for countless crimes and does not deserve the amount of grace he has received from this administration.

While diplomacy and engagement are important, there must be a red line. North Korea crossed that line twice this year, yet Seoul continues to refuse to give up on its failing unconditional engagement strategy. For a cabinet full of former pro-democracy and human rights activists, it is indeed sad how little has been done to tackle this issue.

Views expressed in Guest Columns do not necessarily reflect those of Daily NK.

Please direct any comments or questions about this article to dailynkenglish@uni-media.net.

North Korea releases 7,000 prisoners, orders people to provide for them

RFA (20.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3qI8K5p> - North Korea has released some 7,000 labor camp prisoners under an amnesty, but ordered local cash-strapped governments and impoverished residents to foot the bill for housing and feeding the ex-convicts, sources in the country told RFA.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un ordered the prisoners released under a general amnesty for the Oct. 10 75th anniversary of the 1945 foundation of the ruling Korean Workers' Party.

A resident of North Hamgyong province in the country's northeast told RFA's Korean Service Tuesday that the party's Central Committee recently issued orders to care for the released prisoners in the name of Kim Jong Un.

"In response, the provincial party committee gave instructions to the neighborhood watch units in each district to make local residents take good care of these people," said the source, who requested anonymity for security reasons.

Those sent to labor camps in North Korea suffer harsh conditions while imprisoned. Malnutrition and disease are rampant among prisoner populations who work long hours and are poorly fed.

Contact with the outside world, including with their families, is in most cases restricted. After their long-term incarcerations, the recently released prisoners have essentially become vagrants with no connection to the rest of society.

"The prisoners have come back to society, but most of them are known to have no place to live or any food to eat, so they are wandering around asking for help. This is because most of their families were destroyed by their long prison life, or their family members were scattered," the source said.

"Some of the ex-prisoners were hungry and had nowhere to go, so they have acted violently or threatened local residents. That's why the Central Committee ordered in the name of the Highest Dignity, to take responsibility for these released prisoners in every region," said the source, using an honorary term for Kim.

The source estimated that around 25 prison camps each released close to 300 prisoners—some 7,000 in total.

"In Chongjin city's Ranam district, each local government office has taken measures to guarantee that each prisoner in the area receives 10 kilograms (22 pounds) of corn, a bottle of oil, three bars of laundry soap and some bowls. Most of the released prisoners are staying at inns because they have no homes," the source said.

"It should be applauded that the country set the prisoners free, but if they are going to make each local government office prepare food so they can survive, what other way can they secure food besides collecting it from the residents?" the source said.

Another source, a resident of North Pyongan province in the country's northwest told RFA Wednesday that the order to care for the released prisoners is angering people there.

"The residents are protesting against this decision, saying that if it was the Highest Dignity who granted them amnesty, the state should take responsibility, but they are just passing the burden to us," said the second source, who requested anonymity to speak freely.

"There have been general amnesties many times before, but this is the first time in my life that I have seen that the local offices were ordered to take care of released prisoners," the second source said.

The second source said that the people are resentful because they realize that the local offices will eventually pass the burden onto them.

"Most of the released prisoners are weak due to various diseases and serious malnutrition, so many people are taking care of them by sharing their food little by little, even though they don't have enough for themselves. The residents are angry at the

impudence of the authorities who are telling them to take care of these people who don't have a place to go.”

According to the U.S. State Department's 2019 human rights report, estimates of the North Korean prison population range between 80,000 and 120,000. This figure includes estimates for political prison camps, the existence of which North Korea denies.

New film tells tale of North Korean orphans sent to Europe

By HYUNG-JIN KIM and MONIKA SCISLOWSKA

AP (24.06.2020) — <https://apnews.com/94468960514a586b3e8fc8cedb21593c> - Six decades after they returned to their homeland, traces of thousands of North Korean children orphaned by the Korean War linger for the elderly Europeans whose lives they briefly touched.

The scent of the trees they planted. The memories of their innocent faces. The Korean song they sang.

Some 5,000 orphans were sent to live in Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and East Germany — all communist allies — as part of Soviet-led projects to reconstruct war-ravaged North Korea.

The orphans studied in local schools and made local friends. Then, abruptly, they were called back to North Korea.

“We weren't told — not at all — they just stopped coming to school,” said Halina Dobek, 87, who taught some of the orphans in Poland. “These children were leaving Poland with no enthusiasm.”

It's a mostly forgotten slice of Cold War history, but a new documentary shines light on the lives of the orphans whose departure still weighs on the Europeans who knew them.

The film “Kim Il Sung's Children” — referring to North Korea's founder and wartime leader — will be released June 25, the 70th anniversary the Korean War's start. The three-year conflict destroyed much of North and South Korea, killed more than 1 million people and orphaned an estimated 100,000 children.

Like the war itself, the reconstruction of both countries — including what to do with the orphans — became a part of the Cold War rivalry. At the same time the North Koreans were being sent for education in Eastern Europe, thousands of South Korean orphans were being adopted by families in North America and Western Europe.

“At the time, the United States and the Soviet Union were competing such as who could first send people into space. In this vein, they also competed on ways to show whose political system was more humane and more superior,” said Kim Deog-Young, the film's director.

When the North Koreans started arriving in Europe, the countries were still reeling from the devastation of World War II. Nevertheless, they were treated well.

The film shows Bulgarians giving flowers to North Korean children, clad in identical dark hats and jackets, upon their arrival in 1952.

Katya Panalotova, who lives in the Bulgarian town of Parvomay, recalls in the film that her new classmates were fed five times a day and wore leather shoes while local students had rubber shoes.

Bonds were quickly formed.

"We played football and volleyball together on a hill. We were like brothers," Veselin Kolev, another Bulgarian, says in the movie.

Yet there were also darker moments. Some orphans were haunted by memories of wartime bombing and hid under tables when they heard the sound of planes.

North Korea sent its own citizens to Europe to teach the children the Korean language, history and culture, while European teachers handled other subjects. Dobek taught the orphans Polish in Otwock, a town near Warsaw, from 1956-57.

She told AP that the children "needed the warmth of our hearts."

"The younger ones wanted us to stroke their heads, and give them a hug," she recalled.

Most of the North Koreans lived in dormitories, but a few stayed with local families.

The film includes footage from the Romanian national archive that shows the orphans saluting a North Korean flag with an image of Kim Il Sung and marching with military-like precision at their new school.

The orphans sang "The Song of General Kim Il Sung" so frequently that some classmates still remember some words. In the film, some elderly Bulgarians sing together in Korean about "our general Kim Il Sung whose name is glorious."

At Otwock's Primary School Number 5, where the orphans studied, there are still faded photos of the North Koreans as well as report cards showing they got excellent grades in painting, handicrafts and behavior. In the town, the pine trees the North Koreans planted have grown tall and the remains of an obelisk they put up to memorialize the nations' friendship can still be found.

Kim visited some of the orphans, including those at Dobek's school, during a 1956 trip to Eastern Europe.

It was a year later, on Kim's orders, that the North Koreans started returning home. By 1959, they were all gone.

The film shows footage from 1959 of young North Koreans reaching through train windows for farewell handshakes with Bulgarian friends.

A tearful Maria Yamalieva, from Bulgaria, says she and her North Korean friend Kim Jin Wu cried together while hugging before saying goodbye.

There was never a public explanation for why the orphans were ordered home, but both the film and experts speculate that Kim could have been concerned about the young

North Koreans being too influenced by a foreign culture at a time when there were some anti-Soviet protests in Eastern Europe and calls for political reforms.

Once back home, some of the orphans sent letters to teachers and classmates.

Barbara Michalowska, whose mother taught in Otwock, told AP that one student sent her mother a painting he had made of a Korean landscape. She said others wrote letters saying they wished to return to Poland.

After a few years, the letters simply stopped, said Kim Deog-Young, the director.

What happened to most of the orphans is not known, but there are clues about some.

Seo Jae-pyoung, who fled North Korea in 2000, told AP that his Russian language teacher in the 1980s had been sent to Romania as an orphan and reminisced about feasting on bread, milk and cheese while there.

Haesung Lee, chief of Korean studies at Poland's University of Wroclaw, said three former North Korean diplomats dispatched to Poland and a fourth who taught Polish at a Pyongyang university were orphans sent to Poland.

Their now elderly European friends wish the North Koreans the best, whatever become of them.

"I wish my friends could live as innocently as we did when we were children," Lilka Anatasova, a 77-year-old Bulgarian, says in the movie, mentioning a few North Koreans by name. "I'll never forget you."

—

Scislowska reported from Otwock, Poland.

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North Korea, nuclear arms and human rights, a zero-sum game?

9Dashine (18.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3iPReSW> - The outbreak of a global health crisis starting in China in December 2019 has upended everything, with no end in sight. It amplified existing tensions between global rivals with the potential of realigning an already fragmented, but highly interconnected world, where coordination and cooperation

are vital to tackling global crises. When it comes to international efforts to deal with a nuclear North Korea and its dire human rights situation, more tension weighing on already strained relations could only complicate things further, for everyone.

In other words, by amplifying differences and tensions, COVID-19 could make global cooperation on North Korea – in particular between the United States, South Korea, Japan and Europe on one hand, and China and Russia on the other – all the more difficult.

In dire straits

The US and China are locked in a downward spiral that looks difficult to reverse and improvements in Russia's relations with the West are as distant as under the Cold War. China's attitude towards South Korea has brought increased hostilities, while tensions in inter-Korean relations have been escalating.

Even the US-Europe alliance is in a worse state that at any other point in recent history, just as the longevity of US-ROK relations is called into question. On a positive note however, EU-Japan relations are being reinvigorated by an Economic Partnership Agreement, just as the EU-South Korea free trade agreement brings together two like-minded partners.

In this era of "great power competition", North Korea keeps everyone guessing about their next provocation. As such, on 13 June, the North Korean leader's sister, Kim Yo Jong warned the next "action" against South Korea would be by the North Korean army. On 16 June, North Korea blew up its joint liaison office with the South near the border town of Kaesong and further threatened to send troops into the disarmed areas along the border.

Largely isolated and dependent on China, its sole ally, chief supplier of aid, trade and investment, North Korea remains a security threat and a "problem" to the rest of the world. Hence, its nuclear program is at the core of international efforts to deal with the threat.

Zero progress

Yet, this "problem" can only be tackled if it is defined as the threat the state poses to its own people. Considered against the backdrop of the current state of global cooperation – or rather lack thereof – it should surprise no one that this does not represent the majority view. Denuclearization talks and human rights advocacy are predominantly viewed in a zero-sum game. But they are not mutually exclusive, and should not be treated as such. Yet, as the world is becoming increasingly anxious and confrontational, there is little chance this "problem" will be fixed any time soon, let alone *with*, and not *at the expense of* human rights.

Beijing's approach is taking the international community further away, rather than closer to a strategy focused on human rights and accountability. As Beijing and Washington remain locked in rivalry, Beijing and Pyongyang share similar goals: the weakening of the US-South Korea alliance, removing US forces from the Peninsula and reducing US regional influence

Following the US-North Korea Singapore summit in 2018, Hanoi in 2019 and the US-ROK-DPRK presidential summit at the demilitarized zone in 2019 there has been zero progress with Pyongyang on giving up its nuclear programs. And the same holds true

concerning human rights under the rule of an authoritarian regime, where every single article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is violated in extremity.

Moreover, the fear is that with COVID-19, things are getting worse for millions whose status was already bleak before the pandemic. North Korea's medical system is in a dire state, with the right to health of citizens largely neglected especially in rural areas. More than 10 million people, or nearly 40 percent of the population are thought to be in need of humanitarian aid.

North Korea's self-imposed quarantine has nearly halted trade with China, damaging its already fragile economy. While private markets have exploded with most North Koreans no longer dependent on the dysfunctional central government, the virus could disrupt these markets, further straining the population.

China vs. the West?

As if the grim state of global cooperation wasn't reason enough to worry about, chances for progress in international agreement focusing on North Korea's human rights appear even slimmer because of a shift in the global human rights discourse. This must be considered more broadly. China – with Russia's support – is challenging the existing rules-based, human rights centered liberal order, presenting a state-centric alternative, centered on the respect of sovereignty and non-interference at the expense of human rights.

This shift has supported tendencies to frame the future in terms of confrontation, rather than cooperation; the West vs. China, as opposed to the *West working together with China*. Already over a decade ago this shift was portrayed as a manifestation of the rise of the rest. With China's rise, some see America's abdication of global leadership as an indication that the US is no longer taking the lead in maintaining alliances, or in building global institutions that set the rules for how international relations are conducted.

Against this backdrop, Beijing has been pursuing its strategy to entrench its influence and presence in prominent multinational institutions. This is pivotal to its consolidation of regional hegemony within Asia, which should in turn contribute to further securing its control over Pyongyang. In this process Beijing is seeking to increase its capacity to control the narrative and skilfully use it to its advantage.

"Winning the war" against COVID

Through its response to COVID-19, including its mask diplomacy, drawing on its substantial state - and Communist Party - owned media apparatus, the Chinese leadership has used the opportunity to shift the international narrative by claiming that "winning the war" against COVID-19 needs strong centralized leadership, not democratic governance.

Similarly, Russia has sought to undermine democratic debate through targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns in Europe, seeking to reinforce the impression that the EU is crumbling. A "battle of narratives" is unfolding, indicative of a global power transition and increased uncertainty.

Human rights "with Chinese characteristics"

In the medium to long term, China's growing capacity to exert more regional and global influence could help Beijing to increase its capacity to shape the international approach to North Korea. Two factors are particularly noteworthy.

First, as North Korea's biggest trading partner and only ally, China is vital both in denuclearization and in addressing human rights violations. Second, with increased clout, China is working on promoting its human rights approach "with Chinese characteristics".

This alternative model encourages the downplaying of individual rights, strong state involvement and less support for civil society actors, such as NGOs, both in the political and economic aspects of development. Considering the closed nature of North Korea, where unearthing reliable information about human rights is already difficult, shifting the attention away from government accountability to favour national sovereignty makes addressing human rights violations in the country even more complicated.

In proposing an alternative, China is undermining the United Nations' human rights mechanisms more broadly. As such, in 2018, at the 37th session of the UN Human Rights Council China sponsored a resolution calling for "mutually beneficial cooperation" *between states* on human rights issues, and for a "new type of international relations with win-win cooperation".

This approach further inspired the second South-South Human Rights Forum China hosted in 2019, which welcomed over 300 international experts, seeking to gather steam in China's bid to redefine the concept of human rights, while dismissing the "Euro-American centric notion of human rights".

China and North Korea, still "close as lips and teeth"

Beijing has regularly evoked sovereignty, along with non-interference, in line with the Five Principles on Peaceful Coexistence, to reject international criticism of its own human rights record. And so has Pyongyang, embracing, unsurprisingly, a similar human rights discourse.

Pyongyang, sees any criticism of its human rights record as criticism of its nuclear power, just like Beijing sees criticism as interference in its own domestic affairs. In 2014, North Korea's DPRK Association for Human Rights Studies outlined three key elements of its understanding of human rights: 1. human rights are conditional and shaped by the demand and reality of the nation-state; 2. collective rights are above individual rights, and 3. welfare and subsistence rights have special importance. In 2019 North Korea even warned the UN Security Council that it would consider any discussion of the country's human rights record a "serious provocation".

But North Korea's own provocations, including conducting its largest nuclear test to date in 2017, have complicated the China-North Korea alliance, long regarded as "close as lips and teeth". Notwithstanding traditional solidarity and warmth at the source of their ties, Beijing has suggested North Korea could become an asset and liability at once for China.

Nevertheless, China has restrained its punitive steps towards its awkward neighbour. Concerning the application of human rights within their own borders, there is little disagreement. Moreover, there is much support China has provided in the form of resources, high tolerance for North Korea's provocations and the rejection of international norms. Beijing, in violation of its own commitments to the UN Refugee Convention, has continued forcibly returning tens of thousands of North Korean refugees, deeming them economic migrants. It is suspected North Korean defectors are stuck in limbo in China; not able to finish their escape across the country are now living in hiding fearing getting caught and sent back. There are also worries that China's surveillance technology is posing increasing threats to North Koreans seeking refuge in China.

Do It "My Way"

It will be some time before the pandemic's full impact on global cooperation on North Korea can be judged. The future of engagement on human rights looks bleaker than before. While Washington has most to offer Pyongyang in return for denuclearization, China is in the position to reason with – and control – Pyongyang.

Yet, Beijing's approach is taking the international community further away, rather than closer to a strategy focused on human rights and accountability. As Beijing and Washington remain locked in rivalry, Beijing and Pyongyang share similar goals: the weakening of the US-South Korea alliance, removing US forces from the Peninsula and reducing US regional influence. And while Russia generally follows China's lead on North Korea, President Putin's 2019 summit with the North Korean leader reminded both Washington and Beijing that Moscow has a stake in the Peninsula.

This leaves us with Europe. As a distant global actor with limited strategic interest in Asia, the EU has had limited avenues to directly influence the human rights crisis in North Korea. Yet, the EU has helped facilitate engagement with the UN Human Rights Council mechanisms, including co-sponsoring resolutions since 2003. The joint initiative with Japan in 2013 led to the establishment of the UN Commission of Inquiry, the first concrete step in challenging North Korea on its human rights record.

This is clearly no small task. But as the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, pledged to lead a "geopolitical Commission" this is the right moment to act. It requires two elements: one, strengthening cooperation with like-minded partners – US, South Korea, Japan – in order to keep the multilateral system in place. Two, it demands finding a way to deal with China, without being caught in the middle, or choosing sides. As High Representative Borrell suggested, Europe should go for the "Sinatra doctrine", or "My Way", i.e. adopting a strategic approach to uphold and defend interests and values. The biggest task for the EU, however, is to first find a *common* EU-approach to the "way".

For now, there are two certainties: North Korea remains a global threat with a dismal human rights record, and global cooperation is vital to tackle the "problem". All parties involved must find a way to work *together* and not *against* each other, as millions of North Koreans continue their struggle for survival.

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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."

North Korea executes couple for trying to escape to south during COVID-19 emergency

By Jieun Kim, Leejin Jun and Eugene Whong

Radio Free Asia (22.05.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2B2ABlz> - North Korean authorities earlier this month executed a husband and wife for attempting to flee the country during the COVID-19 national emergency quarantine, sources in the country told RFA.

The couple, from Ryanggang province near China, were caught trying to escape with their teenaged nephew across the border, which has been shut down since January. They were given no trial and were immediately executed by firing squad, though the boy was able to escape execution because he is a minor.

"Earlier this month I heard from an acquaintance in the provincial security department that a family who tried to escape the country was shot to death," a resident of Ryanggang, who requested anonymity to speak freely, told RFA's Korean Service last week.

"They were arrested for attempting to escape [across] the border, which is now heavily controlled due to the national emergency quarantine against the coronavirus," the source said.

According to the source, the couple that were caught were planning to reunite with a family member once they arrived in the South.

"It was a couple in their 50s and a 14-year-old student. The boy is the son of the wife's younger brother, who had previously escaped to the South. They were caught by border guards as they were trying to escape together," the source said.

"The couple were tortured by the provincial security department into confessing that they tried to escape with their nephew after being contacted by her brother in South Korea," said the source.

"The boy's father, who escaped to South Korea, had asked his sister to bring his son to him," the source said.

The three would-be escapees would have had better chances of making it out alive if not for COVID-19, according to the source.

"The attempt to escape at a time like this when border security is so tight due to emergency quarantine measures was an extremely dangerous and risky act," the source said.

"The supreme leadership has ordered that those who attempt to flee the country during the emergency period must be sternly punished. There's no way they could have avoided the firing squad because they attempted to defect to South Korea," the source added.

But the source expressed relief that the authorities spared the teenager.

"Fortunately the child arrested with the couple was able to avoid execution because he is a minor," said the source.

"However, the couple was executed by firing squad, not open to the public, after being charged with treason for trying to cross the border and go to South Korea."

Another resident of Ryanggang who requested anonymity for legal reasons told RFA that the story of the attempted escape has been spreading among the people.

"[They say] that the people who were arrested while trying to escape Hyesan were shot to death. The fact that they were immediately executed for just trying to escape is shocking to most people," the second source said.

The second source confirmed the facts about the story, including the exact family relationships of everyone involved.

"The couple had been taking care of their nephew who was left behind. They were suffering from difficulties in their business due to the coronavirus. They then tried to defect to South Korea at the request of [the wife's] younger brother, but they ended up getting arrested," the second source said.

According to the second source, the harsh manner in which they were immediately executed is angering the public.

"They were only trying to escape with their young nephew to find a way to live. They were shot dead before they were even able to take a single step into the Yalu river," said the second source, referring to a river that forms part of the China-North Korea border. "As people hear this shocking news, they are expressing their anger at the authorities, saying there's nothing wrong with trying to escape from North Korea, especially when it is so hard to make ends meet due to the coronavirus crisis."

Though North Korea officially claims it has no confirmed COVID-19 cases within its borders, it has admitted internally through a series of lectures to citizens that the virus is spreading in three parts of the country, including the capital Pyongyang.

The Korea Institute for National Unification revealed in its 'White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea in 2020' that, released on May 11, that even after Kim Jong Un took office as the chairman of the State Council, public executions have continued.

In the white paper, there were testimonies of witnesses saying that in 2018 two people were executed for possessing a Bible in Pyeongseong, South Pyongan province. In 2015, there was also testimony that two women were executed for the spread of Christianity in Gilseongpo Port, North Hwanghae province, and one woman was executed after receiving a public trial for distributing dissent.

Public executions are relatively common in North Korea.

At a U.N. Security Council session on North Korea's human rights situation in December 2017, then U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley was quoted by Reuters and other news agencies as saying that "defectors have reported that all North Koreans, ages 12 and older, are required to attend public executions—a graphic reminder of consequences of disobedience of the government."

North Korean dissident Thae Yong-ho running for seat in South Korean parliament

Asia News (11.02.2020) - <http://bit.ly/2Hh6arE> - The former high-ranking diplomat, who will run for a conservative party in a Seoul constituency, is critical of the Moon Jae-in administration. If elected he will work for Korean unification. Over the past two decades, 33,000 North Koreans have sought asylum in South Korea, but few are prominent members of the North Korean regime.

Thae Yong-ho, a high-profile North Korean dissident, is running in South Korea's parliamentary election on 15 April.

The conservative Liberty Korea Party (LKP), the main opposition to President Moon Jae-in and his centrist Democratic Party, made the announcement today Thae is expected to run in Gangnam, a wealthy constituency in Seoul where conservatives have been traditionally strong.

If elected, he will become the second defector from North Korea to win a parliamentary seat in South Korea – the first was Cho Myung-chul who was elected in 2012 with the LKP.

The North Korean defector said he wants to work for the unification of the two Koreas, which have been divided along the 38th parallel since the end of the Second World War. He explained that he decided to run after the South Korean government deported two North Koreans back to the communist north. The [two fishermen are accused of killing 16 fellow crew members](#) on their fishing boat and then fleeing to the South.

Thae, a former deputy ambassador to the United Kingdom, is convinced that North Korean leader Kim Jong-un will never give up his nuclear arsenal.

He joined the LKP because in his view Moon's policy of overture towards Pyongyang is unrealistic.

The South Korean president has tried to mediate between the United States and North Korea, partly following the Sunshine Policy of his liberal predecessors.

Thae escaped to South Korea with his family in 2016; back in North Korea, the communist regime has accused him of stealing public funds.

According to the South Korean Ministry of Unification, more than 33,000 North Koreans have fled to South Korea in the past 20 years.

Most (24,000) are women who fled rural areas to escape poverty. A few North Korean government officials and members of the armed forces have requested political asylum in the South.

The highest ranking official to do so was Hwang Jang-yop, a senior member of the ruling Workers' Party. He was very close to Kim Jong-il, the father of North Korea's current strong man. He passed away in 2010.

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.

Seoul peace summit draws comments from North Korea, Dick Cheney

By Guy Taylor

The Washington Times (05.02.2020) - <https://bit.ly/374YmDL> - Past, present and future leaders from around the globe gathered in [the South Korean capital](#) this week to call for world peace and reunification of the Korean Peninsula.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un even sent a message to the event's organizers expressing his hope that the effort will "achieve national peace, prosperity and unification."

The World Summit 2020 is featuring a lineup of high-profile speakers, including former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and former U.N. Secretary-General [Ban Ki-moon](#), offering hope for diplomacy as well as warnings about the gravity of the ongoing nuclear standoff with [Pyongyang](#).

In a video message that aired at the summit Thursday, former Vice President Dick Cheney underscored the need for denuclearization and voiced frustration over what he characterized as North Korean gamesmanship since President Trump's first historic summit with Mr. Kim in Singapore in June 2018.

"Unhappily, there has been no visible improvement since then, and it's not for lack of trying on our side," Mr. Cheney said in the video message. "Our negotiators have simply

run up against the reality that the regime in the North has its own agenda, part of which is to buy time and extract concessions, while giving nothing meaningful in return.”

Mr. Cheney said diplomatic engagement with [North Korea](#) “is certainly better than having no contact at all,” but he implored U.S. leaders to stay “absolutely fixed on our security objectives, with every incentive that can help, but no backing down on denuclearization.” Mr. [Ban](#) cast a broader message in remarks to some 3,000 political, religious and civic figures from 170 countries who were at the summit Tuesday. He told them that “lasting peace and security is humanity’s purest wish.”

Several heads of state are attending the event hosted by [Hak Ja Han Moon](#), the leader of the Unification Church, in celebration of the 100th anniversary of the birth of her late husband, Rev. Sun Myung Moon, who devoted his life to the promotion of world peace and the reunification of the Korean Peninsula.

Organizers said the message from [North Korea](#), dated Jan. 30, was addressed to Mrs. Moon with text indicating that Mr. Kim “sends his congratulations commemorating the 100th birthday of Rev. Sun Myung Moon and the 77th birthday of Dr. Hak Ja Han.”

“We sincerely hope that Dr. Hak Ja Han will continue the work of Rev. Sun Myung Moon and achieve national peace, prosperity, and unification,” said the message, signed by Kim Young-cheol, a high-ranking North Korean official whose name is often printed in English as Kim Yong-chol. The message listed Kim Young-cheol as chairman of the North’s Asia-Pacific Peace Committee, as well as vice chairman of the Central Committee of the ruling Workers’ Party of Korea for South Korean affairs and the head of the United Front Department.

Rev. [Moon](#) was born in what is now [North Korea](#) and met with Kim Il-sung, the founder of [North Korea](#) and Kim Jong-un’s grandfather, in a 1981 summit.

‘Important springboard’

Mr. [Ban](#) told the summit that to end the conflict that has divided North and South Korea for seven decades, “long-standing national division, conflict and antiquated Cold War confrontation must fundamentally be dismantled and give way to new essential values underpinned by peace, coexistence, cooperation, prosperity and reconciliation.”

“I firmly believe that this summit will serve as an important springboard for gathering the most substantial support of the international community in achieving this vision for the sake of a unified Korea and for the sake of the international community more widely,” the former U.N. secretary-general said.

Direct engagement has been a key focal point of the Trump administration’s [North Korea](#) policy over the past three years. Mr. Trump, who has met three times with [North Korea](#)’s leader since coming to office in early 2017, continues to pursue negotiation with [Pyongyang](#) despite an apparent stall in talks over recent months.

The renewal of talks has been blocked by concern that [North Korea](#) may be preparing to carry out an intercontinental ballistic missile or nuclear detonation test. The Kim regime has refrained from such provocations for nearly two years. Unlike in the past, Mr. Trump did not mention [North Korea](#) or the nuclear negotiations in his State of the Union address Tuesday night.

The pursuit of a reunified Korean Peninsula has been an undergirding principle behind the Unification movement that grew from the Unification Church that Rev. Moon founded in 1954.

Mrs. Moon has led the movement since a few years before the 2012 death of Rev. Moon, whose ministry grew from a tiny, embattled church in South Korea to a global spiritual movement and an affiliated commercial empire comprising real estate, manufacturing and agricultural operations, as well as media properties including The Washington Times. "Peace cannot be realized by a single individual or a single nation," Mrs. Moon told the gathering Tuesday. "When we look at the situation in today's world, there are over 200 nations and they all have a common hope, which is the realization of lasting peace."

Mrs. Moon was flanked on stage by representatives from several religions. Hindu, Buddhist, African Traditional, Christian and Muslim leaders opened the event with interfaith invocations featuring a special "water ceremony," in which each poured their own chalices of water into a collective bowl.

Also on stage were dozens of current and former political leaders, including Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan, Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales, Nigerian Prime Minister Brigi Rafini and former Indian Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda.

"It's really appropriate that we are here on the 100th anniversary of Rev. Moon's birth, because out of the devastation of World War II and the Korean War, he and his bride found the courage to dream that they could achieve something, and it is amazing what they have created together," said Mr. Gingrich, the Georgia Republican who was speaker of the House from 1995 to 1999.

"I think each of us should take some courage from their courage," he said. "Each of us should share the vision that everywhere across the planet on every continent people can be brought together and that only by finding a way to work together will we avoid the disasters that would otherwise afflict the entire human race."

Push for peace

Philippine Vice President Maria Leonor Robredo, a political rival of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, recounted how her nation was the first to deploy combat troops to support South Korea at the start of the Korean War and called for a renewed global push for world peace, human rights and democratic ideals in the decades to come.

"Seventy years ago, thousands of lives were offered in this sacred ground in the name of freedom and democracy," the Philippine vice president said. "Today, we recommit and consecrate our lives in protecting those precious ideals."

"We need a better, kinder world, one where the values of equality, liberty are spread throughout the world and where freedom and democracy thrive," she added. "For the longest time, many of those who have been excluded in our quest for economic growth and prosperity continue to struggle in the peripheries. Let us not forget them."

Others expressed appreciation for the thousands who made the journey to attend the gathering at a moment of heightened concern in Asia over the spread of the coronavirus that began in China late last year.

"The fact that, despite the coronavirus spreading around the world, so many leaders are here means that we are all committed to peace, harmony and prosperity and reconciliation among the people," Mr. [Ban](#) said. "Thank you for coming from afar."

Organizers said the summit includes breakout programs involving multiple organizations tied to the Unification movement, including the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace.

Former Indiana Republican Rep. Dan Burton, an IAPP co-chairman, said the association is focused on addressing “the danger a divided Korea poses for the rest of the world, now that nuclear weapons are part of the equation.”

“This year will mark 67 years since the Korean War ceased without ever being declared to be over, and if anything, the situation has grown worse,” Mr. Burton said.

He added that the IAPP calls on “all nations to emphasize that the path for peace on the Korean Peninsula requires cooperative engagement between China, Russia, the U.S., Japan, [North Korea](#) and [South Korea].”

“We really have no choice,” he said. “A war that gets started always runs the risk of turning nuclear, and we know what could happen then.”

The summit in [Seoul](#) is being sponsored by the Universal Peace Federation, a core organization of the Unification movement.

In announcing Tuesday that [North Korea](#) had sent a message ahead of the summit, UPF International Chairman Thomas G. Walsh told participants: “I think Dr. [Hak Ja Han Moon](#) is thinking we will, before long, we will have a summit in [Pyongyang](#).”

“What do you think about that?” Mr. Walsh said to rousing applause. “I think so. We are going to bring peace to this world. We’re going to do it.”

North Korea dispatches more security agents to control and monitor workers in China

Radio Free Asia (17.01.2020) - <http://bit.ly/37EniTV> - North Korean authorities have dispatched more security agents to China in order to boost control and monitoring of North Korean workers around the Lunar New Year holiday, with the goal of preventing the erosion of the workers’ loyalty and decreasing the likelihood of defections, RFA has learned.

“Up until now, one security agent controlled and supervised multiple work sites in cases where there were fewer than 100 workers,” a source from the Chinese border city of Dandong told RFA’s Korean Service on Tuesday.

“But these days, security agents have been dispatched so that there is one at every work site, even for very a small-scale workplaces,” the source said.

“They are called security agents or deputy managers. They seem to be under the supervision of the manager who represents the North Korean workers, but in reality, the manager is under the control and monitoring of the security agents,” the source added.

“Every worker’s passport and river-crossing pass, including the manager’s, are also kept by the security agents,” said the source, referring to permits to enter China across the countries river border.

The surveillance move is very unpopular among many dispatched workers.

"[The] workers at the sites where the security agents had not been [regularly] stationed are saying their good days are gone, because when they weren't being watched by agents, they could have time off on holidays at the discretion of the manager," the source said, adding that the prospect of time off is not something that many expect anymore.

Remain on the premises

According to U.N.-mandated sanctions designed to curb the flow of hard currency to North Korea in order to slow its nuclear and weapons development, North Korean overseas workers were supposed to have been repatriated by Dec. 22, 2019 deadline, and no new work visas are supposed to have been issued over the past two years.

RFA reported shortly after the deadline passed that many North Koreans in China appeared to be ignoring the deadline entirely.

A South Korean businessperson who runs a sewing factory in nearby Donggang told RFA that North Korean employees are not even allowed to leave their workplaces anymore.

"There are about 50 North Korean women who work at a Chinese food-processing company across the street from our factory. I've often seen them going to the grocery store near the factory gate, but not anymore," the second source said.

"I initially thought that they had all returned home to North Korea, but when I asked the owner of the grocery store, I learned that they are now not allowed to come out," said the second source.

"A new security agent has been dispatched from North Korea and he arranged that a single staff member would go to purchase things that the workers need from the store," the second source added.

The newly arrived overseers may not be popular with the Chinese companies that employ North Koreans either.

"North Korea asks the Chinese company to provide about 20,000 Chinese Yuan (U.S. \$2900) a month for accommodation and living expenses for the new security agent," the second source said.

"This is equivalent to the wages of about 10 workers, and sometimes this creates a dispute between the North Koreans and the Chinese company," the source said.

The Korean International Trade Association, a private economic organization, estimated the number of North Korean workers in China at 70,000 to 80,000 in August 2019. South Korea's Foreign Ministry put the number of North Korean workers overseas at 70,000-100,000 as of the end of 2017.

Research institutes in Seoul, including the Korea Institute for National Unification and Sejong Institute, estimate North Korea's overseas workers to be around 100,000, 80 percent of which are from neighboring China and Russia, with 50,000 and 30,000, respectively.

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

North Korean restaurants in Russia remain in business beyond worker withdrawal deadline

Radio Free Asia (06.01.2020) - <http://bit.ly/2uHFoWk> - North Korean-themed restaurants in Russia remained open on New Year's Day, indicating that many of the employees staffing the restaurants were not repatriated by the Dec. 22 deadline under U.N. sanctions, RFA has learned.

"The North Korean restaurants here in Vladivostok were still open on New Year's Day," a Russian citizen source of Korean descent told RFA's Korean Service.

"The female servers had been disappointed that they would soon have to return to Pyongyang in December, but they are welcoming guests with their bright, smiling faces again," the source said.

North Korea maintains restaurant businesses across Asia, including in the Russian Far East. They are great sources of foreign cash, drawing crowds with female entertainers from North Korea who also serve customers as waitresses.

Over the past few years sanctions have caused some of the North Korean restaurants in China and Russia to face staffing shortages, but North Korean workers had found new ways to skirt sanctions, either by changing visas and working illegally or simply ignoring the sanctions altogether.

RFA previously reported that many North Korean construction workers in and around the Russian Far East city of Vladivostok were employing these methods to stay within Russia or quickly return, but according to sources, the waitresses at the North Korean restaurants there all expected they would have to go home.

The source in Russia said that the three North Korean restaurants in Vladivostok experienced an uptick in business once 2020 started.

"The restaurants were once quiet because there were no customers. The quality of food and customer service had dropped significantly as the withdrawal deadline approached at the end of last year," the source said.

"But in the new year, they were revitalized and they are continuing to operate," the source added.

While customers were not flocking to Pyongyang Café, Koryo, and Keum Gang San individually, they were utilizing a new promotion that allows groups of customers to enjoy the restaurants' private performances.

"The private rooms in Keum Gang San were full of customers, so the female staff that normally would have been assigned to the main dining hall were sent instead to sing and dance in the private rooms," said the source.

"They used to offer entertainment to customers who reserved a table in the main hall for 10,000 rubles (U.S. \$161.40), but they changed the system to focus on the private rooms," explained the source.

"Guests who order a simple entrée in the main hall are only treated to militant revolutionary video clips aired by [North Korea's state-run] Korean Central Television," the source said.

The source talked to one of the waitresses at one of the restaurants late last year. "She sounded sad when she said she had to go back to Pyongyang and would not be able to return because all North Korean workers in Russia had to withdraw due to the sanctions," the source said.

"According to that employee, the restaurant workers are all overseas personnel that the Central Committee [of the Korean Workers' Party] dispatched abroad, so they would not be able to return [to Vladivostok] without a major breakthrough," said the source.

That breakthrough might have come if denuclearization negotiations with the U.S. had fared better, but as the deadline drew near, North Korea and the U.S. were still very far apart in terms of what level of denuclearization would justify the sanctions relief North Korea desperately wants.

Another source, also in Vladivostok, told RFA Jan. 2, "Workers at the North Korean restaurants [are still working] on New Year's Day. Perhaps it has been decided that the employees, who were scheduled to withdraw at the end of last year, will stay here in Russia.

"Even though [their] withdrawal was finalized ahead of the Dec. 22 deadline, they are all somehow staying in Russia and the restaurants are continuing operations," the second source said.

The deadline would have been the death knell for the North Korean restaurants, but they were saved at the last minute, according to the second source.

"North Korea's First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Choe Son Hui visited Moscow on November 22 to hold high-level talks as business was about to be interrupted in the North Korean restaurants. After these talks, the restaurant workers were reportedly excluded from the withdrawal list."

Meanwhile, in response to the Korean-language version of this report published Jan. 3, Germany's Foreign Ministry, which holds the chair of the U.N. Security Council's sanctions committee on North Korea, said that Pyongyang should follow the U.N. resolution to withdraw North Korean overseas workers by Dec. 22 last year.

In an email to RFA, the Foreign Ministry said all UNSC decisions, including those on restrictive measures, remain in force and must be fully implemented by all U.N. member states.

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