

**Congressional Executive Commission on China Hearing on
The North Korean Refugees Detained in China
June 13, 2023 10 am
Testimony Submission from Suzanne Scholte
Seoul Peace Prize Laureate
Chair, North Korea Freedom Coalition**

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony about the ongoing crisis of the North Korean refugees in China. I am grateful for the Congressional- Executive Commission on China for focusing attention once again on this issue and its urgency today. The CECC was among the first to bring awareness in the U.S. Congress of the ongoing horrific treatment by the People's Republic of China of these refugees. They began illegally entering China in the mid-1990's to escape starvation during the Arduous March, the Great Famine, in North Korea. At the time, China determined they were "economic" migrants, not refugees, as they escaped for food, not for freedom. But, the moment a North Korean leaves their country, they become a *refugee sur place* as they have a well-founded fear of persecution if they are forced back into North Korea. China knows full well that the thousands of children, women, and men they have forcefully repatriated to North Korea since the 1990s have been subjected to horrific torture, inhuman imprisonment, and even public execution.

Now, the refugees today in China detention centers are in a unique situation because they have been literally trapped in China since North Korea became one of the first countries to shut down its border on January 22, 2020, in response to the COVID pandemic. Kim Jong Un further sealed the border in March, 2020, by issuing a shoot to kill order in a 2-kilometer buffer zone (over a mile wide), where border guards and swat teams patrol. They are instructed to shoot to kill anything that moves, whether a child, a young woman or an animal. A dramatic illustration of this policy for all the world to see of the Kim regime's cruelty and total disregard for human life was their treatment of a South Korean maritime official who approached their sea border in September 2020. He was shot to death by North Korean border guards and his body burned.

There are credible rumors that the North Korea/China border will reopen soon because North Korea, which is facing more starvation reminiscent of the Arduous March, must increase exports to, and imports from, China. While there is no way that Kim Jong Un can allow the North Korea border to fully reopen, trading routes will reopen soon between China and the border cities of Sinuiji and Hoeryong in North Korea. The terrifying fear for all of us human rights advocates is that China's first export to North Korea will be the nearly 2000 North Korean children, women and men currently detained, at least half of whom are believed to have been attempting to reach South Korea.

What is of particular concern about this group is the only way they could have escaped during the COVID pandemic, across this dangerous border, is they had resources. This means they were either Korean Workers Party members of a stature to obtain the financing to pay brokers and bribes for their escape OR had their escape financed by family members in South Korea. This subjects them all to horrific torture and public execution upon forceful repatriation, as it is a crime punishable by death for North Koreans to seek resettlement in South Korea.

Thus, the international community must appeal to Xi Jinping to honor his international treaty obligations, specifically the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, and the Convention Against Torture.

The United States and the international community must announce NOW that it will sanction any Chinese official involved in the forceful repatriation of any North Koreans back to North Korea, pointing out they will also be pursued in international court for being complicit in murder, if these fears are, indeed, realized.

The Republic of Korea must continue to remind China that these North Korean refugees are, in fact, citizens of the Republic of Korea under its constitution. There is no reason for them to be a burden on China. In fact, South Korea successfully rescued a family of four who were flown, in November 2021, directly from China to South Korea during the Moon Jae-in administration, an administration that was more hostile to North Korean refugees than any other in South Korea's history.

If Moon can do that, we are certain Yoon can do it! But President Yoon Suk Yeol needs all of our help to save the rest as ultimately the final decision rests with Xi Jinping. Thus, the international community must press him to act according to China's treaty obligations. My



recommendation to the Yoon administration is to send a plane to China and bring those North Koreans to South Korea, especially remembering that it was the North Koreans living in freedom in South Korea that gave him his margin of victory in the last election.

On a hopeful note, I include this photo from the family that escaped North Korea during the pandemic, got arrested, shackled, and imprisoned in China. But in November 2021, they were flown by plane in a miraculous answer to prayer directly from China to South Korea. This is my closing evidence to show it is possible that all can be saved. We just need more plane tickets!

Finally, I also ask for everyone's continued prayers for these North Korean refugees. I quote from the mother of this family who sent me her testimony for the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing last June. She wrote: *November 2021, God finally took our*

family to the South Korean embassy in XXX and put us on a plane bound for South Korea. On that day, God eventually did something to our family that no president or parent could understand or no extraordinary people could do for us. After safely staying in the XXX prison for

seven months, we were sent to the South Korean embassy in XXX. Finally, on XXX, 2021, my family arrived at the Incheon International airport. All my dreams finally came true. People! God is always listening to your prayers. God always answers your prayers. Thank you.

THANK YOU for giving me this opportunity to submit this testimony. -Suzanne Scholte

*SBS News Report with then Gen. Robert Abrams led U.S. Forces Korea, United Nations Command and Combined Forces Command describing border buffer zone

https://news.sbs.co.kr/news/endPage.do?news_id=N1005976596&plink=LINK&cooper=YOUTUBE

and Daily NK Report on the directive <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-sets-up-strict-security-zones-sino-north-korean-border/>

** South Korean maritime official shot dead: <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/north-korea-shot-dead-missing-south-korean-man-in-its-waters-seoul>

***TLHR Commission Hearing with testimony of Kim Family
<https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/sites/humanrightscommission.house.gov/files/documents/Suzanne%20Scholte%20Witness%20Testimony.pdf>

#####