

US-backed groups push North Korean asylum bids in China

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In the past three months, at least 10 groups of North Koreans have been secreted through northern China to make high-profile bids for political asylum at embassies and diplomatic missions in Beijing and Shenyang. The largest group was in March, when 25 North Koreans rushed into the Spanish embassy. This month 26 people have made it into South Korean or Canadian facilities and were allowed to leave China on Sunday. The most recent incident was on June 13. A teenager successfully entered the South Korean consulate, while his father was seized by Chinese security guards.

The background to these asylum attempts lies in the repression and worsening humanitarian catastrophe gripping North Korea. As many as 300,000 people are believed to have fled across the border into northern China since 1995. North Korea has been in the throes of food and energy shortages for more than a decade—since it lost the markets and subsidies provided during the Cold War by the Soviet Union. Despite evidence that natural disasters and a lack of fuel and fertilizer had utterly devastated the North's agricultural production, the major powers delayed the provision of food and other aid until the Pyongyang regime agreed to a series of political concessions. While estimates vary, as many as two million people may have died from starvation in the 1990s before large-scale UN relief operations went into effect.

Conditions in North Korea have been steadily relapsing back toward a state of famine in the 18 months since the Bush administration was installed in Washington. From 1998 to 2001, under the so-called “sunshine policy,” South and North Korea took steps, tentatively backed by the Clinton White House and Japan, to end the Cold War military stand-off on the Korean peninsula and open up the North for investment and transport links. Bush's inauguration was followed by the withdrawal of US and Japanese support for the proposed deal with the North. Military tensions steadily built up last year, climaxing this January when Bush condemned North Korea as part of the “axis of evil” and accused its government of “starving its people”.

The accusation of “starving” the North Korean people can be most accurately leveled against the American and Japanese governments. The hardline US and Japanese stance against Pyongyang has disrupted the international relief operations that were underway. This year the US is providing just half the amount of grain it provided in 2001. Japan, which donated 600,000 tons of food in 2000, provided nothing at all last year and has given nothing again this year.

Following the lead of the major powers, other countries have

dramatically scaled back aid for the North. An appeal by the UN World Food Program (WFP) for \$250 million in donations had raised just \$25 million by April. Last year, the WFP was providing nutrition to as many as six million of North Korea's 23 million people. This year, it has been forced to issue warnings that it might run out of relief by the end of July.

While the White House has not openly called for a “regime-change” in North Korea, as it has in Iraq, that is clearly the objective of its policy. It is seeking to aggravate the social crisis in the North to the point where the regime either disintegrates or is forced into a settlement that enhances US dominance in East Asia. In particular, the Bush administration is determined to prevent any settlement on the peninsula that could lead to demands for the withdrawal of its military presence in the region and thereby weaken its ability to maintain pressure on China, which it has declared to be a “strategic competitor”.

Within this context, it is worth examining what is behind the string of asylum bids by North Koreans in China. They have not been the acts of isolated individuals, but are being organised and financed by a network of American and South Korean Christian fundamentalist groups. These groups have close connections to the rightwing of the Republican party and conservative US associations, who, in turn, have close links to those in the upper echelons of the Bush administration, the Pentagon and the CIA pushing for a tougher stance against both Pyongyang and Beijing.

The most publicised Christian fundamentalist group involved in the asylum bids is Exodus 21, which is based in Los Angeles and South Korea. A number of rightwing Christian web sites in the US openly and actively discuss support and fundraising for North Korean refugees.

The head of Exodus 21, Korean-American pastor Douglas Shin, recently told the *Washington Post*: “I just want the dictatorships of China and North Korea to let my people go, just like Moses told the Pharaoh.” Shin advocates stopping aid to North Korea in order to hasten its collapse and absorption by South Korea. As an example of his thinking, he speculated in an interview in May 2001 about a unified, pro-US Korea undertaking a “physical expansion” and taking over China's north-eastern Manchurian provinces.

The legwork of smuggling North Koreans through China appears to be done by South Korean Christians, with the American organisations mainly providing money. Both the North Korean refugees and the South Korean activists attempt to blend in with

the two million ethnic Korean Chinese living in the regions of China that border the Korean peninsula. In May this year, the *Korea Times* published a report stating that as many as 100 South Korean Christian “missionaries” had been arrested inside China while attempting to organise asylum bids.

The main international spokesman for the asylum bids since they began in March has been Norbert Vollertsen, a German doctor and Christian fundamentalist who worked in North Korea from mid-1999 to December 2000 on behalf of the aid agency Doctors Without Borders.

Vollertsen told journalists following the incident at the Spanish embassy in March that the aim of getting the refugees out of North Korea was to duplicate the events in East Germany during 1989. He declared: “We will create a flood of refugees to embassies and it will lead to the collapse of North Korea. This is the way it happened in 1989. First there were a few dozen defectors, then hundreds and then thousands.” After several mass asylum bids, Czechoslovakia and Hungary opened their borders and allowed tens of thousands of East Germans to go to West Germany.

The fundamentalist groups are also pursuing other avenues for moving North Koreans out of China to South Korea. On June 12, four North Koreans applied for asylum in the South Korean port of Incheon after successfully stowing-away aboard a Chinese ferry from the port of Dalian. There are rumours that a far larger incident is being prepared to coincide with the media focus on the region due to the current World Cup Soccer finals in South Korea and Japan. Vollertsen boasted to the Japanese *Sankei Shimbun* on May 22 that he was raising the funds for an asylum bid by over 1,000 North Koreans, who intended to sail from China in small boats to Incheon.

According to Vollertsen, he is motivated only by concern for the Korean people. He claims that during his time in North Korea he saw evidence that much of the starvation was being directly caused by the Pyongyang regime in order to punish discontent and keep control over the population. Within months of leaving North Korea, however, he had appeared in Washington as the guest of rightwing associations such as the Defense Forum Foundation (DFF) and the National Endowment for Democracy. The DFF board includes former defense and foreign policy officials of the Reagan administration and ex-military officers.

In March and May 2001, Vollertsen testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. His unsubstantiated allegations assisted in providing a justification for the Bush administration’s curtailment of relations with Pyongyang. He has made four other trips to the US since, during which he has been feted by Republican congressmen such as Ed Royce from California and Chris Smith from New Jersey, who are principal advocates of the Bush White House’s hardline stance against both North Korea and China.

In August last year, Royce moved a resolution in the US Congress demanding Beijing stop categorising North Koreans as economic migrants, allow the mass entry of North Koreans into China and allow international agencies to establish refugee camps on the China-North Korea border. As well as Smith, among the eight congressmen who co-sponsored the resolution was Dana Rohrabacher, one of the most prominent congressional members of

the “Blue Team”—a network that views US conflict with China as inevitable as Beijing develops greater economic and political clout.

Alleged concern for the plight of North Korean refugees also figures prominently in the documents of the so-called “US Committee for Human Rights in North Korea”, which was formed last October and is nothing more than a front for the Republican rightwing and an ideologue for Bush’s policies. It is made up of figures like Reagan aide Fred Ikle, former Democrat congressman Stephen Solarz; former Reagan administration assistant national security advisor Richard Allen; Carl Gershman of the National Endowment for Democracy; and Suzanne Scholte of the DFF.

While failing to detail these US political connections, the *New York Times* and other major American newspapers have now published a number of stories demonising North Korea over the refugee issue. Reminiscent of the wildly exaggerated stories circulating about Serb atrocities on Albanians before the NATO attack in 1999, the *New York Times* published a series of gruesome allegations on June 10 that the Pyongyang regime is carrying out the systematic murder of babies in its prisons. North Korea has denounced the charge as “a whopping lie”.

Within a climate of anti-North Korea hype, the Republican rightwing reintroduced another resolution on June 11 demanding China open its borders to North Korean refugees and international refugee agencies. Supported by the Democrats and passed 406 for, and none against, the resolution calls for Bush to make the human rights of refugees a US demand on North Korea.

The issue is also directed against China, which has been an ally of North Korea. Beijing is already displaying alarm at the fact North Korean refugees have been used to justify the first demands since the 1949 Revolution to allow an international body—the UN High Commission for Refugees—to operate inside its borders. Reports indicate it has initiated large-scale police sweeps to round up and deport North Koreans.

A picture emerges which, at the very least, suggests the asylum bids may be intended to assist the Bush administration justify the next stage of increasing pressure on the Pyongyang regime, and indirectly also on Beijing. A US special envoy—most likely Jack Pritchard—is scheduled to travel to North Korea this week for the Bush administration’s first official talks with the regime. Alongside threats over Pyongyang’s alleged possession of “weapons of mass destruction”, the refugee question is likely to be raised.



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