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## Korea

Feb 1, 2005

### North Koreans 'eat worse than pigs'

By Jeremy Kirk

YANJI, China - The slow, arduous exodus of North Koreans such as Ms Moon, 34, who wants to go to South Korea, is posing increasingly vexing diplomatic conundrums between South Korea and China, as both nations grapple with North Korea's decay and the resulting, unwanted fallout for Beijing and Seoul.

"Honestly, most families can't really eat well" in North Korea, said Ms Moon, working a low-profile restaurant job in this dusty city with a large population of ethnic Koreans, one hour into China from the North Korean border. "When I came to China, I learned that



**The shallow Tumen River, on the northeast border between China and North Korea, is a popular crossing point for refugees.**

people in North Korea eat worse than a pig in China." She asked that her full name not be used.

The mix of political oppression and brutal economics in North Korea has left defectors on the wrong side of the fence in the view of the Chinese government. The issue has put South Korea and China at loggerheads, while defectors and activists contend humanitarian concern has been abandoned.

While it has allowed large groups of defectors to go to South Korea through third countries, Beijing sees them as illegal economic migrants subject to repatriation. North Korean law mandates at least a two-year prison sentence for those who leave and are returned.

South Korea received a record 1,890 defectors in 2004. North Koreans are granted citizenship, but the South Korean

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government has recently made clear its opposition to large-scale defections that have caused tension with China and both of its Korean neighbors.

Starting this year, the South Korean government slashed settlement money given to North Korean refugees by two-thirds, to around the equivalent of US\$9,000. Defectors have often used the money to finance the escape of relatives through activist networks and refugee brokers.

"To speak once again of the defector issue, the government clearly opposes organized defections," Unification Minister Chung Dong-young told the South Korean media recently. "For the people in the North to live their lives in the North with their families is necessary both for individuals and for co-existence and co-prosperity.

"With this in mind, it is not desirable for anyone to organize defections, intentionally bringing people out of North Korea," Chung said.

Refugees do make it to South Korea, although scenes of North Koreans being welcomed with flowers and adulation aren't the standard.

A 24-year-old female defector now living in South Korea contends that escaping from China was somewhat easier than dealing with confrontational South Korean embassy officials and Seoul's National Intelligence Service (NIS). The woman lived in China for several years prior to a failed escape attempt through Myanmar.

Eventually, she left China, surrendering at the South Korean Embassy in Kuala Lumpur in 2002, "We went in and sat down, and my wife just said, 'I'm a North Korean. I want to defect,'" said her American husband, who was with her at the time. "She apparently had been the first one there. They didn't know what to do."

After several frustrating days, South Korean authorities allowed them to fly to Seoul, the couple said. But when they arrived, NIS agents boarded the plane, cursing and roughing them up, they told this correspondent. "They were just totally anti-defector," said the American husband, who speaks fluent Korean. "It's always been that way." Both husband and wife spoke on condition of anonymity, fearing further harassment.

### **Challenging Roh's cozy political line with the North**

South Korean opposition lawmakers have challenged the position of President Roh Moo-hyun, accusing him and his administration of ignoring refugees' plights to improve ties with North Korea. They have also focused attention on cases of South Koreans believed to have been abducted by North Korean agents.

Last month, four Grand National Party representatives traveled to Yanji in China to investigate the alleged abduction of a South Korean pastor by North Korean agents. It's believed the Reverend Kim Dong-shik was stuffed into a taxi in February 2000 and taken to Pyongyang after years of activist work helping North Korean refugees escape. Seoul prosecutors have since charged a Korean-Chinese man, Ryu Yeong-hwa, with kidnapping the clergyman on orders from North Korea's State Safety and Security Agency.

When the lawmakers tried to hold a press conference at the

Beijing Sheraton Hotel, however, several Chinese men shut off the electricity to the room and attempted to hussle them out, claiming they did not have proper permission to hold a press conference. But the representatives - accustomed to occasional physical tussles in their own National Assembly in Seoul - kept vigil for an 11-hour standoff.

"These four congressmen wanted to hold a press conference on so-called 'DPRK defectors' or what we call 'illegal immigrants' at Great Wall Sheraton Hotel," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Kong Quan said shortly after the incident. "We have repeatedly stated our position on illegal immigrants. The Chinese government and people have shown the greatest humanitarianism and made the utmost efforts on this issue."

For China, the hotel incident was another unwanted bit of ugly publicity over North Korean refugees. While at one time China was considered one of North Korea's strongest allies, its growing economic ties with South Korea and the United States makes the



**Ethnic Koreans run bamboo boats on the Chinese side of the border with North Korea at the city of Tumen. Many Chinese are openly sympathetic to Korean refugees.**

North Korean refugee issue a nasty foreign-policy thorn.

"China is trying to tread this very fine line between its past commitments and its future expectations," said John Feffer, author of the book *North Korea-South Korea: US Politics and the Korean Peninsula* and a visiting scholar at Stanford University. "The refugee issue really pushes China."

China doesn't want masses of refugees showing up at its door if North Korea collapses; at the same time, China may not be thrilled with the dynamics of the Pyongyang regime, Feffer said.

Although China signed the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention that mandates interviews and background checks of those claiming refugee status, China has opted in many cases to send them back to North Korea. Human-rights and civic groups estimate that between 200,000 and 300,000 North Koreans are living in China.

The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees said it is hamstrung by the situation. "We can't force countries to comply," said Jennifer Pagonis, deputy head of public information at UNHCR in a telephone interview from its headquarters in Geneva. "We always rely on a country's goodwill."

In the 1990s UNHCR had access to the border area between China and North Korea, but the Chinese government no longer allows it; only one UNHCR representative continues to work in

Beijing, Pagonis said.

"We are particularly concerned when these people are returned to North Korea against their will," she said.

Increasingly, grassroots efforts by young Korean-Americans have lead to protests in front of Chinese consulates and embassies in Seoul and Washington to increase awareness to the plight of refugees. They have often featured activists dressed in costumes modeled on Chinese police uniforms and leading mock "refugees" - blindfolded and bound - for a colorful sidewalk visual.

Eileen Choi, 28, is a US representative of Seoul's branch of Liberation in North Korea, a group that leads protests and education forums. She also teaches English to North Korean defectors at a special school in Seoul. While students at Korean universities are showing increasing interest in the refugee issue, the general Korean public shows a frustrating indifference, Choi said. "The strangers I come across ... they really don't want to talk about it," she said. "There's really no interest at all."

### **A dangerous journey**

On the Tumen River border with North Korea, the old ethnic Koreans who run bamboo boats for tourists say the refugees are easy to spot: their clothing style is very different, and they don't quite fit in with their Chinese counterparts.

Most in this small city are openly sympathetic to those whom they consider their very poor North Korean neighbors, who occasionally ford the shallow waters of the Tumen River to hide in China. From there, it's only the start of a dicey round of hide-and-seek from North Korean agents and Chinese police.

Activists have employed varying techniques to get refugees out of China, including high-profile dashes using ladders to climb into embassy compounds in Beijing, desert drives to the Mongolian border, and dodgy land routes through Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.

"New routes are being looked for all the time," said Tim Peters, the founder of Helping Hands Korea, a non-governmental organization that raises funds for clandestine operations to move refugees out of China. "Old routes get discovered and get shut down."

It's not cheap, and often money must be used to persuade border guards and police to look the other way. Lower risks mean a higher price and vice versa. Often, hard decisions must be made depending on the defector's profile and risk of imminent capture, Peters said.

Peters said many South Koreans seem to look at defectors as costly in terms of crime and social problems. But "if crimes against humanity are taking place in North Korea, sorry, it's no longer a little local issue", Peters said.

If the international community is remembered as doing more for humans rights in North Korea and helping refugees, "That's going to be a horrible scar on the conscience of their [South Koreans] grandchildren [for doing less]," Peters said.

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