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Murder and Kidnapping on the North Korea-China Border

Christian aid workers fear for their safety in the tense region.

By **John Power**

It has always been perilous work for the Christian missionaries that furtively carry out humanitarian work along the tense China–North Korea border. An ever-present risk is arrest and imprisonment by Chinese authorities sensitive to both border security and religion.

But in recent months, a new sense of fear has descended upon the cohort of Christian aid workers that provide food and aid to North Koreans both in China and their poor and isolated homeland. It's a dread fueled by reports of murder and kidnapping orchestrated from the North Korean side of the border.

On April 30, an ethnic Korean Chinese pastor, Han Choong-ryeol, was found murdered outside the border town of Changbai, his body marked with axe and stab wounds.

Meanwhile, two South Korean citizens, one of whom is a Christian minister, remain missing after separately vanishing near the border in February and March. Some fear the pair, who are North Korean defectors, have been kidnapped.

Christian aid workers believe North Korean security agents were involved in both instances. In the case of the murder, many suspect retaliation for the defection to South Korea of 13 North Korean restaurant waitresses in April, which Pyongyang labeled a "kidnapping." Another group of waitresses working in China followed the next month.

Sunny Park, whose Seoul-based church employs the missing minister, says that humanitarian work has been severely restricted amid growing safety concerns.

"They want to make us fearful," Park, who is communications director at Every Nation Church of Korea, told *The Diplomat*. "Of course they killed the pastor and they kidnap people."

Her church has effectively stopped sending aid over the border because of the increased difficulty and danger of calling its North Korean contacts, who are relied on to secretly ferry supplies to people inside the country. One such undercover courier has been out of contact for months.

"In order to contact us, he needs to come to the border area...in the mountains, to get a signal," said Park. "But not

anymore. There are so many watching eyes in the border area these days.”

Chinese authorities have long been an obstacle to the work of Christians helping North Koreans by the border. Korean-American Peter Hahn was held by Chinese authorities for nine months before being convicted of “counterfeiting receipts” and then being deported last September, while Kevin Garratt, a Canadian, remains in Chinese custody after being detained in August 2014 over claims he spied on Beijing for his country’s intelligence services.

But while North Korea has been accused of kidnappings and even murders in the region before--the 2011 death of South Korean pastor Patrick Kim was blamed on a North Korean operative wielding a poisoned needle--recent events have been notable for being both sinister and in such close succession.

Unsurprisingly, a feeling of intimidation is widespread among the Christian aid worker community.

“Obviously a situation like this, an occurrence like this is a very serious red flag to anyone who is involved in this kind of humanitarian work,” said a South Korean-based Christian aid worker who wished to remain anonymous because of the sensitivity of his work.

“Obviously extra precautionary measures are needed. Extra care is taken in communications and travel and locations and destinations, who you meet and who you don’t meet and things like that.”

The pastor, who travels regularly to the border area to help orphans of North Korean women forcibly repatriated by China, believes Kim Jong-un’s regime has been worked into a panic by the recent and extremely public defections.

“Two different groups have defected as a unit, and so that obviously has rattled Kim Jong-un’s cage considerably because these are privileged people from Pyongyang,” he said.

Echoing Park, the pastor says that Christians who had coordinated aid efforts from inside North Korea have fallen silent, the result of fresh crackdowns inside the country.

His contacts fear that information about the underground church may have passed into North Korean hands from the murdered pastor's phone and a deacon at his church who is presumed to have been kidnapped in 2014.

"As a result of that, quite a few North Koreans who had been in communication and may still have been in North Korea at the time... have been rounded up, as I have been informed," he said. "So obviously that particular assistant and most likely the telephone of the pastor was confiscated in order to try track down the movements and the identities of the underground network inside North Korea."

While they feel increasingly threatened and restricted, Christian aid workers believe their work is as vital as ever. In January, the United Nations Children's Fund warned that 25,000 North Korean children were suffering from acute malnutrition, largely as a result of a drought the previous year.

Park says the food situation in the interior of the country, away from the burgeoning wealth of Pyongyang, has deteriorated since the public was mobilized for projects ahead of last month's 7th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea.

"If there is anything we can do, we still want to do it," Park said.

The Author

John Power writes for *The Diplomat's* Korea section.

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