

# International cooperation on the North Korean refugee crisis

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**The biggest challenge concerning North Korean refugees is that, as yet, there is no international framework for how to respond once these individuals have crossed the border.**

Crossing the heavily guarded 38th parallel that divides North and South Korea is virtually impossible, so a majority of refugees attempt to travel through China until they reach South-East Asia. Push factors, such as widespread human rights violations, hunger, economic problems, environmental disasters and war, are reinforced by strong pull factors such as seemingly better living conditions in other countries.

Once refugees get out of North Korea, however, China continues to forcibly repatriate all North Koreans found within its borders. Previously, North Koreans

apprehended within the borders of countries including Thailand, Vietnam and Laos would be handed over to representatives of the South Korean government. The informal agreement existing between South Korea and third countries now seems untenable, as does the future of the 'Underground Railroad' used to spirit North Korean refugees out of China. Yet the international community has not found a coherent voice with which to condemn the actions of the Chinese and find or impose a better, more humane way of dealing with this crisis. Time and time again it is the so-called big picture issues that dominate the headlines and the exchange

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between the powers of the region. It is high time the international community called for action, beginning with the demand that the human rights of these individuals be included on the agenda of any future discussions.



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Markets offer temporary employment for North Koreans during their often slow movement south. Yanji, Jilin province, near the North Korea border.

Once in China, all North Koreans exist without protection or legal recourse. With no means of living legitimately in China, North Korean refugees are not only vulnerable to forced repatriation if apprehended by the Chinese police but are also easy prey for human traffickers.

The crisis of North Korean refugees is a gendered crisis, with the majority of North Korean women who arrive in South Korea reporting some form of sexual abuse during their journey. Over 70% of those leaving North Korea are women – mainly due to the greater space for activities outside the home of women in North Korea – many of whom suffer sexual abuse, including falling victim to human trafficking at the hands of migration brokers who operate outside the law. Many North Korean women are sold to Chinese men as brides, or forced into prostitution to pay off debts accumulated while escaping from North Korea. A few of the ‘luckier’ women who find themselves victims of human trafficking are able to escape and, often with the help of aid organisations, make their way to South Korea but even here they

may struggle, fearing to speak lest they be stigmatised for having been prostituted.

Real change could begin from what is already in place, that is, by formalising the informal networks through which North Koreans have made their way through China and into South-East Asia. This would include creating a number of UN-mandated safe havens in countries that already provide sanctuary for North Korean refugees, albeit in less accommodating prison cells. The role of the Chinese government would simply be to do nothing: that is, to cease its repatriation of North Koreans.

The next step would be regulation of the informal people-moving industry that currently operates with impunity throughout the region. Although there is a very real need for the services they provide, the shadowy nature of the industry continues to prove highly problematic. Ideally, migration brokers/people smugglers would need to be registered through official means – a consulate or at least a government official with a knowledge of who is operating and when they are in the process of guiding.

Excessive introspection regarding the likelihood of the collapse of North Korea and a resultant tidal wave of refugees aside, the international community has to be willing and prepared to manage the crisis of North Korean refugees that is happening in the present. For the nations of the region the biggest challenge will be convincing China of the benefits of turning a blind eye instead of contributing to the problem by forcibly repatriating North Koreans to an uncertain fate. This can only happen, however, if the global community is ready to accept that this constitutes a humanitarian crisis and is willing to engage China – and each other – on this issue.

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