

Korean Pathétique: A Symphony of Refugee Tears Unheeded

By Tim Peters

Founder/Director, Helping Hands Korea (NGO)

An estimated 300,000 North Korean refugees live in fear and hiding throughout China. Driven by famine and an oppressive social system, a growing stream of North Koreans drained from every current of North Korean society risk their lives to furtively cross the the Tumen and Yalu River borders to China. For the fortunate few who evade capture by border patrols on the adjoining riverbanks, the mirage of China as a safe haven quickly fades in the glare of the enforcement policies of a security apparatus perpetually on high alert for any uncontrolled population movements on its borders, particularly from impoverished North Korea. At best, the well-tilled and prosperous Yenbian region of Northeast China, home to over two million ethnic Korean-Chinese citizens, provides only a brief respite from the hunger and repression that haunt everyday life in Kim Jong-il's 'workers' paradise.' With their clothing still wet from the river crossing, refugees are typically dismayed to discover that China is far less a 'light at the end of a dark tunnel' than its continuation, a 'no-man's land' fraught with unexpected new perils; betrayal, capture, and rampant human trafficking. The dangers do not end there. Refugees dread interception by North Korean own secret police who roam China freely, tracking down refugees to either eliminate them "on the spot" or drag them back to prisons in the North. Despite the extraordinary odds stacked against them, North Korean refugees in astonishing numbers continue to accept the risks of their fugitive existence in China in preference to the dismal conditions in North Korea. This paper will first explore conditions under which refugees currently live. It will then focus on the best-case and worst-case scenarios to remedy the current situation. The concluding section will recommend a specific set of international and regional initiatives for implementation, encompassing government, international institutions, the business community and non-governmental organizations—practical measures that are specifically focused on ending this heart-rending symphony of tears once and for all.

Three Painful Snapshots of the Present

The Untimely Death of Yoo Chul Min

A 10 year-old North Korean refugee boy hiding in China swiftly assesses the dilemma before him in deciding to undertake a desperate life-and-death gamble to cross the arid Sino-Mongolian border under the cover of darkness, settling on a sobering course of action light years from the normal concerns of an elementary school student. However for North Korean refugees, reaching Mongolia safely means putting to rest the constant fear of being arrested in China and the specter of repatriation to North Korea.

His name was Yoo Chul Min and his fateful decision tailspinned into tragedy. Joining five other North Korean fugitives in China, also desperate for even a fleeting glimpse of freedom, Chul Min and his companions lost their bearings for 26 hours in the desert-like steppe of the Mongolian frontier. The lad's chubby pink cheeks, the result of months of

an improved diet in China, masked the fatal reality, weakened vital organs brought on by years of malnutrition. A decade of chronic food shortages in his home province of North Hamkyoung had taken its toll, robbing Chul Min of the normal reserve of endurance and resistance to the elements one would associate with a healthy, growing pre-teenager. In the end, Chul Min's heroic young life was pitifully snuffed out by exhaustion and exposure, yet another North Korean victim of what the UN terms "slow-motion famine." Once the surviving members of the group had regained their bearings, his lifeless body was quickly thrown across the shoulders of another refugee and carried across the Sino-Mongolian border.

This young boy's story is of personal interest because our paths had crossed during my own work as an NGO in China sheltering North Korean refugees. Our encounter had been brief, as are most meetings of activists and refugees in China. At the time, he was under the protection of courageous Korean Christian aid workers in the capital of the Yenbian region. Immediately evident was the fact that I was the first Caucasian Chul Min had ever met. From his expression, he likely saw in me someone who closely resembled pictures and drawings of those hated devils from America that appeared in North Korean schoolbooks and propaganda posters. Therefore, by necessity, our conversation was awkward. Taking a children's book off the bookshelf, I motioned for us to begin reading together. Chul Min warily agreed but was soon engrossed, reading aloud the Korean text in this illustrated children's Bible. Savoring this tiny victory, I sat and listened, fervently hoping that somehow this brief episode would begin to bridge the gap between our two worlds. Perhaps, I mused, Chul Min and my grandson might someday be friends in South Korea. It never dawned on me that I would never see him alive again.

In the days that followed the jarring news of Chul Min's death, the magnitude of the tragedy grew. Government officials in Mongolia refused our entreaties to wait for Chul Min's father, himself a recent arrival to the South from China, to travel to Mongolia to identify his son's body and to be present at his burial. In a tragic fate that seems uniquely North Korean, endless weeks passed before Chul Min's father was able to successfully navigate the maze of South Korean and Mongolian bureaucracies and gain permission to travel to Mongolia. At last, he was led to a nondescript plot in the vast expanse of sand that is the Gobi Desert marked off only by a small wooden cross; left alone to his grief and bewilderment beside his son's windswept grave.

Of Human Bondage

Yoo Chul Min's story is poignant testament that even the tender-aged are not immune to tragedy. Children, teens, adults and even desperate grandparents in North Korea routinely cast their own personal safety to the wind and plunge into the icy waters of the Tumen and Yalu Rivers. They do so to flee famine and tyranny in a once-beloved homeland that has been transformed into a Dante's inferno of fear. In the bizarre parallel universe that has become reality for North Korean refugees in China, Yoo Chul Min would most likely be perceived as lucky to have traversed the 1,000 miles across China to the Mongolian border without capture. All too many of his countrymen encounter impossible obstacles

only a few feet into Chinese territory. North Korean women who venture into China know this bitter truth better than anyone; from 70 to 90% of them fall into the hands of human traffickers plying the sex trade.

Although a victim of such depravity, Lee Mi-ja considers herself providentially protected to have survived to tell the following tale. Her father died when she was still very young, leaving her mother to grapple alone with the hardships of a famine-racked North Korea. Unending work, privation and shrinking government distributions combined to take a fatal toll. Three years ago, Mi-ja's mother, a victim of unspeakable fatigue and despair, surrendered to her daily life-and-death battle for survival in the hardscrabble economy of Hamkyoungpukto, "the Siberia of North Korea." In her 20's, Mi-ja suddenly found herself exposed to the economic facts of provincial life in the wake of eight years of man-made famine. A middle-aged woman from a nearby town spoke directly in whispered tones to Mi-ja's fear and uncertainty, expressing a willingness to accompany her personally to China and arrange for Mi-ja to live with her prosperous Chinese relatives. The grieving young woman readily accepted, never suspecting anything but goodwill from this kindly aunt-like *ajumma*, a common fixture throughout Korean society.

Although their harrowing river crossing went undetected by both North Korean and Chinese border guards, Mi-ja's elation was short-lived. In a matter of several hours, she watched with disbelief as a coarse Chinese farmer stuffed a wad of bills into the *ajumma's* fist and glared at the young woman as if he'd struck a bargain for a fattened pig. Mi-ja's heart sank yet again upon discovering she would not even attain the dubious status of a 'mail order bride.' Instead, she was relegated to a 'concubine' for a violent, married man, who would burst into a rage and rain blows on her face and arms at the slightest sign of protest to his advances, leaving her face bleeding and swollen. To endure such dehumanizing treatment would scar the life of even the strong. However, Mi-ja is quick to point out that she counts herself fortunate. Escaping sexual servitude in less than a year, she ruefully related that many North Korean girls, many as young as 15 and 16, had been bought and sold in China up to four times.

Going Home... to Die

The Commission to Help North Korean Refugees (CNKR) reported in December of 2003 that over 850 such refugees were being held after capture by Chinese security forces in five separate Chinese detention centers in the Yenbian region. Well-informed sources also reported that the refugees were being repatriated from the five camps to North Korea at a rate of roughly 100 per week (50-100 more North Koreans are reportedly repatriated from Dandong, China to Sinuiju, North Korea at similar intervals).

Why does the prospect of repatriation incite such terror in North Korean refugees, to such a degree that many carry a small poison cylinder, preferring suicide to capture by Chinese security patrols or North Korean secret police operating in China? For those refugees who convert to the Christian faith during their furtive life in China, forced repatriation to their own home country constitutes a particularly grim fate. Such was the case of a family

of four refugees whose faith flourished for over a year in the care of an undercover missionary in China. However, in May 2002, the family was discovered and detained by Chinese police; shortly thereafter they were sent back to the North Korean border town of Namyang. Their attempt to keep religious books hidden in their clothing was thwarted by agents from North Korean State Security. Countless refugees have testified that the very first question asked repatriated refugees by interrogators is, "Have you had any contact with Christians in China?" or "Do you believe in Jesus?" Although many newly converted refugees choose discretion as the better part of valor, this family was firm and forthright in their profession of faith. Following their bold declaration, a number of eyewitnesses testified that the four were led to so-called "Hepatitis Street," a small courtyard adjacent to the liver ward of a hospital in Namyang City. As a five-soldier firing squad was hurriedly assembled, the residents of the neighborhood were summoned to observe the execution. Gunshots rang out and all four fell with mortal wounds to the head. The message to the stunned cluster of neighbors was unmistakably clear: anyone attempting to exercise a religious belief other than the worship of the Dear Leader, Kim Jong-il, would meet the same fate.

Best Case Scenarios: Seeking a Pinpoint of Light at the Tunnel's End

An assessment of recent refugee testimonials as well as political developments in Northeast Asia provide little room for optimism that this depressing human tragedy can be ended any time soon. Granted, heroic efforts by individual human rights activists to rescue small groups of refugees from their plight in China are beacons of hope. But the occasional refugee who flees to safety inside an embassy compound in Beijing constitutes a rare grace note in an otherwise depressing dirge. It is all too clear that the Chinese government is unimpressed by the passion for freedom expressed by both North Korean refugees and the humanitarian aid workers who voluntarily assist them. Indeed, Beijing has taken an increasingly hard line in dealing with such activists in the past two years. At the time of this writing, at least five humanitarian aid workers languish in Chinese prisons, serving terms of up to nine years for the "crime" of assisting North Korean refugees. (The release on March 19, 2004 of South Korean *New York Times* photojournalist, Seok Jae-hyun, following 14 months of strident international protest, only underscores the difficulty.) Less than one week after Seok's release, over 100 North Korean refugees detained in the Tumen and Rongjing Detention Camps of Northeast China launched a desperate and unprecedented hunger strike to protest the Chinese-North Korean treaty of forced repatriation.

Such troubling events notwithstanding, channels do exist within the governments of both China and North Korea to ease the plight of North Korean refugees, if only they were better utilized.

Possible and largely voluntary positive measures can be summarized below:

1. *China's leaders should be made to understand that continued flouting of its international treaty obligations with the United Nations in general, and the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in particular, would seriously jeopardize China's quest for a larger role and greater respect on the world stage.*

If the official statements of its senior officials are any indication, one might conclude that China actually takes such obligations seriously. As recently as 2001, during China's 50th anniversary celebration of its accession to the *1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, China's Vice Minister Wang Guangya waxed eloquent in describing this landmark instrument of international law as the "...Magna Carta of International Refugee Law... the Convention is a candlelight of hope in the dark to the helpless refugees... (and) serves as a guide to action to people who are engaged in humanitarian work of protecting and assisting refugees."

Such eloquence, unfortunately, is impossible to square with actual Chinese domestic policy. Despite ample evidence provided by hundreds of North Korean refugees themselves (as well as exhaustive reporting by such organizations as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea) of their "well founded fear of persecution" if returned to their home country, tens of thousands of North Korean defectors have been systematically repatriated to North Korea by the government of China on the untenable grounds that they are *not* refugees but merely illegal economic migrants. The fates of the repatriated are grim indeed, ranging from several months of detention, to torture, even to summary execution.

If China were to allow UNHCR staff to freely visit the Sino-North Korean border region for the purpose of interviewing North Korean defectors, a proper determination could be made as to which defectors are *bona fide* refugees. In so doing, China would accomplish two major goals:

- a) China's prestige within the international humanitarian aid community would take a quantum leap forward. The stigma of heavy-handedness would be lifted... and not a minute too soon, with the 2008 Olympics looming over the horizon.

- b) An objective determination of which North Korean defectors are authentic refugees, *not* economic migrants as China contends, would be made based on international law (not Chinese national law, as is now the case). Refugee camps could conceivably be set up in Northeast China to accommodate North Korean refugees. Once in place, Chinese anxieties concerning the financial burdens from the inflow of North Koreans across the border could be mitigated, since the UN is mandated to underwrite the costs of such camps, as in the case of refugee camps in former Yugoslavia as well as Thailand (for Cambodian refugees).

2. In the event the Chinese leadership fails to see the wisdom of embracing international human rights standards by allowing the UNHCR to carry out its mandate, the network of humanitarian aid workers would be well-advised to upgrade their operations, improve their internal security standards, find synergies in their separate activities, avoid duplication of effort, and seek new allies in the diplomatic community to protect as many refugees as possible.

Serious consideration should be given to independently setting up refugee camps in Russian Far East Maritime Provinces and/or Mongolia. The governor of Primorskaya krai raised eyebrows in December 2003 by openly embracing the idea of resettling North Korean refugees as workers in his province, although motivated less by humanitarianism than the demographic reality of a shrinking population. While such refugee resettlement would undoubtedly help the district's economy, any constructive measure of protection and assurance of safety for refugees would be a vast improvement over their current plight in China. However, given regional historical realities, it is far from clear that Moscow would jeopardize its leverage vis a vis Pyongyang by embracing such an open-door policy. Moreover, without a clear acceptance by Russian authorities of North Korean refugee status, they would remain in legal limbo.

3. North Korean leaders themselves could stun the international community by bowing to the inevitable 'handwriting on the wall.' By virtue of a shrinking number of policy choices, Kim Jong-il may be forced to conform to longstanding international human rights concerns to be included in future six-party and other multilateral negotiations.

4. Indeed, if the current American administration is re-elected in November 2004, the leadership in North Korea will almost certainly be faced with an unrelenting emphasis on human rights concerns as an integral part of multilateral negotiations with the U.S. likely to pursue a full-court press similar to the forging of the Helsinki Declaration with the former Soviet Union. Any State Department negotiating team should seriously consider the human rights issue as its trump card, instead of the WMD issue. (Lesson review: Iraq)

5. In the current leadership vacuum in the South Korean government regarding the North Korean refugee crisis, (for the second year in a row, South Korea bewildered the world in April, 2004 by remaining deafeningly silent on a U.N. resolution condemning North Korean human rights conditions), a golden opportunity exists for the South Korean as well as international business communities to step into the breach, bringing economic leverage to bear in resolving the current refugee crisis.

Worst Case Scenarios: Sliding Yet Deeper into Dante's Inferno

One shudders to contemplate a scenario in which conditions for North Korean refugees in China would take on even harsher aspect. Some argue that conditions couldn't deteriorate beyond their current deplorable state. Unsettling facts argue otherwise.

1. China could follow its worst instincts and stiffen its policy and penalties vis a vis the refugees and aid workers who help them.

Recent refugee reports from China in the first three months of 2004 indicate a troubling trend: food shortages are again approaching, or even surpassing, the extreme hardships widely reported in 1996 and 1997. Severe shortages that were commonly reported in North and South Hamkyoung have now spread to Hwanghae and Kangwan Provinces. China clearly indicated its grave concern in the autumn of 2003 by ordering the deployment of over 150,000 PLA army regulars from a base near Shenyang to areas closer to the North Korean border. Despite the notable absence of public explanation, the message was in the marching orders themselves: Beijing would countenance no disorder on its borders, notwithstanding the massive humanitarian crisis on its border. By continuing to adhere to its longstanding mutual repatriation treaty with North Korea while systematically barring UNHCR staff from interviewing those who cross the border, China is actually intensifying the suffering of uncounted thousands of desperate North Koreans who cross the border, as well as its own image and standing in the international community. Hopes were definitely not raised by events of April 2nd, 2004. On that day a refugee was shot dead by a Chinese border guard in a desperate attempt to cross the Mongolian frontier. Activists grimly noted China's own crossing of a new and ominous threshold: the use of deadly force on defenseless defectors.

2. By allowing an estimated three million people to starve from 1996 to the present while simultaneously maintaining the fifth largest army in the world, Pyongyang's leads have brazenly made its 'army first' priorities crystal-clear to the region and the world.

As the nose tightens on Pyongyang's illicit arms and narcotics sales worldwide, an increasing share of its illicit earning is in serious jeopardy. There is every reason to believe that the 22 million North Koreans, who have somehow managed to survive so far will be asked to tighten their belts still further, if and when missile and heroin sales decline. The DPRK response to the devastating train explosion in the border town of Ryongchon on April 22, 2004 tended to confirm the darkest assessments of how lightly the DPRK values the lives of its citizens. Its own outdated and ill-equipped medical facilities woefully overwhelmed to deal with the thousands of seriously injured, including a disproportionately large number of blinded schoolchildren, North Korean authorities

prevented a single ambulance from crossing the bridge to the nearby Chinese city of Dandong and its hastily prepared hospital wards for emergency patients from the train blast. The Stalinist regime's then turned a cold shoulder to the rapid land transport of relief supplies across the 38th Parallel by South Korea, insisting that it come the customary and non-intrusive way, slowly by ship. Was the greatest concern of officials in Pyongyang a fear that citizens of Sinuiju would attempt to flood to China if the border discipline were to be relaxed? Or would subsequent interviews of blast victims by international journalists on the China side result in tarnishing the image of Kim Jong-il's 'workers' paradise?' The *New York Times* summed up much of world opinion in its April 29th headline, "North Korea's Top Priority Remains Secrecy After Blast." Reports of tearful North Korean adults rescuing portraits of Kim Jong-il from burning buildings before tending to the injuries of children left the world only more stunned and appalled.

3. *Based on its conduct and responses to the plight of North Korean refugees, in China, the UNHCR fits the oft-cited caricature of United Nations agencies as impotent and ineffective.*

Cowed by Beijing's prohibitions on staff visits to the China-North Korean border area to interview North Korean refugees, the UNHCR nevertheless found itself thrust into the international spotlight in June 2001, when a family of refugees actually stormed the gates of the UNHCR compound in Beijing in a desperate bid for protection. The South Korean volunteer translator accompanied them later stated that the refugee protection agency treated the Jang Gil Su family as "unwanted pests." When given the perfect opportunity to reassert its mandate before the world by declaring the fleeing North Koreans eligible for refugee status, the UNHCR instead did Beijing's bidding, dancing the diplomatic two-step and shuffling the family off to the Philippines and then to South Korea, offering the lame excuse that they would receive better medical care there.

The situation can only worsen—increasing the suffering of refugees—if the UNHCR office in China continues to avoid its responsibilities under international law to protect refugees, and reduced to playing a largely ceremonial role,

4. *If the UN's World Food Program (WFP) continues its current method of delivering food aid despite unreasonable North Korean restrictions on its monitoring of distribution, the flow of refugees into China is very likely to persist.*

As it has deftly done for a decade, the Stalinist regime in Pyongyang will continue to exercise disproportionate control over enormous amounts of humanitarian aid, thus guaranteeing that distribution to its citizens will be based **not** on the universally accepted basis of need or vulnerability, but strictly along lines of loyalty to North Korea's 'Dear Leader.' Refugees who come from the bottom rung of the social ladder often report they've never even seen foreign food aid, except being sold in local markets.

5. In the event that China's trading partners continue to fall over one another to gain an even larger share of China's growing market, an established pattern of prioritizing trade deals at the cost of ignoring, or at the very least minimizing, human rights violations will be perpetuated.

Ironically, the message from developed nations to North Korean refugees will be eerily similar to Pyongyang's own message to them: "You are an unnecessary eater; your lives and those of your children do not tip the balance away from our more important commercial concerns." In so doing, developed countries and multinational corporations inexcusably forfeit one of their most potent instruments of persuasion—their tremendous economic clout central to the regime's legitimacy.

Untying the Gordian Knot: Implementing Real Solutions to the Refugee Crisis

The simple fact that the North Korean refugee crisis is now approaching the 10 year-mark bears witness to the daunting prospect of finding real solutions to this complex regional problem. Despite the intransigent nature of the challenge, strong arguments can be made for incremental, yet significant steps in reducing the refugees' suffering.

1. Regarding the possibility of a voluntary shift toward a more humane approach to the North Korean refugee issue on the part of China's leadership, the next few years may be particularly critical for such an epiphany.

With Beijing's preparations in full stride as host of the 2008 Olympics, President Hu Jintao will doubtless be eager to present the world with a China that is not only undergoing extraordinary economic growth, but also with a society and leadership that reflect the noble goals of the Olympic Games. Indeed, the official Olympic slogan, "Celebrate Humanity," provides Beijing with a fitting backdrop to undertake bold actions would be certain gain the attention and admiration of billions of spectators.

Conversely, the absence of such a change might result in a public relations nightmare for China with human rights and religious groups joining forces in reminding the world that "Celebrate Humanity's" host routinely and forcibly repatriates thousands of North Korean refugees annually to await barbaric political and religious persecution in flagrant violation of international law. Undoubtedly, the 2008 Olympic organizers would dread such an image as much as the prospect of a well-synchronized boycott of its sports extravaganza. Perhaps the very awareness that such a boycott is a distinct possibility might provide added impetus for China's leaders to re-think national policies that are seriously out of sync with international norms.

2. Like most East Asian bureaucrats, the Chinese tend to be thoroughly pragmatic. It's an open secret that ideological considerations increasingly take a back seat to

pragmatism and simple reward/punishment in decision-making. In such an atmosphere, *how difficult would it be for a loose coalition of investors in Northeast China, interested NGO's, and former South Korean officials with good conscience and even better political connections in China, to forge an informal understanding with provincial officials and/or the Chinese security apparatus to open a, narrow corridor between the China/North Korean border and the China-Mongolian border through which North Korean refugees could pass, escorted by humanitarian aid workers? Alternatively, periodic e.g. annual or semiannual 'amnesty for illegal aliens' could provide another face-saving method for China to allow North Korean defectors to leave by air.* Significantly, such agreements albeit on a smaller scale, have already been made by members of the so-called 'underground railroad,' assisting refugees in their passage to safe havens in countries surrounding China, e.g., Mongolia, Vietnam, Myanmar, etc. Once again, such consummately practical arrangements, whether official or unofficial in nature, would avert untold suffering, while allowing China to 'save face.'

3. In view of the UNHCR's dismal track record thus far, one might easily conclude that the reason resides in the lack of a legal basis to act. In reality, however, the UNHCR's own 1995 bilateral agreement with China *grants the UNHCR's staff in China **unimpeded access to refugees within China.*** However, the only means available to determine who is a refugee, and who is not, is to interview them. Yet, as already noted, China has *never* allowed the UNHCR free movement near the North Korean border to do so. In addition, China has also "foreclosed even the possibility of individual grants of asylum. [China] declar[ing] all of them to be conclusively non-refugees, and mak[ing] no provision for individual adjudication to the contrary."

*Secondly, the treaty stipulates that, in the event a dispute arises between the two parties, such as China's refusal to allow the UNHCR access to North Korean defectors, the UNHCR can invoke **binding arbitration** and an arbitrator acceptable to both parties must be named within a 45-day period. Alternatively, the UN can appoint one empowered to determine within a reasonable period whether or not the UNHCR should be allowed access to North Korean defectors in China. Yet, inexplicably, in a 10-year period, officials of the UNHCR in China have *never* invoked the principles of **unimpeded access** nor **binding arbitration**, in its dealings with China on refugee questions. The remedy is readily apparent:*

- a) The UNHCR needs to make better use of the instruments already in its toolbox to make its voice heard, acting with genuine conviction in carrying out its mandate to protect refugees. In this regard, the newly introduced (3/24/2004) U.S. Congressional Bill, *The North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004*, urges the UNHCR to do the obvious: assert

its right to binding arbitration with China.

b) In this regard, a top-to-bottom review of UNHCR staff performance and procedures in Beijing is also in order.

c) Thirdly, UN member-state donors should be made aware that they have the power to designate how their contributions are spent. Specifically, contributing countries can earmark their donations to programmes that are effectively protecting North Korean refugees under the auspices of the Beijing office of the UNHCR.

4. *Humanitarian efforts by NGO's to assist North Korean refugees in China, both sheltering and providing logistical support along the 'underground railroad,' should be actively encouraged and supported. Further, the immediate release of those imprisoned in China for their activism should be made a policy priority.*

While the grassroots movement formed to win their release is growing, it should be upgraded and expanded in a coordinated campaign drawing upon the resources of the international community (both governmental and non-governmental). Regrettably, in the past two years, only two have been released (Pastor Chun Ki-won and *New York Times* photojournalist, Seok Jae-hyun).

5. *A new **Tripartite Initiative** is needed that would be implemented by a coalition of the concerned and the willing. Participants should include: (a) South Korean business leaders with strong corporate governance and ethical resumes in partnership with (b) relevant South Korean government officials; and (c) civil and religious NGO's leaders/communities with a demonstrated track record and expertise in North Korean refugees affairs.* Teamwork is essential in expediting the transfer and resettlement of tens of thousands of refugees now in China to South Korea. Such a bold and innovative step is long overdue and would address a serious bottleneck: the South Korean government's woefully limited (perhaps deliberate) capacity to process more than a handful of refugees per year through its Hanawon facility. In effect, hundreds of thousands of North Korean refugees in China remain in limbo and at the mercy of regular Chinese security dragnets on their urban and mountainside shelters.

This initiative might also eliminate approximately 100,000 illegal workers in South Korean factories that hail from Southeast Asia, Central Asia and Africa, replacing them with resettled North Korean refugees now in China, hopefully with the latter's cooperation, on a new 'fast track.' Further, 'company towns' could provide the necessary facilities (dormitories, training facilities, etc.) to

absorb the inflow. This would obviously play to the strong suit of the Korean business community that has an enviable reputation of getting things done *ppali ppali*(quickly) – in sharp contrast to the government, which has dragged its feet, building only one resettlement facility during the last decade.

Such a proposal should also be of intrinsic interest to South Korean business leaders, who are currently rushing, lemming-like, into China to take advantage of low labor costs, leaving in their wake an alarming swath of disillusioned and unemployed South Korean citizens (854,000 as of January 2004), especially among the young. *Far-sighted South Korean businessmen might be expected to capitalize on the opportunity of utilizing workers who share the same language and culture in preference to the current practice of hiring illegal foreign short-term workers*, thereby avoiding the inevitable social problems (*e.g.*, company owners' exploitation of illegal workers; higher crime rates among transient workers, etc.) that result. Employing newly resettled refugees, principally in manufacturing jobs, would also have the beneficial secondary effect of reducing unemployment by generating additional executive and technical level jobs that could be filled by many newly unemployed university graduates in South Korea.

In reality, however, there are a number of political roadblocks to such a sweeping programme, among them, the Uri Party's landmark parliamentary victory on April 15, 2004, that makes it likely that the resolution of the nuclear crisis with North Korea will receive priority attention to the detriment of the refugee problem. Under these circumstances, a more effective tack would be to reach out to Korean business leaders with factories in Southeast Asia and Central Asia (especially Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) who are better positioned to employ North Korean refugees without the visibility and political fallout that might occur in the South. Remarkably, perhaps providentially, refugees have already fled from China to nations with active Korean business interests *e.g.* Thailand, Philippines, Vietnam, etc. and could reach these destinations without a great deal of difficulty.

The South Korean government would also appear to have much to gain from either of these initiatives. *South Korean bureaucrats are well aware that the current resettlement allowance of \$25,000 per refugee is only manageable for a small number of refugees, not a deluge.* In addition, bitter experience has already demonstrated that many resettled refugees have no experience in handling such large amounts of money. All too frequent is the sad tale of newcomers bilked by unscrupulous brokers in Northeast China, promising to help bring remaining family members stranded in North Korea to safety, only to disappear with their ill-gotten gain.

By acting now, the South Korean government could begin replacing the current

method of awarding lump-sum payments with the far more practical alternative of partial direct allowance and indirect subsidies that would provide funding, largely through tax credits, for the construction of dormitories, training centers, social welfare facilities, that, in fact, were needed years ago. Regrettably, all preparations for a substantial inflow of refugees were essentially paralyzed at the beginning of the Kim Dae Jung administration in 1998, predicated on one questionable tenet of the “Sunshine Policy,” viz., that they would signal to the North Korean regime that the South sought its demise.

CONCLUSION

The scope of this paper prevents a detailed examination of every facet of such a sweeping programme. However, a brief summary of the advantages it offers includes:

- a) A far greater number of North Korean refugees would be able to realize their dream: escape from life-threatening dangers in North Korea and China.
- b) Significantly, South Korean companies would gain roughly the same savings in labor cost that might prompt them to consider re-locating to China. The crucial difference would be that the savings would be incurred by employing Korean, *not* Chinese labor. Such a programme also offers the very real possibility of reversing rising unemployment in South, with companies taking advantage of tax credits to lower their labor costs. Korean businessmen with facilities in Southeast and Central Asia could also play a key part in this effort.
- c) The South Korean government would greatly benefit from a prudent distribution of resettlement allowances to refugees once the inevitable refugee deluge begins. Put simply, instead of a direct transfer of the bulk of the re-settlement money to the refugees themselves, these funds would be used for a finite period of time as a cost of living allowance, or salary add-on. To eliminate the possibility of corruption, such subsidies should be in the form of tax credits to employers, collected at the end of the fiscal year, not as up-front payments.
- d) NGO and religious leaders should provide ‘checks and balances’ to both business and government through their proven track record in providing for the welfare of resettled North Koreans and the valuable experience gained through years of interacting with and assisting North Korean refugees.

Let us hope, and indeed pray, that practical efforts, such as those described above, will become reality; that they will generate a genuine light at the tunnel's end for hundreds of thousands of North Korean refugees like Yoo Chul Min and his father – an ever-swelling human tide that remains stranded between the oppressive 'rock' of North Korea and its famine and the very 'hard place' of sudden fear and countless hidden dangers lurking in China. A self-respecting 'international community' can only "Celebrate Humanity" with a clear conscience when it has brought these refugees under the protection of a permanent safe haven and offered them the opportunity of a life without fear.

Helping Hands Korea (HHK), is an NGO that has endeavored since 1996 to provide famine relief inside North Korea, particularly to schools and orphanages. From 1998, HHK has concentrated on sheltering refugees in China and coordinating logistical support for their escape to third countries.

The views and strategies expressed in this paper are the author's and do not necessarily reflect the policy positions of the Federation of Korean Industries (FKI).