

The Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing (TLHRC)  
Escaping North Korea: The Plight of Defectors  
Thursday, September 23, 2010

Mi Sun BAHNG

Oral Testimony:

My name is Bahng Mi Sun and I entered South Korea on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2004. After living in hell on earth that is North Korea and coming to South Korea, I feel like I have entered heaven. Also, for me to be here in the beautiful country of the United States today, and to meet distinguished people here, I feel there is no greater honor for me than this.

Before escaping North Korea I lived in the city of Musan in North Hamkyung Province, and during the 'Arduous March', my husband, who was a laborer in a mine, starved to death, and in order to save my young children I risked my life to cross the Tumen River and fortunately I arrived safely on the other side in China.

The first people I met as soon as I stepped foot in China were Chinese brokers. Once they saw me they used the safety and well-being of my children to threaten me. Finally I was separated from my children and sold for 4,000 Chinese Yuan Renminbi [Approximately \$594]. What was more infuriating was that these Chinese brokers called North Korean defector women 'pigs', and treated us like animals.

I found out for the first time that there were such violent and shameless people in the world like these brokers, and even if such people existed, how can they call human beings 'pigs' and how can one human being sell another human being? What hurt more was that even though I was being treated in this inhuman manner, there was no place for me to go and plead my grief and this was frustrating.

In a period of few months I was sold two, three times, and one day I succeeded in escaping and in the process of searching for my children I was caught by the Chinese authorities and forcibly repatriated to North Korea.

After my experiences in the labor reform prison camp, jail, and prison, and from the injuries suffered in my leg from the beatings and torture, I am officially classified as a physically handicapped person in South Korea.

Who is to blame for all this? This is all because of the dictator Kim Jong Il in North Korea. Also, isn't it also the fault of Hu Jintao, whose government arrests North Korean defector women and forcibly repatriates all of them and as a result suffer unspeakable suffering? If we are all human, if any of us had any hearts, we will not sit still and leave these two dictators alone.

Due to time constraints I will end my testimony here, and lastly I would like to thank all the North Korean human rights activists who are actively working in this area, and would like to especially sincerely thank Suzanne Scholte and other human rights organizations for their work and effort. Thank you.

September 23, 2010

Bahng Mi Sung

### Written Testimony:

My name is Bahng Mi Sun and I entered South Korea on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2004. After living in hell on earth that is North Korea and coming to South Korea, I felt as though I was in heaven. I was placed in a 605 square feet rental housing unit, but compared to my previous living conditions in North Korea, this was a palace. Also, not having to worry about food, not having to worry about scraping tree bark for food – if this is not heaven then what is?

Before escaping North Korea I lived in the city of Musan in Musan County, located in North Hamkyung Province, and during the 'Arduous March' my husband, who was a laborer in a mine, starved to death. As a result I went through severe mental anguish in trying to continue living my life. I thought that if things were left the way they were, even my children would starve to death and after much thought I decided to take my son and daughter and crossed the Tumen River in June of 2002 and stepped foot in China.

I thought that once I went to China my children would not starve to death, and that is why I crossed the Tumen River, but once we arrived on the other side, what awaited us were the fear of capture by Chinese security officials and forced repatriation back to North Korea. In a situation where I would have done anything to guarantee the safety of my children, Chinese brokers appeared and using the safety of my children as an intimidation, they started threatening me. Finally I was sold for 4,000 Chinese Yuan Renminbi [Approximately \$594] and taken to the Chinese city of Helong.

At that time the Chinese brokers called us North Korean refugee women 'pigs'. I was with a group of other North Korean refugee women, and I was deemed 'the best pig', and therefore sold first. When I was taken to Helong, the person who bought me for 4,000 Chinese Yuan Renminbi sold me at a higher cost to his relative in the city of Shandong.

I was in a new and strange land of China; my new 'husband', with whom I could not even communicate, was a paraplegic who could not use his legs, and he was 15 years my senior. Since he bought me for the 'astronomical' sum of 7,000 Chinese Yuan Renminbi [Approximately \$1,041] which he earned and saved through farm work, he treated me like an animal from the first day. After some time passed of this kind of treatment from my 'husband', one day when he went off to the fields for work, a few rough looking men came to my 'house' and abducted me, and took me to another location.

It was only later when I found out that these men were an even worse kind of evil brokers who 'stole' other North Korean refugee women, and sold us at a higher price to others. So in a period of a few months in a very pitiful situation I was sold three times like livestock. I knew then for the first time there was a world in which people were sold and bought and realized also that there were such cruel and shameful people in the world.

The person I was sold to was a 34 year old man who lived with his elderly parents. I was 48 years old at that time, and I found myself sold to a man who was 14 years younger than me. It was quite a spectacle for someone as young as he to be my husband and to be acting like he was in charge, and he even said that since I was too old, he told me to change my age to 38. In an instant I was 38 years old, and at the slightest things he would beat me and yell at me. One day, he told me that I needed to bear him a child.

It was absolutely ridiculous that at my age of 48 I could get pregnant, but what was more unbelievable was that when I told him I had a contraceptive implanted in my uterus when I was

in North Korea and told him that I could not bear any children, he screamed back 'regardless of a contraceptive device or whatever, just pull it out'.

He then called his sister and other relatives who were living in the same neighborhood and they talked among themselves, and finally brought an obstetrician-gynecologist to the house.

Without any medical equipment or medical supplies, and, without any notice, they forced me to the ground, held me by my arms and legs, and forcibly removed the contraceptive device that I had implanted in North Korea.

The bleeding was so severe that I could not get up for a few days. For a month I just lay bedridden due to a high fever. As I lay there ill with my fever, I wondered to myself how I came to be in this situation, and how I came to be in such a pitiful condition, and had thoughts going through my mind. It was so unfair, I was filled with rage and sadness, but what was more unfortunate and exasperating was that there was no place for me to take this sadness, no one to tell about my situation. I spent my whole time crying while I was bedridden.

After some time, while waiting for the right moment, I escaped to Yanbian. I came to Yanbian with the determination that even if I died, I will be with my children, and came to search for them there, which was where my children and I were separated. However, in a vast country like China there was no way for me to find them. During my search for my children I was arrested by the Chinese security police and forcibly repatriated to North Korea.

After repatriation, the first place I was taken to was a forced labor prison camp. About 40 of us were taken together, and we were forced to sit and stand up repeatedly, about 100 times, and forced to run around a soccer-pitch sized field around 100 times as well.

Prisoners from their 20's to 60's formed a single file line and ran, and to me it felt like I was going to suffocate and die, because I was so out of breath. Finally I stumbled and fell. As soon as I fell someone came and started to viciously kick me and started beating me with a club. The place where I was hit became grossly swollen, and a few days later in the infirmary I was diagnosed as having developed osteomyelitis. The injuries suffered during this beating have caused me to become classified as a handicapped person in South Korea.

Not long after I was then taken to the Ministry of Security's jail cell, and here I saw and experienced a life that I had never before seen or experienced. The authorities locked up 30 to 40 repatriated North Koreans in a holding cell no bigger than 180 square feet, and it became unbearably suffocating in the cell. If we showed the slightest movement, all of those in the cell would be punished as a group, and in more serious cases, they would make the inmates beat each other. One day, a refugee woman who had become pregnant in China was brought in and forced to lie down on the floor, and a wooden plank was placed on top of her belly; two male inmates were brought and told to climb on top of the plank. The rest of us could not keep our eyes open and look at what was happening before us, so we just looked down and were shaking in fear. A few days later I heard that the woman had died, and the baby was miscarried; soon after I was sent to a living hell, the prison at Hamheung.

Limping with my injured leg, I was taken to the Hamheung prison (kyo-hwa-so) and became an eyewitness to truly horrible things. Words fail me in describing inmates who had given up being human, who in trying to extend their dying days would try to catch insects to eat to sustain themselves. To this day I have unending nightmares of the people in pathetic situations I saw there, those who would be working out in the fields and if they saw a snake or a frog would catch them and swallow them whole; there were people who would be defecating and if a piece of radish came out they would immediately wipe it on their sleeves and eat it; if there were

pieces of beans or kernels of corn found in cow manure, the person who found them would consider that day to be lucky day.

I too was living like an animal like the rest of the inmates, but even if I had to live like an animal I vowed that I would be reunited with my children. I thought of the faces of my children wandering around China looking for their mother, and this allowed me to bear the harsh realities I was going through. After about 1 year and 3 months of incarceration I was on the verge of death but finally out through the gates of the prison.

When I returned to my hometown there was no one to greet me or welcome me back. My house was gone, and since I didn't have a place to stay I went to my in-laws; while here I had the fortune of meeting a Chinese citizen came looking for me bearing news from my son. The son whose fate I did not know had ended up going to South Korea and had laid the groundwork to bring me out to South Korea.

I followed the Chinese person to the Tumen River, which was a River of Tears for me, and crossed into China again; I was able to reach South Korea through the help of the South Korean Consulate in China. I was finally reunited with my children, and now as I look back on my days when even as a human I lived like an animal, I am trying to find what I can do for the remaining days of my life. I know now that a harmonious family life, and for a family to come together to plan and dream for tomorrow, are kinds of happiness. But even now at this moment as I think of the North Korean refugee women in China and in North Korea who are treated as animals, I realize what I must do.

If there is no one to wipe their tears, tend to their wounds, and help them live as human beings, the North Korean refugee women will today and tomorrow continue to be sold and traded like pigs in China and the women in our hometowns who have no rights will die without even knowing the rewards of living a fulfilling life.

I hope that our North Korean women refugees will no longer be sold and traded like animals in China. I hope that our North Korean brothers will no longer be held in prisons and labor camps and forced to live like subhuman people. I appreciate so much the efforts of the North Korean human rights activists who are trying to rescue these people, and I also extend my deepest gratitude to Madam Suzanne Scholte and the efforts of human rights groups in the United States.

Thank you.

Bahng Mi Sun

*For further information contact Suzanne Scholte at 703-534-4313 or email [Skswm@aol.com](mailto:Skswm@aol.com).*