



For a Few Dollars More

Jay Lefkowitz, Special Envoy for Human Rights in North Korea

Op-Ed

The Wall Street Journal

January 10, 2007

There is a growing consensus in the international community that North Korea's conduct is unacceptable. Nevertheless, several countries engage in practices that funnel cash to the regime in a manner that violates the spirit of a recent United Nations resolution and raises serious human rights concerns. These countries contract labor through historical -- and even new -- agreements with the regime of Kim Jong Il. Because the North Korean government takes a major portion of workers' salaries, these arrangements provide material support for a rogue government, its nuclear ambitions, and its human-rights atrocities.

Three times last year, the U.N. condemned North Korea's dangerous and abusive conduct. In November, the General Assembly's human-rights committee voted 91-21 to express serious concern about the regime's atrocities against its own population. The Security Council also voted unanimously to condemn North Korea's ballistic missile program in July and its nuclear weapons testing in October. The October resolution calls on member states to freeze the financial assets of those aiding North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

Surely such U.N. proclamations should make anyone think twice about engaging in activities that could aid Pyongyang. Yet several countries utilize trafficked North Korean labor in a manner that provides significant resources for the regime. There are approximately 10,000 to 15,000 North Koreans working abroad for their government. Labor arrangements reportedly exist between North Korea and entities in Russia, Czech Republic, Mongolia, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Libya and Angola. It is unclear how much hard currency is generated for Pyongyang by these arrangements, but it can be presumed significant, given the number of workers involved.

Even though Russia voted for both Security Council resolutions, it provides the largest market for North Korean labor. In camps near Khabarovsk in Siberia, North Korean labor gangs harvest Russian timber. This work force used to be populated by North Korean prisoners and others viewed by the North Korean government as disloyal. It filled a labor gap in Siberia that coincided with the decline of the gulag. Today, conditions are so harsh in North Korea that workers actually volunteer for such labor assignments. However, because these workers are not paid directly, much of the capital generated ends up in the coffers of Mr. Kim's regime. Despite promises of cash, some workers reportedly are paid in coupons that turn out to be of little value. This activity runs afoul of a U.N. protocol on trafficking in persons, to which Russia is a party.

The fact that North Koreans eagerly volunteer for these jobs is a testament to how bad things are in Kim Jong Il's socialist paradise. Although it is hard to gain access to these labor facilities, several recent reports reveal that workers in these camps are treated like prisoners and are provided with food and shelter that are barely adequate. Days off are rare -- cumulatively less than a week per year -- and the workers cannot leave the work areas or interact with locals. They are under the control of North Korean security officials and have no recourse to local authorities. There are some accounts of torture and executions. The work day can reach 17 hours, even in temperatures plunging to 40 degrees below zero. Accidents are common, and the workers are prohibited from using healthcare outside the camp. They work under portraits of the "Dear Leader," Kim Jong Il, and are subject to political indoctrination meetings twice a week.

The Czech Republic also hosts several hundred North Korean workers, although it stopped issuing new work visas six months ago. The North Korean government skims their paychecks and funnels the revenue to Pyongyang. Workers' monthly salaries are deposited directly in an account controlled by the North Korean government. After numerous deductions for items including propaganda films, the workers are left with only about 20% of their wages, from which they still must purchase their own food.

Pyongyang's take varies by location, but we know of no instance where North Korean laborers like these receive their wages directly. This is one of the concerns we have with the Kaesong Industrial Complex in North Korea, where workers are supposed to earn a minimum of \$57 per month. While there are some welcome indications that South Korea may be reassessing its commitment to this project, several South Korean companies have spent hundreds of millions of dollars to set up shop in Kaesong to use inexpensive local labor. Even advocates of the endeavor, who believe Kaesong will open and liberalize the North, concede that authorities take a portion of the wages paid by the South Korean companies. Indeed, a recent report indicates this take is 45% of a worker's salary. Verified details are elusive, and neither the North or South Korean governments, nor any company, has been able to state definitively how much of his or her wage a Kaesong worker is allowed to keep.

Some argue that labor arrangements like those in Russia and Kaesong are positive developments. They see these activities as a way to open North Korean eyes to the outside world. To date, however, those benefits seem more theoretical than real. Rather, it is more likely that the hard currency these countries are sending to North Korea will end up funding the regime's nuclear aspirations instead of improving living conditions for the people of North Korea.

Released on January 10, 2007



Published by the U.S. Department of State Website at <http://www.state.gov> maintained by the Bureau of Public Affairs.