

## **Testimony of Ms. Songhwa Han Congressional-Executive Commission on China**

Hello, my name is Song Hwa Han and I came to the United States with my two daughters in 2008 as refugees, following the passage of the North Korean Human Rights Act in the United States Congress in 2004. The lowest class of people in North Korea have a most desperate and earnest plea. That plea is to be freed and liberated to freedom of human rights from the worst suffering and pain of starvation. I want to thank God and the United States Government for hearing our plea for hope and giving us freedom. I want to just describe very briefly my reasons for leaving North Korea.

I escaped with my two daughters from North Korea for the first time in 1998. Before defection from North Korea, my family consisted of eight people. My mother and my two month old new-born baby son died from starvation. My oldest daughter, who was 18 years old at that time, left home to find food, and never came back; to this day I do not know of her whereabouts, or what happened to her. I had another five year old son, who I had to leave at an acquaintance's home before I escaped to China. I promised my son, "If you just sleep for five nights, I will be back with rice and candy, and I will come back to get you." Afterwards, my five year old son, who was suffering from malnutrition, was kicked out of the house I had put him in, and died while waiting and crying out, 'Mommy, sister! When are you coming back...'" He cried and cried and died in a grass field; this news was delivered to me by someone I had hired to go and bring my son to China.

My husband was arrested and sent to jail for the crime of crossing the Tumen River and going to China and bringing back a sack of rice, when what he had done was simply to go to China to find food for his children and save them, who had slowly over time grown weaker and weaker from starvation. He died while incarcerated in prison, from the severe punishment he received. Afterwards, my family was labeled as 'anti-state' traitors, for having crossed over to China, and the North Korean police and the 'bowibu' (National Security Agency) agents came to look for us in our countryside village home. They came to kick us out of the village, for me to take the remaining family members and move away to another place. Our family had devoted ourselves to the Party and to the Dear Leader, but contrary to the police in the United States, instead of protecting the citizens, the North Korean police threatened to burn down our house if we did not move out. I could no longer beg for help or for mercy. I decided right then and there. Rather than staying put and starving to death, even if we die trying to go find our way to freedom, I decided to seek out freedom! My one sole wish was to feed my children just one meal of white rice, and decided that I would never suffer from starvation or be unfairly mistreated and therefore took my seven year old daughter who was malnourished and was not growing up properly, put her in a sack and carried her, and held my older daughter's hand and leaned on one another and crossed the waist-high currents of the Tumen River and safely escaped from North Korea.

After escaping to China and living in fear for almost ten years, during that period we were forcibly repatriated four times. During one of those forced repatriations, I would just like to share about my experience from the time I was forcibly repatriated during the summer of 2003.

First of all, once a North Korean defector was handed over by the Chinese police to the North Korean 'bowibu', one had to become an animal, and secondly, the defectors who are repatriated are ordered by the North Korea guards that "You are all dogs from now on, so therefore lower your head and move around by only looking at the ground." The prisoners are handcuffed and chained to one another, and if the slightest noise is made, the prisoners are beaten with rifle butts. After the interrogation is finished at the 'bowibu', the prisoners are taken to a reform labor camp. Where I was sent, we were forced to work from 5 in the morning until late at night, and after dragging our dead-tired bodies back from work we were given only a fist-size corn-riceball to eat, and until 11pm in the evening we were required to participate in self-reflection and self-criticism group meetings. We would then spend the rest of the night sitting in front of one another and picking off the ticks and lice from our clothes and our hair, and then sleep for a few hours, and then wake up early in the morning to the wakeup call and then get dragged out for more labor.

These punishments are repeated for as long as six months, and like my husband who died from malnutrition and starvation and the women prisoners who collapsed from fatigue and could not get up

again, women and men alike had to carry heavy logs up to the mountainside and if a prisoner became injured there was no recourse for medicine or medical care. In the wintertime, there were no proper footwear, so pieces of cloth and strings would be used to cover up the feet and while working in the snow many would come down with frostbite, but we could not stop work and had to continue working, and also continue to work the following day. Sometimes the men had to shovel human waste with their own bare hands. The women prisoners would then carry the human waste mixed with dirt on their back and carry the load onto the fields. So for the crime of going to China for only wanting to live and not die from starvation, North Korean refugees who are repatriated by China become prisoners and end up suffering under crushing labor doing construction work or coal mining work, and become sick or injured, or worse, suffer in misery and pain and die while working under horrendous conditions; the wretched and poor North Korean refugees continue to suffer like this and the misery is never-ending.

For the crime of betraying the nation, in the 'bowibu' prisons the North Korean refugee men who were forcibly repatriated were beaten with steel pipes, and countless people died from the beatings inflicted on them where arms and legs were broken. I myself was beaten in the head for the crime of having gone over to China, and I was beaten so severely that my skull still has pieces of bone embedded in my head. Besides this injury, because I was beaten so severely and punched around so much my eyes became swollen, and one of my ear drums ruptured, and to this day, I am hard of hearing in one ear. While we were suffering from thirst there was no water to drink, and the prisoners would end up drinking foul water from water tanks or wells, and contract dysentery and die without any care or treatment given to them.

North Korean refugees, if they are miraculously able to survive and released from prison or from the reform labor camps, will attempt to escape from North Korea even if it means death if caught again. Through this Hearing today I earnestly plead and beg of you. Refugees of other countries have been accepted in the U.S. numbering in the tens of thousands of people, but after the North Korean Human Rights Act passed in 2004, only about 130 North Korean refugees have been granted asylum in the United States.

These defectors, who have been separated from their parents, separated from their children – these defectors who have no place to go – these North Korean refugees who are shuddering in fear in China right now, are desiring freedom in the free world, whether it be South Korea or the United States, and desire to be rescued and accepted into freedom. Please help us North Korean refugees.

Thank you.

Song Hwa Jan

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