

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

Jin Hae JO

Oral Testimony:

Hello, my name is Jin Hae Jo, and I have been in the United States for three years, coming here through the grace of the Almighty God and with the help of Pastor Philip Buck.

Since coming to the United States and living such a free and happy life, I have to say I have gained quite a bit of weight. I have even heard recently from another person that I would have a hard time getting married, and should go on a diet; this actually is a sign of me eating rich, delicious food and gaining weight that was elusive in North Korea. When I was forcibly repatriated from China, I was 22 pounds lighter than now, but even in North Korea I was teased for my weight – people used to say of me ‘if they caught and ate me they could eat for three months.’

We have a situation where people in the free world have an excess of food and for us women we have to worry about our image and getting married, but in North Korea, even now, there’s not even enough cornmeal gruel to go around and thus people are facing hunger and dying of starvation, of which all of you distinguished gentlemen sitting before me are well aware of, and of which I am so worried and concerned about.

Recently, I received a letter from a pastor who had taught my sister and I Bible study and looked after us for some time; in the letter he recounted his time spent eating a meal with a few North Korean defectors (men) who had just come out of North Korea two days prior to the meal and were telling the pastor the most current up-to-date situation in North Korea. They told the pastor that a large number of people lost their homes in the recent floods that happened in North Korea, and that a large amount of crops were lost to the flooding as well. These people who were so devastated they left North Korea for China to seek a lifeline, but were all caught and arrested by the border security and sent to prison in North Korea, forced to rebuild government buildings damaged or swept away by the floods, and dying from the forced labor or from epidemic of disease resulting from the floods. These defectors told the pastor that every time a person died they would become manure for fruit trees, and a common phrase developed whereby whenever someone died, people would say, “someone just became manure”; they all would lament why there was no war to end the misery in North Korea.

Also, the world would not be the same without women, and here in the United States, people open doors for the women to enter first, showing respect and care, and women receive love here, but the women of North Korea, even now, because of Kim Jong-il and Hu Jintao, there are some North Korean women who are sold for less than the price of dogs here in America.

My dear mother whom I love and admire so much, protected me so I was not sold or traded in a human trafficking ring, but during my 10 years of living in China I saw many, many women being sold and traded in these trafficking rings. Every time I saw those women, my heart ached and was in pain, because my own sister, who left North Korea at the young age of 18 to find food for our family and was sold to a trafficking ring, will probably never come back to our family and I don’t even know if I will ever meet her again while I am still alive.

Almost 80% of North Korean women who go to China go to try to save their hungry and starving families back in North Korea, but in a lot of cases these women end up not being able to help their families at all and become a source of money for others. Before my sister left our house,

my father, in order to save us who were starving and dying, went to China and brought home a sack of rice from a relative there; for this 'crime' he was arrested by the North Korean security agents and died at their hands from the torture and starvation. My own grandmother died of starvation right before my eyes, her one last wish being able to eat one steamed potato. My two-month old baby brother also died from starvation. My mother had left the house in search of my sister who had left home; my baby brother was waiting for our mother's bosom to come back and feed and nourish him, but he could not wait, and died. In less than a year, four members of our family had died. I stood before my grandmother's grave and vowed that I would come back and tearfully I along with another younger brother and my younger sister took our mother's hand and left for China to find a better life for all of us.

Since we had no shoes on, our feet soon developed blisters and started bleeding, and we were weak from hunger; our own mother had suffered torture in prison and was in no condition to look out after the three of us. It was decided to leave our younger brother at someone else's house, and we promised our younger brother that we would come back in 5 days to come get him; when we were leaving him at the house my brother held on to my pant leg and cried out, 'sister, why are you taking little sister but not me?'; I told him that my mother and I will be bringing back rice, and little sister would be bringing candies and cookies, and thus were able to soothe him. We tried to return as quickly as possible but due to the wet season the river became swollen, and we had also heard news that the government was executing people who did not participate in elections for Kim Jong-il; we could only send someone after two months to go and bring our brother back, but by then we heard that he had been left out and abandoned in the streets and in his young tender age of 5, he died in a field of reeds crying out, 'sister, when are you coming back', and starved to death. To this day I am so sorry in my heart for not bringing him with us, and I miss him dearly every day.

I am not sharing my testimony here at this place to solicit your pity or for you to feel sorry for me. My reason for being here today is to ask for people in the world and all of you here, to concentrate your efforts and together, help with this situation so that there will be no more children who suffered like I did and still suffer from living through this kind of family situation, of feeling longing, feeling sorry, and feeling hurt, and even in my sleep I have nightmares of being repatriated to North Korea and live in fear.

I want to take this pain and experiences and make a sacrifice of myself and live diligently and work hard to make sure the regime in North Korea falls, and I want to be one of the people who will help to change North Korea to a great and proud country like the United States of America or South Korea. However, I work 12 to 14 hours every day and I can barely make the rent and car payment, and so I have no time to study or go to school, and so I am just getting by like this.

The most important reason I came today to share with you is that the hunger has been going on for 10 years, and countless North Korean women have been sold and traded in trafficking rings, including my own sister, and I want freedom to come to them so that the day will come when they will reap the benefits of a diligent life, the day will come that when there is injustice they can turn to the police and the law and receive help, and I earnestly pray and wish for that to come true soon and beseech all of you here today.

Lastly may God bless all of you here today and all the people working for the human rights of North Korea, and to all those who have supported in the past and will continue to support us.

Thank you.

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