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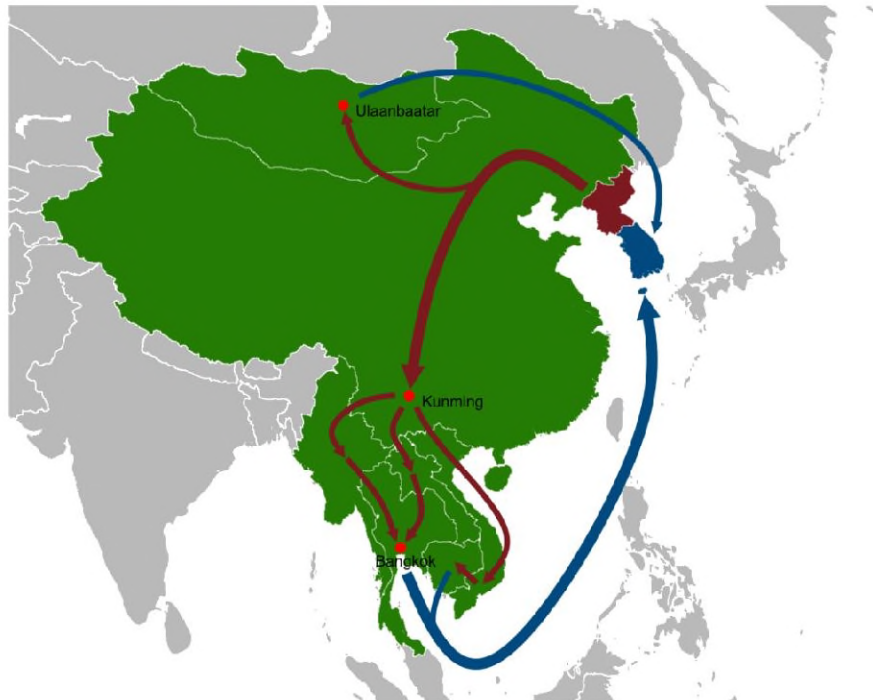
THE PENINSULA

North Korean Refugees: Uptick in Number Reaching South Korea but China Is Forcibly Returning Refugees

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Author: [Robert King](#)

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The number of North Korean refugees fleeing their homeland and reaching South Korea for resettlement has increased during the first nine months of 2023, though the numbers are still far below the number of refugees that reached South Korea in the previous decade. At the same time, disturbing reports indicate that China is forcibly returning a large number of North Korean refugees who are seeking to escape from North Korea and settle in South Korea or elsewhere. Many of the North Koreans who are being repatriated were detained by Chinese officials as they sought to escape from North Korea. Many of those now being returned to North Korea are refugees who fled as long ago as early 2020 when the COVID pandemic led to considerably tighter border controls.

Uptick in North Korean Refugee Arrivals in South Korea

During the first nine months of 2023, a total of 136 North Koreans (26 males and 110 females) were resettled in South Korea. That number is significantly higher than in the recent past. In 2022, the total for the entire year was only 67, and for the entire year of 2021, the total was only 63. Before the COVID pandemic, however, much larger numbers of refugees successfully fled from North Korea. [Official South Korean statistics](#) from the

Ministry of Unification indicate that some 34,021 refugees arrived in the South From the late 1990s through the end of the third quarter of 2023, but the annual numbers were much smaller recently.

Most refugees have escaped North Korea by crossing the land border with China. Then, with the help of South Koreans and others working covertly inside China, they have been able to travel through China from the northeast near China's border with North Korea where they have escaped across the Chinese border and then onward to neighboring Southeast Asian countries. There they have been processed by South Korean government officials, and they are then flown to South Korea. The peak annual number of refugees reaching South Korea was in 2009 when 2,914 refugees were resettled. In 2010 some 2,402 reached South Korea, and the following year, 2011, the number arriving was 2,706. After Kim Jong-un became supreme leader of North Korea in December 2011, refugee numbers began to decline as the North Korean government tightened border controls. The number gradually dropped to just over one thousand per year from 2012 to 2019. In 2019, the number of refugees resettled in South Korea was 1,047.

When the COVID pandemic struck in early 2020, stringent public health measures were adopted and rigidly enforced by Pyongyang to prevent spread of the disease in North Korea. The public health care system in North Korea is fragile and woefully underfunded. Illegal border crossing either entering or leaving the country illegally was aggressively prevented. Stringent Chinese government border controls and much tighter restrictions on travel inside China also because of COVID made it very difficult for North Koreans seeking to escape their homeland to travel into or through China. With the beginning of the COVID pandemic, the number of refugees from North to South Korea has declined sharply.

Another event adds an additional dimension to the refugee issue, and it may portend a possible increase in the number of North Korean refugees escaping their homeland. News reports recently noted that four apparent North Korean defectors in a small wooden boat were found by the South Korean coast guard off the northeast coast in coastal waters. The four, one male and three females, were members of the same family. They are being questioned by the South Korean military and other government officials and a final report on the recent arrivals has not yet been made public. But refugees arriving by boat could indicate a shift in how North Koreans may now reach the South.

In the past refugees have seldom arrived by boat. North Korean coastguard and military forces closely guard the coast of North Korea, and vessels that might be used for escape to the South are particularly closely watched. Occasionally fishing boats are blown off course in a storm, or they inadvertently drift across the maritime boundary between North and South. Most fishermen have families living in North Korea, and in the past, most have sought to return to the North when they inadvertently end up in South Korean coastal waters. The fact that the vessel which recently arrived carried three women and one man is a clear indication that the group was not a fishing vessel off course, but more probably an intentional effort to seek refuge in South Korea.

Leaving North Korea by boat in the past has been riskier than crossing the North Korean land border with China, but because of COVID concerns, land borders are much more closely guarded by both countries. Crossing the land border has become more difficult. China has also tightened its internal travel restrictions to deal with the pandemic. These

changes have made it much more difficult for North Korean defectors to leave overland by the traditional routes out and water routes may be relatively less dangerous than in the past.

An incident in 2019 that continues reverberate, indicates how North Korean migration to South Korea is politically sensitive and carefully monitored. In 2019, the South Korean government returned two North Korean fishermen to North Korea who successfully reached South Korea. They were suspected of murdering other crew members on the fishing vessel and then seeking refuge in South Korea. The two fishermen were returned to North Korea against their will by the previous government of then-President Moon Jae-in, in order to improve North-South relations. An effort to coverup the decision to return the would-be refugees failed, and the issue became public and was highly controversial. The forced return was discovered by the South Korean news media at the time the two individuals were returned against their will to North Korea. After the change in governments with the election of President Yoon Suk-yeol in 2022, the case has been investigated by law enforcement officials and some former officials involved in the forced repatriation decision have been arrested.

The title of one article published in South Korea on the uptick of refugee arrivals from North Korea sounded positively glowing: "Number of NK defectors entering S. Korea more than triples in January-September Period." The number of refugees arriving increased from 67 for all of 2022 to 136 for the first nine months of 2023. While the headline is correct that this is triple the number who arrived in the January-September period in 2022, it is a far more modest increase in comparison with pre-pandemic numbers of refugees before 2020. The increase is encouraging, but if there were freedom of movement from North Korea, far more refugees would be leaving the North.

China Forcibly Repatriating North Korean Refugees

The second noteworthy issue involving refugees from North Korea is the Chinese decision now to repatriate refugees from North Korea. Since the beginning of the COVID pandemic in late 2019/early 2020, North Korea closed its borders, and China detained North Korean refugees who were captured in China as they sought to go to South Korea or elsewhere.

China and North Korea share an 880-mile border. North Koreans illegally cross the border to find employment in more prosperous areas in China, and others cross that border to escape North Korea and seek to reach South Korea or other countries. A significant number of North Koreans work in China under agreement between Beijing and Pyongyang to permit North Koreans to work in China. Significant fees go to the North Korean government and to North Korean middlemen who set up these labor arrangements. Other North Koreans illegally go to China and work "off the books," allowing to earn without involvement of North Korean officials.

In addition to those who go to work in China (either legally or "off the books"), a significant number of North Koreans go through China in an effort to reach South Korea or other countries where they may have family or where they can enjoy freedoms not available in North Korea. These refugees are illegally leaving North Korea and illegally entering and crossing through China. If they are returned by Chinese border guards to North Korean officials, they will be severely punished and many will be executed. Unfortunately, despite international concerns about these North Korean refugees, China simply returns the refugees to North Korean border officials, and they suffer severe punishment.

Recent reports from South Korean human rights organizations indicate that some 600 North Koreans in China have been forcibly repatriated to North Korea against their will in mid-October. Other reports suggest that as many as two-thousand-five-hundred North Koreans have been detained by the Chinese government since early 2020 and all of them are being held for deportation back to North Korea. Harsh procedures were imposed in North Korea to prevent the spread of COVID when the pandemic first emerged. These North Korean would-be refugees are apparently individuals who have been detained in China since the beginning of the COVID outbreak because North Korea closed its borders to prevent spread of the COVID—and that even included prohibiting the return of North Korean diplomats and other citizens who were legally abroad and were seeking to return home.

The reports of forced repatriation were of sufficient concern that the South Korean Government officially protested to the government of China. At a news media briefing in Seoul, the spokesperson for the South Korean Ministry of Unification said, “It appears to be true that a large number of North Koreans in China’s three northeast provinces have been repatriated to the North. . . The South Korean government regrets the situation and raised the matter with the Chinese side in a serious manner, emphasizing our position.” He emphasized international practice and the strong position of the South Korean government: “The [South Korean] government’s position is that under no circumstances should North Koreans living abroad be forcibly repatriated against their will. Forced repatriation against one’s will is a violation of the international norm of non-refoulement.”

The South Korean Unification Minister Kim Yung Ho warned the Chinese government in August, before the forced returns began, that “North Korean defectors in China should be granted humane treatment in accordance with international standards, and be also able to enter countries that they are hoping to go to, including South Korea.”

The United States government also expressed grave concern about the Chinese government’s repatriation of North Korean refugees. Ambassador Julie Turner, recently sworn-in as the U.S. Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues, speaking at a forum in Washington, D.C., on October 20, 2023, said, “I am gravely concerned by the recent and credible reports that the PRC [People’s Republic of China] repatriated large numbers of North Koreans, including as recently as last week.” Turner was sworn-in as U.S. Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues on October 13, 2023. The conference at which she spoke took place one week after she was sworn-in and a day after returning from her first trip as Special Envoy to Seoul for meetings with South Korean officials on North Korean human rights.

The United Nations Human Rights Council issued strongly worded statement sharply critical of China and North Korea and condemning the repatriation of North Koreans by China. The statement said, “there are long-standing and credible reports to believe that North Korean escapees forcibly returned to the DPRK would be subjected to torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment . . . and other serious human rights violations.” The statement said the senior UN human rights officials “urge China to abide by its international legal obligations and not forcibly repatriate remaining North Korean escapees.” UN Experts who signed the statement included Elizabeth Salmón, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, and a number of other UN human rights experts.

Former UN officials and other human rights experts also publicly criticized the repatriation of North Korean refugees in an [open letter](#) to Chinese President Xi Jinping. Their letter was released publicly, calling upon the Chinese government to cease the forcible repatriation of North Koreans detained in China. The letter noted the UN Commission of Inquiry's 2014 report on human rights violations in North Korea. Two of the three members of the commission signed the letter, Sonja Biserko and Marzuki Darusman, and in addition it was signed by Thomas Ojea-Quintana, Former UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of human rights in the DPRK (2016-2022). Marzuki Darusman was also previously the UN Special Rapporteur on DPRK human rights (2010-2016). Other prominent advocates for human rights in North Korea were also signers of the letter, and a number of prominent human rights organizations endorsed the letter.

The United Nations continues to play a positive role in pressing North Korea and People's Republic of China with regard to human rights conditions in North Korea. Conditions in the North are grim, but South Korea and the United States continue to work together closely on human rights issues involving North Korea.

Robert R. King is a Non-Resident Distinguished Fellow at the Korea Economic Institute of America (KEI). He is former U.S. Special Envoy for North Korea Human Rights (2009-2017). The views expressed here are the author's alone.

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Return to the Peninsula