PERILOUS JOURNEYS:
THE PLIGHT OF NORTH KOREANS IN CHINA

Peter Beck, Gail Kim and Donald Macintyre

ABSTRACT

This article examines the factors leading to cross-border migrations in North Korea and then describes the politically charged but fragile and increasingly mercenary networks through which North Koreans seek refuge. Some 10,000 North Koreans have safely resettled in South Korea and elsewhere, but many more suffer exploitation while in hiding or on the run. China’s repatriation policy and South Korea’s ambivalent postures have resulted in the networks to explore various other alternatives, testing the limits of Beijing and Pyongyang’s tolerance. Although indifference and fears of mass migration have kept relevant governments from pressing for a halt to all forced repatriation or pursuing the quiet cooperation necessary to protect the asylum seekers, this article identifies practicable strategies to access, relocate and resettle the most exposed while relieving some of the pressures to escape.

1 INTRODUCTION

The economic collapse of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK)—North Korea—and the famine in that country in the 1990s and subsequent food shortages have prompted scores of thousands to escape their country’s hardships and seek refuge in the People’s Republic of China (PRC)—China—and beyond, contributing to a humanitarian challenge that is playing out almost invisibly as the world focuses on North Korea’s nuclear programme. The international community has failed to find an effective means of dealing with this situation. Despite billions of dollars in humanitarian assistance over the past decade and increasing awareness of human rights violations, conditions for the vast majority of citizens in North Korea remain dire,

1 This article is a revised version of Crisis Group Asia Report no. 122, Perilous Journeys: The Plight of North Koreans in China and Beyond, 26 October 2006.
while conditions for those who reach the PRC are only marginally better. In China, the border crossers live in hiding from crackdowns and forcible repatriations by China and neighbouring countries, vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. If repatriated to the North, they face harsh punishment, possibly execution. That North Koreans in China are virtually invisible makes it impossible to give an accurate assessment of their numbers. Only a little over 10,000 have made the journey to safety in the Republic of Korea (ROK)—South Korea, or in a small number of cases, to Japan, Europe or the United States. However, on the basis of the assessments of several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and first-hand interviews with border crossers and Korean-Chinese in the border area, the total is likely to reach up to 100,000.

The plight of these North Koreans has emerged as a source of tensions, not only between the two Koreas, but also between China and its neighbours, South Korea and the US, and has even become a sticking point between the US and China. China and South Korea have held back, even during the United Nations Security Council debate in October 2006 over post-test sanctions, from applying as much pressure as they might to persuade Pyongyang to reverse its nuclear policy, in part because they fear that the steady stream of North Koreans flowing into China and beyond would become a torrent if the North’s economy were to collapse under the weight of tough measures. While there is marginally more hope Beijing will change its ways than Pyongyang, concerned governments can and must do far more to improve the situation of the border crossers as events could get much worse if famine looms again.

Hunger and the lack of economic opportunity, rather than political oppression, are the most important factors in shaping a North Korean’s decision to leave the country. A lack of information, the fear of being caught by Chinese or North Korean security agents and financial limitations are more significant barriers than any actual wall or tight security at the border. China compensates for the virtual absence of border guards with a relentless search for North Koreans in hiding. In October 2006, Chinese authorities began to build a fence along the frontier and conducted neighbourhood sweeps to find and arrest border crossers (Caryl 2006). Despite these obstacles, the willingness among North Koreans to risk their lives to escape is growing stronger, and arrivals in the South hit a record in 2006. The most important pull factor shaping the decision to leave is the presence of family members