

The curious case of North Korea

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Displacement and distress migration within and outside North Korea may be an indicator of state fragility but a reduction in numbers should not necessarily be read as a sign of improving conditions there. In fact, increased movements might be considered as positive, if they are accompanied by increased protection for refugees, survivors of trafficking, stateless children and other vulnerable populations.

In 2011 the Fund for Peace's Failed State Index ranked the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) 22nd out of 177 countries, giving it a score of 95.5 out of a maximally worst score of 120. This was actually an improvement over the DPRK's previous rankings; indeed, it was the first time the country had dropped out of the top twenty since the index was begun in 2005. This was not due to enhanced state legitimacy, an indicator on which North Korea scored a 9.9 out of 10 (worst in the world), nor a better human rights record (9.5 out of 10). The 'improvements' were noted in the indicators of 'refugees and IDPs' and 'human flight', where North Korea was grouped among states with 'moderate' records.

Though both North Korean refugees and IDPs are quite challenging to count, it is not numbers alone that should be used to convey improvement or decline in their situation, as opposed to the fragility of the North Korean state. The unique physical and political geography of North Korea is shaped within by a regime bent on checking internal and external migration, as it is shaped externally by China to the north, that seeks to suppress cross-border movement and deny refugee protection to those who flee, and by South Korea to the south, whose cautious commitments stem in equal parts from a desire to help its suffering kin to the north and a fear of a dangerous, destabilising exodus. The result is a curious case where the ordinary measures of increased internal or external exodus are no longer reliable as indicators of greater fragility or propensity to fail. In North Korea, when seeking to interpret the meaning of displacement, the problem of absence does not mean the absence of problem.

While census data and official documents from the DPRK suggest limited movement internationally and internally, the unofficial picture is one of a great deal more mobility, most of it without authorisation. A study in 1998-99 that included nearly 3,000 North Korean refugees and migrants in China suggested a net migration rate of 18.7%, with much of the internal movement characterised as 'distress migration'. The study retrospectively covered a four-year period including 1996-97, when the DPRK experienced a severe famine with significant malnutrition, a rise in infectious disease and a dramatic spike in mortality among all age groups. In the study, more than 30% of respondents said their main reason for moving out of the household was to "search for food". Large numbers of children displaced by the famine and economic hardship were placed in so-called '9/27 centres' (named after the date of their establishment by government decree to aid those "wandering for food").

This displacement occurred within the territory of a state that has displayed a long-standing disregard for human rights and the international relief agencies currently involved had no clear mandate (or means) to address such concerns. Natural disaster seems to be the only form of displacement that may be discussed openly.

International migration

While migration of Koreans into north-east China dates back to at least the 1880s, the more recent surge in cross-border movements began in the mid-1990s but did not peak until 1998. Since then, North Koreans have been crossing into China, seeking to escape food shortages, economic

hardship and state repression in their own country. Most of these North Koreans have left without documentation or travel authorisation. Given their undocumented status and the repressive nature of the DPRK, these North Koreans have been labelled as refugees and asylum seekers by those who seek their protection. Conversely, they are called illegal migrants by both the Chinese and the North Korean governments.

From 1999 to 2008, we worked with local and international partners to monitor movements of North Koreans crossing into China. Key trends over the years included an obvious seasonal spike in arrivals during the winter months when food and fuel were scarce in North Korea and security might have been relatively more relaxed on both sides of the border, and an overall (nearly ten-fold) decline in the number of arrivals over the period from 1998 to 2008.

It is fairly clear that there was a dramatic decline in the North Korean population in north-east China, from around 75,000 refugees and migrants in 1998 to around 10,000 by 2009. Reasons for the declining refugee population have little to do with improved circumstances in North Korea. More than a decade after the famine, hardships continue for the North Korean people in the form of continued human rights abuse, chronic food insecurity, a moribund economy and periodic natural disasters. The declining refugee population has instead much more to do with tightened border security, increased migration to South Korea and other countries, and a growing knowledge that there are clear limits to protection and livelihood opportunities in China. China is signatory to the 1951 Convention but has introduced no implementing legislation nor do its policies acknowledge North Koreans as entitled to refugee protection under either national or international law.

In the leadership transition following the death of Kim Jung-il in December 2011, tightened security on both sides of the border contributed to reducing cross-border

arrivals of North Koreans into China to a trickle for several months in 2012. North Korean entries into South Korea totalled only 1,500 in 2012, down from 2,700 in 2011. Since movements to South Korea began in earnest in 2002, about 24,500 North Koreans have settled in the South. It would be a sign of improving North-South relations and – with the exception of a massive exodus in the context of war, natural disaster or regime collapse – might be a possible sign of improved conditions inside North Korea if there were an increase in the outflow of North Koreans to South Korea and other countries.

Conclusions and recommendations

The declining numbers of North Korean refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in China cannot be interpreted as a sign of improving conditions in the DPRK but, at best, as evidence of constrained migration options and, at worst, as a cynical effort by both states to suppress the right to leave one's country and to seek and enjoy asylum in another. The growing proportion of women among the remaining North Koreans and the growing number of children born to these women and their Chinese husbands or partners point to a need to broaden the protection focus for displaced North Koreans to include measures to protect against human trafficking and promote durable solutions for stateless children.

UNHCR has declared all North Koreans in China to be 'persons of concern', although China does not recognise North Koreans' claims to asylum as valid. Indeed, in March 2012, a Chinese official reiterated that "these North Koreans are not refugees but rather they have entered China illegally for economic reasons... China is opposed to the attempt to turn the issue into a political and international subject."

North Korea might be encouraged to initiate something like an Orderly Departure Program (ODP), similar to the multilateral programme begun in Vietnam in 1979 to permit safe and orderly exodus of populations seeking to leave. It would be in North Korea's interests

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to permit households with motives of family reunification, labour and economic betterment, or simply survival, to leave without risk of penalty to themselves or their family members left behind.

A practical, and perhaps even productive, approach to North Korean migration must begin by framing an understanding of population mobility within and outside the country as something more than a simple threat to stability. The migration of North Koreans in the last two decades has always encompassed a mix of motives: food, health,

shelter, asylum, family formation, family reunification, labour/livelihood and more. The problem is that the discussion of this migration – and the policy/programme options that either are or should be available – has been dominated almost exclusively by the question whether they are or are not refugees.

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