



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

A Struggle for Survival: Trafficking of North Korean Women

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I would like to begin by thanking the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars for hosting this morning's discussion and also thank Bob Hathaway, a former colleague on the Hill, for the kind introduction and for putting together this forum on a very important issue: the exploitation and trafficking of North Koreans, specifically women and girls.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is a source country for men, women and children trafficked for the purposes of commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor, and for the fifth consecutive year has been placed in Tier 3, the lowest tier, in our annual Trafficking in Persons Report because it is making no discernible efforts to combat the trafficking of its citizens.

It has been well-documented, and publicized, that the dire conditions in North Korea include a severe shortage of food, a lack of basic freedoms, and a system of political repression which includes a network of government-operated prison camps, where as many as 200,000 prisoners are subjected to reeducation and slave-like conditions. The circumstances in the DPRK lead many North Koreans to seek a way out across the border into Northeast China where tens of thousands of North Koreans may reside illegally, of whom it is estimated that more than half are women.

Commonly, North Korean women and children voluntarily cross the border into China, but some of these individuals, after they enter the P.R.C. in a vulnerable, undocumented status, are then sold into prostitution, marriage, or forced labor. The trend of North Korean women trafficked into and within China for forced marriage is well-documented by NGOs and international organizations. Sometimes North Korean women are lured out of North Korea with the promise of a "better life" as waitresses or factory workers, and then are forced into prostitution in brothels, or exploitative labor arrangements.

A potential factor, among others, in the trafficking of brides is the gender imbalance caused by China's one-child policy. There is, in short, a demographic man surplus relative to marriageable women. All agree that the two governments are not doing enough to prevent or punish the practice of forced marriage. NGOs and international organizations find it difficult to work independently in the PRC, so little assistance reaches this vulnerable group of DPRK women who have crossed into China.

North Koreans crossing the border are extremely vulnerable to trafficking given their illegal status in China and their inability to return home. A core principle of an effective anti-trafficking strategy is the protection of victims. The United Nations Protocol on Trafficking in Persons calls on governments to protect foreign victims of trafficking, including legal alternatives to deportation to countries where they face hardship or retribution. Greater government efforts need to be made to protect this highly vulnerable group of victims.

Unfortunately, China classifies North Korean refugees as "economic migrants" and forcibly returns some to the DPRK where they may face severe punishment, including in some cases execution. The PRC stands by this policy; however, the U.S. consistently urges China to treat North Korean asylum seekers in line with international agreements to which it is a signatory. China's poor transparency and the political sensitivity of the issue hamper our efforts to effectively advocate for change on this issue.

Some steps to address the problem are being taken in China. The International Labor Organization (ILO) recently began a new project to work closely with the China Enterprise Confederation to educate entrepreneurs, owners, and managers of various enterprises that in the past have been linked to trafficking, such as hotels, karaoke bars, restaurants, bars, and massage parlors. The All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) and non-governmental organizations have a number of ongoing prevention and education projects in affected provinces. In the past five years, with assistance from UNICEF and international non-governmental organizations, China has established transfer, training and recovery centers for trafficking victims in four provinces and has assisted more than 1,000 trafficked women and children. ACWF works closely with law enforcement agencies and border officials to raise their awareness of the problem of trafficking.

China has also engaged the U.S. government and international and non-governmental organizations to work on other anti-trafficking initiatives, and has made progress. China hosted a Children's Forum in Beijing, a joint project sponsored by the ILO and organized by the ACWF that brought child representatives from across the country to discuss measures to prevent vulnerable youth from being trafficked and to increase protection and prevention. Provincial public security officials have traveled to the U.S. to learn about how multiple sectors of U.S. society – federal and state law enforcement and courts and civil society – protect victims, whether in the U.S. legally or illegally – and prosecute traffickers.

It will be interesting to see if these officers are indeed affected and that there is an impact, but the United States is offering its experience on seeing that trafficking victims are indeed treated as victims, not criminals or illegal aliens to be deported. MTV's special, regionally-tailored anti-trafficking public awareness campaign, funded by the US government, was broadcast nationwide and received state media coverage.

Most notably, in December 2007, the PRC agreed upon the China National Plan of Action on Combating Trafficking in Women and Children. The Plan of Action has been developed in order to: effectively prevent and severely combat the criminal activities of trafficking in women and children; actively provide assistance and give appropriate aftercare to rescued women and children; and earnestly safeguard the legal rights and interests of women and children.

With sustained efforts to combat TIP and improvements in their identification and treatment of victims, and transparency in criminal law enforcement, China could be a constructive partner in the region on this issue.

While much of the world's attention regarding North Korea is rightly focused on the Six-Party talks, the goal of which is verifiable denuclearization of North Korea and even the visit of the New York Philharmonic to Pyongyang last week, we must not ignore the tragic circumstance of thousands of trafficked North Korean men, women, and children.

As Secretary Rice has said, "We are major proponents of the North Korean people." We seek to help those who are vulnerable to human trafficking in North Korea and when they flee North Korea. At the heart of the U.S. Government's victim-centered approach to ending human trafficking is a commitment to human dignity – a desire not only to rescue people, but restore their dignity. Our hope is to foster regional cooperation to end this violation against human dignity, and to abolish modern-day slavery.

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