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## N. Korean defections strain ties

By Jeremy Kirk

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YANJI, China -- The slow exodus of North Koreans is posing increasingly vexing diplomatic problems for South Korea and China, both grappling with North Korea's decay.

Every year, hundreds of North Koreans fleeing hunger, poverty and oppression cross the border into China, hoping to continue on to South Korea. Though Beijing has allowed large groups of defectors to go to South Korea through third countries, it sees them as illegal economic migrants subject to repatriation. North Korean law mandates a minimum two-year prison sentence for those who leave.

The issue has put South Korea and China at loggerheads; meanwhile, defectors and activists contend that humanitarian issues get short shrift.

"When I came to China, I learned that people in North Korea eat worse than a pig in China," said a 34-year-old North Korean woman who revealed only her surname, Moon. She works in a restaurant in this dusty border city, which has a large population of ethnic Koreans, while waiting to go to South Korea.

South Korea received a record 1,890 North Korean defectors last year. They are granted citizenship, but the Seoul government recently made clear its opposition to large-scale defections that have caused tensions with China.

Starting this year, Seoul slashed resettlement money given to North Korean refugees by two-thirds, to about \$9,000. In the past, defectors often used the money to finance the escape of relatives through activist networks and human brokers.

The government "clearly opposes organized defections," Unification Minister Chung Dong-young told reporters recently. "For the people in the North to live their lives in the North with their families is necessary, both for individuals and for coexistence and coprosperity."

Refugees do make it to South Korea, although scenes of North Koreans being greeted with flowers don't always ensue.

A 24-year-old defector living in South Korea said escaping from China was somewhat easier than dealing with confrontational South Korean Embassy and National Intelligence Service (NIS) officials. She lived in China for several years before a failed escape attempt through Burma. Eventually, she left China and in 2002 went to the South Korean Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

"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 were just

totally anti-defector," said the American, who speaks fluent Korean. "It's always been that way."

Neither the American nor his wife wanted their names used, fearing more harassment.

South Korean opposition lawmakers have accused President Roh Moo-hyun's administration of ignoring the plight of refugees as he concentrates on improving ties with North Korea.

Four lawmakers of South Korea's conservative Grand National Party traveled to Yanji to investigate the reported abduction of a South Korean pastor by North Korean agents. It is thought the Rev. Kim Dong-shik was pushed into a taxi in February 2000 and taken to Pyongyang after years helping North Korean refugees escape.

Seoul prosecutors have since charged a Korean-Chinese man, Ryu Yeong-hwa, with kidnapping Mr. Kim on orders from North Korea's State Safety and Security Agency.

When the South Korean lawmakers tried to hold a press conference at the Beijing Sheraton, several Chinese men shut off the power to the room and tried to hustle the officials out, saying they did not have permission to speak to reporters. But the four kept an 11-hour vigil at the hotel.

For China, the incident was another unwanted bit of bad publicity over North Korean refugees. Though China was once considered among North Korea's strongest allies, its growing economic ties with South Korea and the United States makes the refugees a sticky foreign policy issue.

"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," China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Kong Quan said shortly after the hotel incident.

"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: U.S. 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 banging on its door if North Korea collapses. At the same time, China may not like the actions of the Pyongyang regime, Mr. Feffer said.

Although a signatory to the 1951 U.N. Refugee Convention that mandates interviews and background checks of people who say they are refugees, China has opted in many cases to send them back to North Korea. Human rights and civic groups say 200,000 to 300,000 North Koreans live in China.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees had access to the border area between China and North Korea in the 1990s, but Beijing no longer allows it.

"We can't force countries to comply," said Jennifer Pagonis, deputy head of public information at the UNHCR in a telephone interview from Geneva. "We always rely on a country's good will."

One UNHCR representative continues to work in Beijing, Miss Pagonis said.

Increasingly, grass-root efforts by young Korean-Americans have led to protests in front of Chinese consulates and embassies in Seoul and Washington to increase awareness to the plight of North Korean refugees.

They often have featured activists dressed in mock Chinese police uniforms leading mock "refugees" -- blindfolded and bound -- to make their point.

Eileen Choi, 28, a Korean-American, belongs to the Seoul branch of Liberation in North Korea, a group that leads protests and education forums. She also teaches English to North Korean defectors in Seoul.

Though students at Korean universities show increasing interest in the refugee issue, the public is mostly indifferent, Miss 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."

On the Tumen River that divides China and North Korea, an old ethnic Korean man who runs bamboo

boats for tourists said the refugees are easy to spot. Their clothing style is different, and they don't quite fit in with their Chinese counterparts.

Most in this small city of Tumen are openly sympathetic to their poor North Korean neighbors, who occasionally cross the shallow river to hide in China. From there, their lives become a game of hide-and-seek with North Korean agents and Chinese police.

Activists have tried many novel ways to get refugees out of China, from high-profile dashes using ladders to climb into embassy compounds in Beijing to desert drives to the Mongolian border to risky land routes through Burma, Thailand and Vietnam.

"New routes are being looked for all the time," said Tim Peters, the founder of Helping Hands Korea, a group that raises funds for clandestine operations to move refugees out of China.

"Old routes get discovered and get shut down."

• *Joanne V. Moon contributed to the article.*

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