

## **North Korean Refugees Repatriation in China**

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There was a group of 18 North Korean escapees arrested by Chinese authorities at the Mongolian border, and I was among them. We attempted to cross the border fence into Mongolia, but before we could reach it, we were chased by Chinese soldiers. The soldiers started shooting in our direction while 4-and-6 year old children, holding my hands, were screaming. We were apprehended, handcuffed, and taken to a prison in Manchurian City. All we wanted was to reach South Korea or other democratic countries through China.

On my prison cell wall, I saw a long list of detained North Korean escapees; there were at least thousands of them who had been detailed there. They had meticulously recorded the dates of their capture, the number of individuals, and the dates of their repatriation to North Korea. We were no different. We also added the date of our arrest and the number of people in our group. Soon, we were transferred to another prison near the North Korean border. The bus journey took three days, with non-stop driving day and night. Throughout the transportation, our hands remained handcuffed, and the boys had their feet tied up to prevent them from running away.

After spending a few more weeks in a border prison, we were repatriated to North Korea. Inside a North Korean prison cell, I witnessed horrifying scenes of fellow inmates enduring suffering, screaming, and desperately pleading for their survival. The most haunting moment was when a fellow inmate, leaning against my back, died overnight. I discovered his death due to torture in the morning. It sent chills down my spine, and when his body was dragged out of the cell, I feared that I might meet the same fate. Luckily, I managed to survive that ordeal, but it drove me to attempt a second escape to China. Sadly, my second escape resulted in my arrest once again, this time at the Shanghai American school, leading to my imprisonment in Shanghai International prison.

That was my fourth imprisonment. I had now experienced twice escapes and four imprisonments in China and North Korea.

This is the fate of North Koreans born in a totalitarian regime. They are in danger from the moment they attempt to escape from North Korea, often without even knowing the concept of a passport. Most of them live in hiding or continuing their journey to cross into other countries, however, if they're discovered by Chinese authorities, they're arrested and forcibly repatriated to North Korea.

In fear of my second repatriation in Shanghai prison, which could have led to a public execution, I cried every night, until a South Korean gangster inmate told me to pray to God for my survival. It was a tiny hope and faith that I could hold onto. That led me to pray everyday because I didn't want to be killed at the age of 17. During that moment of fear and darkness in the prison cell, two men visited me, and they turned out to be foreign diplomats.

They explained to me that Chinese authorities had made a very unusual decision to deport me and our group to the Philippines - instead of North Korea. This global campaign, pressuring the

Chinese government, was ignited by a 13 year-old American School student who wrote an email to a journalist expressing concern about our potential death back in North Korea. It was an act of love that moved reporters, and their efforts ignited a global campaign standing up for the lives of nine people.

I went through a life-and-death process in Chinese and North Korean prisons. Yet China's last-minute wise decision to deport our group to another country spared the lives of nine people. Today, one of them is standing here at the United Nations, exercising my freedom of speech, and urging the cessation of the repatriation of my fellow North Korean people.

I am appealing for an act of love and humanity.

Over the past 20 years, China has not stopped repatriating North Korean people, leading them ending up in prison camps, facing torture, or even execution upon their return to North Korea. Among hundreds of thousands or possibly million of repatriations, only up to 34,000 have managed to arrive in democracies. This is a tiny proportion of the total population of 25 million people.

We urge President Xi Jinping to choose a humane decision that allows our detained North Korean refugees to go to South Korea, which kindly offers democratic citizenship. During the escape of East Germans to West Germany in 1989, both Austria and Hungary opened their borders in the name of humanity for East Germans. We wonder why China cannot take similar steps and make wise decisions for the common good of humanity, given its historical association with Chinese Confucian philosophical thought, as well as in politics.

To our dear friends in the international community, especially the Security Council Members of the US, Britain, France and China, we implore you to open your hearts and make efforts to alleviate the long-standing suffering of our North Korean people. Including to address the issue of repatriation by Chinese authorities, we encourage you to initiate any platform of diplomatic dialogues with Chinese authorities.

How much longer must they endure, and is there any hope for these millions of my fellow North Koreans in darkness? As we all recognise, this year marks the 75th birth of the UDHR. So What does our United Nations stand for - if not for the principle that all individuals are born free and equal in dignity and rights? No individual and nation was born to be in darkness and suffering.

In freedom, I have discovered who I am, what choices I have, and what I love and care about, and what my dreams are. If these experiences reflect our intrinsic values of humanity, then they are something worth fighting for. I am standing for them today.

Thank you.