

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing

on

North Korean Human Rights Movement:
Current Prospects and Obstacles

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Statement of Hu Kang Il

Thirty Years of North Korean Defector History and
the Activities of North Korean Defector Human Rights Organizations
North Korea Democratization Committee

Introduction

I was working as a dispatched laborer at a North Korean worksite in Russia when I tried to locate my maternal relatives living in South Korea. Because a colleague informed on me, I became wanted by the North Korean authorities. I then escaped on June 5, 1993, and spent two years and two months in hiding while evading pursuit by North Korean State Security agents in Russia. After undergoing an on-site asylum screening by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Moscow, I entered the Republic of Korea on August 23, 1995.

At the time of my escape, I had been active together with 13 fellow North Korean defectors who had left North Korean worksites in Russia and hoped to go to South Korea. We formed an anti-regime organization called the “Ilshim Comrades Association for Defection from North Korea,” and I later came to South Korea through that course of activity.

Among those who could testify to our anti-regime activities in Russia at the time are the late Mr. Lee Yeon-gil, who served as commander of the KLO unit during the Korean War and was deeply involved both in operations into North Korea and in the defection of Hwang Jang Yop, as well as Mr. Park Jeong-won, Deputy Consul General, and Consul Choi Deok-geun of the Republic of Korea Consulate General in Vladivostok, Russia. Consul Choi was assassinated in 1996.

Before we entered South Korea, on April 15, 1994, the Kim Young-sam government of the Republic of Korea decided at a meeting of the Policy Coordination Council on Unification and Security that approximately 200 North Korean defectors who had left North Korean worksites in Russia would be brought to South Korea if they wished to seek asylum there, in accordance with the President's view that North Korean defectors overseas were also citizens of the Republic of Korea under the Constitution.

History of Large-Scale North Korean Defection

1. Phase One: 1994–1999 — The Initial Stage of Mass Defection

This was the period in which the flow of large-scale defection began to take shape, centered on North Korean overseas dispatched workers who escaped from worksites in Russia. The main categories included forestry mission workers in Russia, coal industry workers dispatched to Russia, construction workers in Russia, and overseas diplomatic personnel.

Until 1993, the number of overseas dispatched workers defecting had remained at only two or three people per year. However, after the South Korean government announced in 1994 that it would accept North Korean defectors abroad, the scale of defection steadily increased, and by the late 1990s it had risen sharply to the level of dozens per year. In particular, beginning in the late 1990s, some of those who fled to China to escape the “Arduous March” joined the stream of people entering South Korea, and the number grew exponentially.

In response to this change, the South Korean government enacted and promulgated the Act on the Protection and Settlement Support of Residents Escaping from North Korea on July 14, 1997, thereby laying the institutional foundation for guaranteeing the stable livelihood of the rapidly growing number of defectors and supporting their settlement in South Korean society. Representative measures included settlement subsidies, guaranteed rental housing, and employment opportunities within government agencies.

In addition, in December 1997, the North Korean Defectors Foundation was established, and on July 8, 1998, Hanawon, a specialized education institution for North Korean defectors under the Ministry of Unification, was established in Anseong, Gyeonggi Province. Later, on December 5, 2012, a Hanawon branch was added in Hwacheon County, Gangwon Province, and Hanawon came to be recognized as the representative educational institution supporting North Korean defectors as they took their first steps in South Korean society.

This period also saw the historic event of the defection to South Korea of Hwang Jang Yop, the former International Secretary of the Workers' Party of North Korea, while he was in China on April 20, 1997.

2. Phase Two: 2000–2009 — The Expansion of Large-Scale Defector Entry
During the so-called “Arduous March” from 1995 to 1998, countless North Koreans died of starvation. It is known that the number of North Korean defectors who escaped for survival and remained in China illegally reached as many as 300,000. Many of them moved through third countries such as Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam in order to enter South Korea.

In 2004, 468 North Korean defectors entered South Korea aboard two chartered aircraft. This remains recorded as a representative case of group entry carried out with the involvement of South Korean government agencies at the time.

Although the total number of North Korean defectors who had entered South Korea by 1998 was only 947, the number continued to rise steadily thereafter, surpassing a cumulative total of 2,000 in 2002, 10,000 in February 2007, and 20,000 in November 2010. It then reached 30,000 in 2016, and as of the end of 2024 stood at 34,314 in total.

As the number of defectors entering South Korea increased, North Korean human rights organizations led by defectors themselves also began to form in earnest and to carry out sustained activities for the freedom and human rights of the North Korean people. Representative developments include the following:

April 1999: Formation of the Association of North Korean Defector Comrades under the leadership of Hwang Jang Yop

January 2000: Formation of the North Korea Democratization Alliance under the leadership of Hwang Jang Yop

October 2003: Visit to the United States by a delegation of the North Korea Democratization Alliance led by Hwang Jang Yop

April 2004: First North Korea Freedom Week held in Washington under the leadership of Suzanne Scholte

April 2004: First North Korea-directed broadcast transmitted by Free North Korea Radio

April 2007: Establishment of the North Korea Democratization Committee with Hwang Jang Yop as its first chairman

As the activities of defector-led North Korean human rights organizations intensified, North Korea sent agents south in order to carry out terrorism against Hwang Jang Yop, mobilized hostile elements within South Korea to issue indiscriminate threats against defector leaders, and even distributed blood-stained axes and kitchen knives to the offices of North Korean human rights organizations, thereby creating an atmosphere of terror.

3. Phase Three: 2010–2020 — The Decline in Mass Defector Entry

Because of the sudden currency reform imposed by Kim Jong Un's regime on November 30, 2009, and because of the full border closure brought on by the spread of COVID-19 from late 2019 onward, along with intensified Chinese police crackdowns on North Korean defectors, escape through China became virtually impossible. As a result, the number of defectors entering South Korea fell sharply.

The last major case of large-scale group defection during this period was the 2016 incident in which 13 workers from the North Korean Ryugyong Restaurant in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, China, left their workplace and entered South Korea. Some have defined this as a planned defection, but based on the views of those involved, I believe it should be understood as a voluntary group defection rather than something forced from outside.

In addition, smuggling, which had been active on a civilian basis in the North Korea-China border region, was completely cut off because of North Korea's border closure, and the lives of North Korean residents once again faced a brutal survival crisis comparable to the "Arduous March" of the mid-1990s.

At the same time, before the border closure, outside information and Korean popular culture had already spread rapidly, especially among the jangmadang generation, through miniature radios, Notetel devices, mobile phones subscribed to Chinese carriers, CDs, USB drives, and SD cards that had been sent into North Korea in large quantities by defector human rights organizations, Christian groups, and South Korean civic organizations.

For years, defector human rights organizations such as the North Korea Democratization Committee, Fighters for a Free North Korea, Keunsaem, and the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Refugee Human Rights had continued to send anti-North Korea leaflets and to release supplies toward North Korea using the ebb tide of the Han River. Later, however, the South Korean government strongly restricted or blocked these activities through legal and administrative means.

4. Phase Four: 2020–Present — Entry Centered on North Korean Defectors Illegally Residing in China

After the full border closure caused by COVID-19, new defections from inside North Korea became nearly impossible, and only a very small number of defectors who had already been residing illegally in China were able to enter South Korea.

One particularly notable case occurred on November 2, 2019, when two North Korean fishermen in their early twenties crossed the Northern Limit Line aboard a squid-fishing boat and sought asylum. The Moon Jae-in government, however, forcibly repatriated them through Panmunjom on November 7, just five days after their arrival. I believe this was an extremely serious matter from the standpoint of the spirit of South Korea's Constitution, humanitarian principles, and international human rights norms.

By contrast, under the Yoon Suk Yeol government, on May 6, 2023, nine members of a single family who had departed from Kangryong County in Hwanghae Province aboard a wooden boat crossed the Northern Limit Line in the Yellow Sea and defected to South Korea. On December 26 of the same year, four more North Korean residents also crossed the Northern Limit Line in the East Sea and defected to South Korea.

According to their testimony, one of the direct motives for their escape was that they had developed a longing for the free world through outside information and Korean popular culture that had flowed into North Korea. In other words, information inflow is not merely a cultural influence. It is a practical factor that leads North Korean residents to make the decision to choose freedom.

This flow toward freedom among the people of North Korea has not stopped. In particular, the younger generation inside North Korea, especially the jangmadang generation, is leading a change in consciousness based on the influence of outside information and Korean popular culture, and this has become the very seed of change that the North Korean regime fears most.

I believe that if the South Korean government, regardless of the political orientation of the administration in power, had consistently maintained a North Korea policy that stood not with the North Korean regime but with the freedom and human rights of 24 million North Korean people, North Korea's hereditary dictatorship would have faced a far stronger challenge.

In the end, the central point today is clear. Both Kim Jong Un's dictatorship, which oppresses the North Korean people, and policies that lean toward appeasement and compromise rather than meaningful restraint of that dictatorship must be subject to historical judgment and accountability.

Evaluation of the North Korea Policies of Successive South Korean Governments

1. The Kim Dae-jung Government (1998–2003)

I assess that the core of the Kim Dae-jung government's North Korea policy was focused excessively on improving relations with Kim Jong Il's regime rather than on the freedom and human rights of the North Korean people. The so-called Sunshine Policy was presented under the banners of peaceful coexistence, peaceful exchange, and peaceful unification, but I believe that in practice it led to excessive appeasement of, and submission to, the North Korean regime.

In particular, the issue of transfers of funds to North Korea around the time of the 2000 inter-Korean summit, along with the June 15 North-South Joint Declaration, generated major controversy in South Korean society and, rather than clearly raising questions about the nature of the North Korean system, instead weakened such scrutiny.

In addition, by restricting the free political and social activities of Hwang Jang Yop after his 1997 defection, the Kim Dae-jung government failed to fully guarantee the voice of a symbolic figure for democratization in North Korea and the liberation of the North Korean people.

2. The Roh Moo-hyun Government (2003–2008)

I believe the Roh Moo-hyun government likewise inherited the Sunshine Policy orientation of the Kim Dae-jung government in its North Korea policy. Its approach—seeking to induce change through economic cooperation while avoiding provoking the North Korean regime—ultimately revealed its limitations by failing to place the human rights problem of the North Korean people at the center.

Roh Moo-hyun's visit to Pyongyang in October 2007 and the October 4 Joint Declaration may have had political significance, but they also had clear limitations in that they failed to address fundamentally the brutality of the North Korean regime and its repression of human rights.

3. The Moon Jae-in Government (2017–2022)

I regard the Moon Jae-in government as the administration among all previous South Korean governments that took the most one-sidedly conciliatory posture toward the North Korean regime. Its North Korea policy also lay on an extension of the Sunshine Policy, and the issue of North Korean human rights was effectively pushed to a lower priority.

In particular, the Moon Jae-in government institutionally pressured the activities of North Korean defector human rights organizations in South Korea and of defectors seeking to defend the value of freedom. It strongly restricted not only the inflow of information into North Korea, the sending of anti-North Korea leaflets, and the delivery of supplies to North Korea, but also a wide range of privately led North Korean human rights activities. On June 26, 2020, searches and seizures were conducted against Fighters for a Free North Korea and Keunsaem, among others, and in July of the same year, the Ministry of Unification even pursued office inspections of registered nonprofit organizations under its jurisdiction.

While the Ministry of Unification devoted substantial resources to projects supporting North Korea and to settlement assistance, it structurally excluded or reduced projects related to North Korean human rights. As a result, defector organizations faced unprecedented difficulties and were placed in a situation in which they had to worry about their very survival.

In addition, the 2019 starvation deaths of defector Han Seong-ok and her son in Bongcheon-dong, Gwanak-gu, Seoul; the case of a deceased North Korean defector woman found after having been left unattended for a long period in an apartment in Yangcheon-gu; and the death of a young North Korean defector in a gosiwon in Gimhae, South Gyeongsang Province all laid bare the blind spots in support for the defector community and the government's indifference.

Above all, I believe that the forcible repatriation in 2019 of the two North Korean fishermen who had sought asylum was an act in which the Republic of Korea itself destroyed the minimum principles it was obligated to uphold as a country of freedom and human rights.

4. The Lee Jae-myung Government (June 2025–Present)

I believe that the Lee Jae-myung government likewise shows, in the basic direction of its North Korea policy, a tendency to prioritize de-escalation and peaceful coexistence over the freedom and human rights of the North Korean people. But true peace on the Korean Peninsula cannot be achieved while turning away from the freedom and human rights of the North Korean people.

In particular, I am deeply concerned that, since the launch of the current government, the movement to strengthen regulation and punishment of anti-North Korea leaflets and North Korea-bound information activities has intensified once again. Even though the Constitutional Court ruled on September 26, 2023, that the anti-leaflet law was unconstitutional, I believe there have since been continued attempts to pursue substantially the same effect through other laws and administrative means.

I am also deeply concerned by the movement within the Ministry of Unification to use the term “bukhyangmin”—a term with no clear legal basis—in place of the legal term “residents escaping from North Korea” or the socially accepted term “North Korean defectors.”

The term “North Korean defectors” is not merely a label. It is an expression that contains the political and legal identity of people who escaped North Korea’s oppression in search of freedom. In light of Article 3 of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, it is also connected to the principle that residents who escape from North Korea must be protected as citizens of the Republic of Korea.

An attempt to change that term to “bukhyangmin” or something similar, without legal procedure or social consensus, risks blurring the identity and legal status of North Korean defectors and causing confusion and division within the defector community itself. More than that, it is a very serious issue because it may also have a negative impact on the logic under which defectors residing in third countries are admitted to and protected by the Republic of Korea.

I am concerned that the Ministry of Unification, even though it is a state institution that more than any other must rigorously enforce law and 制度 (system), is instead moving in a direction that undermines legal stability and consistency in public language.

I also view as extremely serious the weakening or reduction of North Korea human rights-related organizations and functions within the Ministry of Unification, as well as the trend toward dismantling or hollowing out the structural mechanisms intended to advance North Korean human rights.

I believe the current government should firmly maintain a security order based on the U.S.-ROK alliance and shift to a policy that places the freedom and human

rights of the North Korean people at the center, rather than prioritizing management of relations with the North Korean regime.

Conclusion

The Republic of Korea now stands at an important crossroads. This is the moment to decide whether it will stand firmly on the principles of liberal democracy, or whether it will weaken the value of freedom with its own hands through compromise and appeasement toward the North Korean dictatorship.

Stability and peace on the Korean Peninsula can never be realized so long as Kim Jong Un's nuclear weapons, missiles, and politics of terror remain in place. True peace is possible not through silence and submission, but only on the foundation of freedom, human rights, truth, and principle.

Today, as one of the North Korean defectors who risked his life to find freedom, I say this clearly: North Korean defectors are people who know better than anyone the value of freedom. We are prepared to risk our lives again in order to defend the freedom we risked our lives to obtain.

The North Korea Democratization Committee, Free North Korea Radio, Fighters for a Free North Korea, and other defector-led North Korean human rights organizations will continue to fight with unwavering resolve for the freedom and human rights of the North Korean people.

Now more than ever, this is a moment when the concern and support of the international community are urgently needed so that defector organizations can act in a more organized and active way. I urge the United States, which has led the free world, to give greater attention to this struggle for the freedom and liberation of the North Korean people. In particular, I ask that you provide political, diplomatic, and moral support so that defector-led North Korean human rights organizations can carry out meaningful work on the ground. Thank you.

For further information contact Suzanne Scholte at Suzanne@defenseforumfoundation.org (English) or johnnypark@defenseforumfoundation.org (Korean)