



North Korea

Escape route from North Korea grows ever more perilous

Security tightens on network braved by people fleeing the world's most oppressive regime

JUNE 23, 2017 by **Bryan Harris** in Seoul and **Michael Peel** in Bangkok

The choice is stark: endure a life of servitude at the hands of the world's most oppressive regime or risk everything with a perilous dash for freedom.

In recent decades tens of thousands of desperate North Koreans have embarked on “Asia’s Underground Railroad” — the route out of poverty and state surveillance to safety in the south.

Named after the covert network that helped 19th-century slaves flee the American South, it is one of the few remaining passages out of North Korea. But the escape rate is dwindling as the journey becomes increasingly fraught.

Pyongyang and Beijing are cracking down not only on refugees and escapees but on the missionaries, aid groups and brokers that keep the route open. Campaigners say western governments are turning their backs on a longstanding crisis as global attention shifts from North Korea’s human rights abuses to the growing threat of its weapons programmes.

“North Koreans are the slaves of the 21st century,” says Tim Peters, a Christian activist and founder of Helping Hands Korea, which supports people fleeing to China.

Five stages of escape



1. Most refugees escape from North Korea over the eastern part of its border with China, across the narrow Tumen river
2. Multi-day journey across China's heartland to Yunnan province
3. Hike across mountainous border into Laos or Myanmar
4. Transit to Thailand
5. Flight to safety in South Korea

From there, many will travel for days and sometimes weeks across China — itself an authoritarian, Communist state — using a clandestine network of safe houses and guides who lead them past armed patrols and treacherous jungle borders.

Once in Southeast Asia they make their way to Thailand or Laos, from where South Korean diplomats spirit them to safety in Seoul, a city just 50km from their homeland.

Since the peninsula was bisected after the second world war, more than 30,000 North Koreans have sought refuge in South Korea, and the tally has recently been rising by about 1,500 a year. But the numbers have dropped sharply in 2017, with aid workers, missionaries and defectors pointing to increased security in the border regions between North Korea and China.

“Both North Korea and China have reinforced the border. Far fewer refugees are even reaching China, which has no incentive to help and no humanitarian concerns,” says Melanie Kirkpatrick, author of *Escape from North Korea*. “There has been a failure of successive US governments to work with China on this issue.”

Sokeel Park of Liberty in North Korea, an NGO and central link in the Underground Railroad, points to a long-term trend of tightening security.

“It used to be like the Wild West but there has been a noticeable uptick [in security] since Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping came to power,” he says. “As China develops and gets more confident, it feels like it shouldn't have illegal foreigners in its border regions.”



A North Korean family on the perilous walk across the border with northern China © Tim Peters

Amid a spat with Seoul over its hosting of a US missile shield, Beijing this year expelled dozens of South Korean missionaries who had been aiding impoverished North Koreans in China's north-eastern provinces.

"I've never seen anything like it. This was unprecedented," says Dan Chung of Crossing Borders, a Christian group that supports North Korean refugees in China.

The move has triggered soaring "distress calls" from escapees, who find themselves increasingly vulnerable without the safety umbrella of the aid workers, according to Mr Peters.

No official data are available but as many as 200,000 North Koreans are believed to live in China. The vast majority are women, who lack legal status and are often forced into the sex trade or sold to socially marginalised Chinese men.

Refugees live in fear of a "knock on the door" from Chinese authorities, who have a longstanding policy of immediate repatriation.

"Refugee' is not in China's glossary — only 'illegal economic migrants'," says Mr Peters.

Back in North Korea, they face at best brutal interrogation. If police believe they had been plotting an escape to the South, their fate lies in concentration camps, where starvation or even execution beckons.



Tim Peters, right, oversees a hasty eye exam of one of the refugees fleeing across China © Tim Peters

The risk of capture is a strong incentive to continuing the journey across China, says Mr Chung, who estimates only about one in 10 refugees join the Underground Railroad. “Some believe living in bondage in China is still better than life in North Korea”.

Those who continue their journey link up with voluntary aid groups or professional brokers, who for a price smuggle them out of the country.

“The broker networks have been operating for many years and there is a certain amount of professionalism involved,” says Mr Park. “This is a multimillion-dollar industry.”

Kim Seung-eun, a pastor who leads the Caleb mission in South Korea, has been smuggling North Koreans out of their homeland for almost 20 years, often accompanying them along the way.

His preferred method is to drive across China from its border with North Korea to southern Yunnan province — a multi-day journey requiring rotating drivers. Under cover of nightfall, the group then makes a hazardous 12-hour trek across the mountainous frontier with Laos, followed by a 16-hour drive to the country’s capital, Vientiane.



Pastor Kim Seung-eun treks through the jungle as he escorts North Korean refugees to safety © Kim Seung-eun

In Southeast Asia, before they can reach South Korea, the refugees face interrogation by Seoul’s diplomats, a first line of defence against spies from the North who are known to pose as defectors. In 2010 two such operatives were imprisoned in Seoul for plotting to assassinate a high-ranking defector.

The whole journey is made possible by bribes, says Mr Kim — a cash payment to a North Korean, Chinese or Laotian border guard can mean the difference between escape and repatriation.

The Chinese passage can cost missionaries \$2,000 per refugee, although brokers sometimes charge up to \$5,000. The amount needed to bribe a North Korean border guard has risen to as much as \$8,000, according to activists and brokers.

But missionaries such as Messrs Kim and Peters say funding has dried up amid growing global ambivalence towards North Korea’s humanitarian crisis. In addition to the cost, these aid workers face personal risks, including jail time in China or even assassination.

Both Ms Kirkpatrick and Mr Chung point to the presence of North Korean spies in north-east China and incidents of South Korean missionaries being kidnapped.

In 2011, for example, pastor Kim Chang-hwan was killed by a poison needle while waiting for a taxi in the Chinese city of Dandong.

Such crimes are rarely punished, Ms Kirkpatrick says — “China just turns a blind eye”.

Additional reporting by Kang Buseong