

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing

on

North Korean Human Rights Movement:
Current Prospects and Obstacles

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2118 Rayburn House Office Building

Statement of Choi Jeong Hun

On the Risk of Forced Repatriation of North Korean Prisoners of War and
the Need for Humanitarian Protection
North Korean People's Liberation Front

My name is Choi Jeong Hun, and I am the Commander of the North Korean People's Liberation Front, an organization of former North Korean soldiers.

Through this written testimony, I respectfully urge the U.S. Congress and the international community to pay close attention to the fate of the two North Korean soldiers captured by Ukrainian forces during the Russia-Ukraine war. This issue is not merely a matter of prisoners of war. It is a grave humanitarian matter directly tied to the North Korean regime's structural human rights abuses, forced mobilization, guilt-by-association punishment, and the fundamental principle of non-refoulement.

The Russia-Ukraine war, which began in 2022, continues to this day. As the war has become prolonged, Russia expanded its military cooperation with North Korea, and it has been reported that, beginning in 2024, the Kim Jong Un regime deployed more than 10,000 North Korean troops to the battlefield. This is a clear example of the North Korean authorities sending young men into a foreign war with no regard whatsoever for their lives, safety, or free will.

According to multiple accounts, North Korean troops were sent to the front under an extremely closed and coercive system, having been subjected to intense ideological control. Testimony from the Ukrainian side indicates that these soldiers charged forward in battle without retreat, even under severe danger, resulting in devastating casualties. Some reports estimate that the number of North Korean troops killed or wounded has exceeded 7,000.

Yet rather than reflecting on or taking responsibility for these sacrifices, the North Korean regime has exploited them as a tool of propaganda. Kim Jong Un has portrayed the fallen soldiers as symbols of loyalty to the regime and of victory, using this deployment to justify his rule and reinforce internal cohesion. This demonstrates that the North Korean regime does not treat its people's lives as something to be protected, but rather as political instruments.

In this situation, a particularly urgent concern is the possibility that the two North Korean soldiers captured by Ukrainian forces could, in the course of future negotiations, be sent back to North Korea. According to what has been publicly reported, these men have openly expressed through the media their wish to go to South Korea. If they are repatriated to North Korea against their will under such circumstances, there is an extremely high likelihood that they will face severe punishment by the regime.

In North Korea, becoming a prisoner of war is not regarded merely as a military failure. It may be treated as betrayal of the system or even treason. Moreover, since their faces and intentions have already been made public, not only these individuals themselves but also their families remaining in North Korea face a serious risk of retaliation and punishment. In North Korean society, a structure in which family members are punished for the actions of one individual has been maintained for decades, and this reality is widely known within the North Korean defector community. Therefore, if these men are returned to North Korea, the risk of persecution is not an abstract concern. It is a highly real and concrete danger.

Testimony that these North Korean soldiers attempted to kill themselves immediately before capture also reveals the gravity of this issue. To those outside North Korea, such actions may be difficult to understand. But to those of us who have experienced the North Korean system firsthand, they are not unfamiliar. In North Korea, loyalty to the regime and its leader is placed above human life itself, and there exists a military culture and political ideology that compels soldiers to choose death over capture. At the same time, many North Korean soldiers internalize the fear that, if they are taken alive, their families may also suffer consequences. In this sense, such suicide attempts should not be seen merely as battlefield actions, but as evidence that the structure of human rights abuse under the North Korean regime extends all the way to the battlefield.

In fact, it has been reported that Ri Kang Eun, age 22, attempted to take his own life immediately before capture, even while suffering from severe bleeding due to

his injuries. Baek Pyeong Gang, age 27, is likewise reported to have attempted self-destruction at the moment he was about to be taken prisoner while wounded. Their actions demonstrate just how extreme the fear, indoctrination, and terror of retaliation against their families are within the North Korean military system.

These two men have also spoken in interviews about their hopes for the future. One said that, if he were able to go to South Korea, he would like to study vocal music. The other said he would like to learn information technology and computers. These statements show that they are not merely actors in a war. They are young North Korean men who have been denied the opportunity to learn freely and to live freely.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the U.S. Congress and the international community to give serious attention to the following:

First, please make diplomatic and humanitarian efforts to ensure that the two North Korean prisoners of war currently held in Ukraine are not forcibly repatriated to North Korea against their free will.

Second, please strengthen monitoring and support, based on the principles of international humanitarian law, so that their fundamental rights and dignity as prisoners of war are fully protected.

Third, since they have expressed their wish to go to South Korea, please actively consider cooperation with the relevant governments and international organizations so that their wishes may be genuinely respected and their safety securely protected.

Article 13 of the Geneva Convention clearly provides that prisoners of war must in all circumstances be treated humanely and protected from violence to life and person. The principle that a person facing a clear risk of persecution must not be returned against his will is likewise a critical standard of the international community. The case of these two North Korean prisoners of war is a real test of whether those principles will truly be upheld.

These men are victims who were driven into war by the political decisions of the Kim Jong Un regime, and at the same time they are human beings whose rights must be protected from the structural violence of the North Korean system. This issue must not be treated merely as a matter of prisoner exchange or diplomatic bargaining. Their lives, their safety, and their free will are essential considerations that the international community must not ignore.

As a former North Korean soldier and as someone who has personally experienced the North Korean system, I must state clearly that these two young men must not be sent back to a country where punishment and retaliation await them. I respectfully urge the U.S. Congress and the international community to play a responsible role so that they may begin new lives in an environment where freedom and safety are guaranteed.

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