

The Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing (TLHRC)
Escaping North Korea: The Plight of Defectors
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Oral Testimony:

I am originally from Pyongyang, and escaped North Korea and entered South Korea in 2002.

Currently in South Korea, 78% of the almost 20,000 North Korean defectors are women. The motivation for starting the organization, Coalition for North Korean Women's Rights in 2006, was to help the resettlement and integration into South Korean society of North Korea defector women and to defend our human rights and rights as citizens, through our own efforts and will.

This year, our organization has interviewed 100 North Korean defector women who are living in South Korea, and among the 100, 90% experienced being sold into a human trafficking ring in China.

Broadly speaking the North Korean women who have escaped into China went to China not for the reason of staying and living in China, but rather to earn and make money and feed and keep alive their family left behind in North Korea.

And during this process of finding work, they would have never imagined in their wildest dreams that they would be sold and traded in a human trafficking ring.

However, once they are in China and are sold into these human trafficking rings, from then on the lives of these North Korean refugee women go on a downward spiral, and for the sole reason of them being illegal aliens, they are treated as subhuman by the Chinese, forced to become unwilling sex slaves, and in addition endure beatings and other shameful maltreatment.

There are some women who are knowingly sold to these human trafficking rings, and those women who of course don't know that they have just been sold and traded.

Why do some of these North Korean refugee women knowingly allow themselves to be sold and traded in human trafficking rings? The traffickers threaten and blackmail the women by telling them that if the women do not listen to the traffickers, they will report the women to the Chinese security authorities, and that they will be forcibly repatriated.

When this happens, the North Korean refugee women know that once repatriation happens they will be jailed, beaten, sent to labor camps, and overall just receive a very harsh punishment. Fearing this treatment, the women have no choice but to be sold into these trafficking rings.

Mr. Steve Kim's organization, 318 Partners, and our organization, have partnered together to rescue the North Korean refugee women who are in China, and most recently from a study and survey done with North Korean refugee women in China, a lot of these women who were sold into rural farm areas to Chinese men who otherwise would not have been able to find a wife and get married, learned to speak Chinese, found out more about the realities of life in China, and escaped the farm life and went to the cities to work in bars or in the Internet sex-chatting industry.

There is also the situation of the children of these North Korean refugee women in China. The status of the children of these women is one of the most serious issues for the refugee women and their children. If efforts are made to register the children with the state authorities then the fact will be made known that one of the parents is an illegal alien, and there is an increased chance of forced repatriation. In China, for a child to go to school, there must be proof, and some sort of identification, that proves the child's identity. Due to these kinds of problems, the children often do not get to go to school and are alienated from receiving an education.

China became a signatory to the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the Protocol in 1982, and has the responsibility to protect refugees who have escaped their homeland and are in China. However, the Chinese authorities look at the North Korean refugees as illegal economic migrants and therefore do not recognize them as refugees, and continue to put for the position that the issue of the refugees is a matter between China and North Korea and not something a third country or an international organization need to be involved with.

In light of this situation, the United States and other members of the international society must continue to press and urge China to hold human rights views that is fitting for a nation that is becoming a developed nation.

The Chinese government must stop the forced repatriation of North Korean refugees, and allow North Korean refugee women who have lived with ethnic Chinese citizens for 5 to 10 years, and their offspring, at least a temporary right of residence, and protection from human traffickers and violation of human rights.

Children of North Korean refugee women and Chinese husbands must be allowed to go to school, and the rewarding of money for Chinese citizens who report on refugees must be stopped as well.

As long as North Korea does not collapse, and as long as there is no reform in North Korea, there will be continued movement of North Korean refugees streaming out of North Korea due to hunger and economic hardships.

The supporting of North Korean defectors-led groups and the training of defector leaders is something that will truly prepare for the eventual reunification of the peninsula, and as such the ones who can take the lead and help the democratization of North Korea are the defectors; therefore there must be continued support and interest for North Korean human rights and the North Korean refugee issue by the United States and the international community.

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