

## **Abraham Lee**

### Testimony before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China *Combating Human Trafficking in China: Domestic and International Efforts*

#### **I. Introduction**

Crossing Borders is a faith-based organization committed to maintaining a sustainable and viable presence in Northeast China to aid the plight of North Koreans fleeing the oppression and suffering of the North Korea regime. Our vision is to see the refugees under our care reestablish their sense of self-worth, self-respect and their sense of hope by providing food, clothes, shelter, and medicine with love and care.

#### **II. State of North Korea**

Information from within the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) confirms ongoing suspicions of continuing famine-like conditions particularly in rural areas along the Tumen River border with Northeast China. Reports indicate that proposed rations purported to be distributed to workers and citizens beginning in October 2005 have not been made available and the North Korean people continue to go hungry. The lack of food and accompanying malnutrition appear to be substantial factors in the spread of tuberculosis among villagers. In addition, as the testimony of the growing number of defectors out of North Korea have confirmed, the government of the DPRK continues unabated as a regime committed to the suppression of human rights and freedom within its borders. Its citizens live under constant fear and threat of brutality including possible detention in notorious political prison camps and even summary execution. Repatriated refugees who were unsuccessful in their attempts to escape to China and evangelical Christians are particularly susceptible to intense persecution.

The extreme famine of the late 1990's triggered a mass exodus of refugees into China in search of food and an opportunity for survival. With little improvement in the basic living standard of most North Koreans, the flow of refugees continues to remain steady. Especially in towns along the Chinese border, increased access to information from returning refugees and visitors from China entice citizens to pursue a better life across the border. In addition, while many still attempt the treacherous journey through the mountains or across icy rivers to reach China, the border has become more porous and accessible often only requiring a bribe to a border guard of approximately 200RMB (\$25) per crossing. Reports indicate that meals inside North Korea consist of fried corn gruel and boiled weeds while going hungry is often the norm. Rice is virtually unavailable.

#### **III. Refugee vulnerability**

The combination of extreme hunger, potential economic opportunity and easier access motivates refugees to abandon family and risk their lives to enter China. It also provides human traffickers the perfect opportunity to exploit this desperate situation. Although the numbers are difficult to quantify, reports indicate that as many as 70%-80% of all North Korean women who enter China illegally are victims of trafficking. Refugees in the care of Crossing Borders often admit to having been lied to or abused during their journey to or during their subsequent stay in China. In response to the question "Have you been lied to?" or "Have you been abused?" a common answer is "many times" or "more times than I can count."

North Korean women are particularly susceptible to physical and sexual abuse. Chinese farmers are often unable to find spouses because of their low social status as well as the migration of an already sparse population of potential women to the cities. The narrow probability of finding a wife leads many Chinese

men to seek a companion among the vulnerable female population of North Korea. For the cost of \$50 a trafficker will pose as a businessman and enter North Korea on behalf of a Chinese farmer. The trafficker will entice reluctant women by offering food, clothes, shelter and a “better life” in exchange for an arranged marriage with a Chinese suitor. Seeing no other options and often with the slim hope of providing for the family left behind in North Korea many women agree to the arrangement.

The United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons defines trafficking in persons as:

*the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of...the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.*<sup>1</sup>

North Koreans are in the ultimate position of vulnerability with the only alternative to following a trafficker into China being starvation, suffering and possibly death. Knowing this, traffickers take advantage of the dire situations of young North Korean women and coerce them into agreeing to the arranged marriage. Many of the promises of a “better life” are never fulfilled and many of the arranged marriages are to physically disabled or alcoholic husbands with the end result often being abandonment or physical abuse.

Traffickers also prey on refugees by offering jobs in China and lying about what they can offer them. Ms. Kim's<sup>2</sup> family was approached by traffickers and her mother was given promises that they could provide a good job in a factory for her daughter. In addition, Ms. Kim would be able to regularly send money home to help the family. In fear of following these men into a foreign country and having to leave her family behind, Ms. Kim protested and refused to go. However, her mother encouraged her saying, “Trust these people. It will be best for our family.” When she finally arrived in China there was no factory, no job and no money. She was immediately sold and sexually abused by the man who bought her.

So-Young was only 15 years old when she and a friend crossed the river from North Korea into China. They were approached immediately by Chinese men. They promised the girls wages of 300RMB (\$36) per month if they worked for them. It was enough for the young girls to agree. The two thought surely they were too young to be sold as a wife or slave. The next morning however, So-Young awoke to discover that her friend had been sold. That was the last time she ever saw her. So-Young was forced to work and wait to grow taller in order to be sold. After four months, the first buyer came to claim his bride – a 40 year old Chinese man. “I was so disgusted at that point, all I could do was cry out, ‘Heavenly Lord,’” she said. “I never heard the phrase before, I never heard of Jesus. But I had a slight conception of a heavenly place so I cried out.” She managed to evade attempts to sell her by stubbornly refusing to go. After repeated failed attempts to sell her, So-Young was transported again to a new home and later came to realize she was simply being moved to meet a new buyer. She soon discovered that the mistress of the house was intending to sell her to help pay for college. So-Young recalled, “She said she would no longer be able to take care of me, and that I should marry a Chinese man.” Immediately, So-Young alerted one of the deacons of a local underground church in the village who had compassion for her situation and secretly ministered to her. Together they planned her escape. The next morning she ran away. After three years as a refugee however, So-Young was discovered and sent back to North Korea where she faced insufferable imprisonment for six months before escaping to China a second time. She was caught by traffickers again, and this time was raped by her sellers. Eventually, she was sold to a Chinese man who also raped her multiple times before she was able to run away. Today So-Young remains in hiding and faces daily the possibility of being captured again. “There are many people coming out of North Korea,” she said. “But they don’t have anywhere to go and no other choice but to go that route [into China].”

Unfortunately, the desperation of many North Korean women makes them susceptible to being trafficked more than once. HyunJoo first escaped to China in March 2004. She was sold and forced into an abusive relationship with a Chinese man. Unhappy and looking for a means of escape, she was able to make contact with a local pastor and entered into one of our Restore Life<sup>3</sup> shelters. Against our advice, she attempted to flee to South Korea and was repatriated back to North Korea. She attempted to return to China in early 2005 but chronic pain in her lower extremities forced her to abort the attempt. Through our NKM ministry<sup>4</sup> we were able to send funds for her to obtain medical attention. She entered China in December 2005 and subsequently was captured and trafficked to a Chinese buyer approximately 4 hours outside of Shenyang< sup>. We were unaware of her exact whereabouts until we received a phone call on February 16, 2006. She called requesting assistance and hoping to reenter a RL shelter. We are currently working feverishly to help her escape. She is just one of many who attempt this journey even if it means having to suffer again through the agony of being a trafficking victim.

Children are also the unintended victims of many of these trafficking stories. The children in our 2nd Wave shelters<sup>6</sup> have a Chinese father and North Korean mother. Their mothers were subsequently repatriated, re-trafficked or have simply disappeared with the father unable or unwilling to take care of the children. Mina is an 8 year old young girl who studies hard in school and who loves to smile and laugh. Four years ago her North Korean mother disappeared apparently having abandoned her young daughter and her dying Chinese father. With his deteriorating health, her father was unable to care for her and Mina suffered in poverty and inattention. Thankfully, she was able to enter our shelter and with Chinese citizenship has a hope for a brighter future through constant love, care, and an opportunity to attend school. Unfortunately, many of these young children never get this opportunity and are often left to fend for themselves. The difference between finding hope in a local church and becoming a victim of trafficking is great but the probability of finding safety is slim. The road into China is littered with potential dangers including human traffickers, Chinese authorities and even North Korean security agents. But while still relatively few, the number of refugees able to find protection in the care of evangelical Christians and other organizations is growing.

#### **IV. Chinese government persecution**

In 2002, along the streets of Yanji City<sup>7</sup> just 30 kilometers from the North Korean border, it was not uncommon for visitors to encounter North Korean refugees begging for food and money in the streets. Many of these refugees were children. However, by 2005, there were absolutely no refugees visible in and around the city streets of Yanji City.

Beginning in 2003, it appears that the Chinese government increased its efforts to hunt down and repatriate North Korean refugees as well as persecute and arrest those who attempted to provide assistance to refugees. This increase in pressure has forced refugees to go deeper into hiding and become even more dependent on the network of organizations devoted to giving them help. According to local reports, as many as 40 refugees per month were being repatriated by Chinese authorities through the Tumen Detention Center in 2003.

Through our NKM ministry we were able to gain intimate details of what happens to repatriated refugees after being caught by Chinese police. Mrs. Huh's son and younger sister fled to China and found refuge in a local church. However, a raid by Chinese police resulted in their detention and forced repatriation back to North Korea. Mrs. Huh's son and younger sister were summarily executed by firing squad for allegedly committing criminal acts while in China. Unofficially, the real reason for their execution was their contact with the local church in China and for their conversion to Christianity. These types of stories of complicity by the Chinese government and the severe punishment of repatriated North Koreans have been well documented.

As has been widely reported, China has failed to live up to its obligations under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. China continues to stand by its position that North Koreans are economic migrants and thus their expulsion is a valid exercise of their right to enforce illegal immigration policy. With the definitive accounts of conditions within North Korea, it is obvious that North Koreans are fleeing famine and persecution and not as economic migrants. China is in clear violation of its obligations by failing to render aid, by forcibly repatriating refugees and by blocking access to refugees by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)<sup>8</sup>. In addition, the entire governmental system of enforcement continues to be saturated in corruption and inconsistency. The staff at Crossing Borders observed there appears to be an increase in governmental activity and persecution in the winter months leading up to the New Year. Further inquiry leads us to believe that the increase at least in part and probably in whole is due to the coming festive season of New Year's and the seeking of bribes by local officials to supplement their income in preparation for the coming celebration. In winter 2003, the Chinese government cracked down on local churches for harboring North Korean refugees. Fines were assessed and local pastors were banned from entering church grounds. Recently, around Christmas 2005, Yanji Church received a fine of 60,000RMB (\$7500)<sup>9</sup>.

Most regrettably, one of our local shelters was forced to shut down because of Chinese governmental pressure. We maintained a shelter of three North Korean teenagers until October 23rd of last year when we received word that one of the teenager's parents were attempting to flee to South Korea and wanted to take their son with them. After his departure from the shelter we continued to maintain it until December 16th when the remaining teens and their caretaker were forced to abandon the shelter after three Chinese policemen had knocked on the door earlier in the day. Only one of the teens was present at home at the time and wisely did not answer the door. The local staff person responsible for the administration of this shelter was forced to go into hiding into the countryside for approximately one month leaving behind his wife. The breach in security forced us to close down the shelter. Later we learned that the family attempting to escape to South Korea was captured by Chinese officials. Under interrogation, they proffered the name of the local staff person and the location of the shelter. The whereabouts of the family are still unknown. If captured, the local staff person who is a Chinese citizen would most likely have been imprisoned, interrogated and/or fined a substantial amount.

The network of local Chinese citizens is an invaluable part of the ongoing work to help rescue and restore North Korean refugees. Without their assistance, the work of Crossing Borders and other organizations would be impossible. Our status as foreign aid workers offers some form of limited protection against the Chinese authorities, but these local workers have no such protections and risk their very lives and freedom in helping North Koreans.

## **V. Conclusion**

Crossing Borders is committed to providing assistance to the continuing flow of North Korean refugees that enter China everyday. Although there are potentially one thousand refugees in need of assistance within our network of local churches, we are only able to directly help a small fraction of them. The Chinese government and its actions against North Koreans stand as an enormous roadblock to achieving our mission. Understandably, the situation is a complicated one, but the United States has an obligation to take a stand against China and North Korea as perpetrators of evil and suffering against a weak and vulnerable population. The Chinese government has done little to combat the network of traffickers that exist along the North Korean border and fails to comply with its obligations to protect North Koreans within its country. We hope that provision may be made to provide asylum for these suffering people and that the United States would be the leader in providing hope to a people starving for a better life.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.unodc.org/unodc/en/trafficking\\_protocol.html](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/trafficking_protocol.html)

<sup>2</sup> All names of refugees have been changed to conceal their identity and protect their safety

<sup>3</sup> Restore Life (RL) ministry is the main refugee support mission of Crossing Borders

<sup>4</sup> Crossing Borders sends in approximately 5 teams of Korean-Chinese citizens per month into North Korea to provide assistance as part of its NKM ministry

<sup>5</sup> Capital of Liaoning Province in Northeast China

<sup>6</sup> One of the ministries of Crossing Borders committed to giving hope and opportunity to needy children

<sup>7</sup> Capital of the Yanbian Autonomous Prefecture in Northeast China

<sup>8</sup> Under its agreement obligations, China is required to grant the UNHCR unimpeded access to refugees in China

<sup>9</sup> Although this fine was unrelated to involvement with North Koreans it is here to illustrate the increase in bribes during the winter months