

# The Forgotten Victims of the North Korean Crisis

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# The Forgotten Victims of the North Korean Crisis

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By Tessa Morris-Suzuki

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## I. Introduction

Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Professor of Japanese History in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University and author of the forthcoming book *Exodus to North Korea: Shadows from Japan's Cold War*, writes, "Today in Japan, relatives of those who "returned" to North Korea in the Cold War years watch the difficult process of nuclear diplomacy quietly but with intense concern... While the story of the Japanese kidnap victims has dominated news headlines, this tragic story of the 93,340 who were "returned" remains little known, and hostility to North Korea (as well as fears for the fate of relatives in the North) makes it difficult for the small group of survivors now living in Japan to raise their voices."

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## **II. Article by Tessa Morris-Suzuki**

- "The Forgotten Victims of the North Korean Crisis"

By Tessa Morris-Suzuki

As the slow and difficult negotiations on North Korean denuclearisation unfold, one small group of a hundred people or so in Japan are watching proceedings with a unique personal interest. Some are Japanese, others ethnic Koreans. All are survivors of one of the modern world's most bizarre, tragic and utterly forgotten "humanitarian" projects.

Between 1959 and 1984, these few were among the 93,340 people who migrated from Japan to North Korea in search of the new and better life. There were several particularly ironic features of this migration. First, it took place precisely at the time of Japan's "economic miracle". Secondly, although it was described as a "repatriation", almost all those who "returned" to North Korea originally came from the south of the Korean peninsula, and many had been born and lived all their lives in Japan. Third, the glowing images of life which tempted them to Kim Il-Sung's "worker's paradise" came, not just from the North Korean propaganda machine but from the Japanese mainstream media, supported and encouraged by politicians including key members of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party.

After decades in North Korea, around one hundred migrants have now escaped the harsh realities of life there, and made the perilous return journey back to Japan. Other survivors of the same project who managed to escape have settled in South Korea.

As secret documents from the Cold War era are declassified and testimony from survivors emerges, the true story of this mass movement is now starting to emerge for the first time. We now know that it was the product of a deliberate policy, very carefully designed and implemented at the height of the Cold War by the North Korean and Japanese governments often working in concert, and supported in various ways by the Soviet Union, the United States and the International Red Cross movement. It is a history that sheds important light on the complex background to Northeast Asia's contemporary conflicts. It also evokes chilling echoes of other coerced or manipulated migrations, including the repatriation of Eastern Europeans to the Soviet Union and other Communist countries in the immediate post-war era.

The story starts in the mid-1950s at the height of the Cold War. Some 600,000 Koreans were living in Japan, most having migrated to Japan from the southern part of the Korean Peninsula during the colonial period (1910-1945). Having been unilaterally designated "foreigners" by the Japanese government, they had no legal right to permanent residence and faced continual discrimination, prejudice and poverty. South Korea was then an impoverished nation under the authoritarian rule of Yi Seung-Man (Syngman Rhee) and had no interest in taking them back.

The newly released records show that from 1955 onwards, some Japanese bureaucrats and politicians (including members of the ruling party) began to develop strategies to encourage Koreans in Japan to "return" instead to North Korea. Knowing that this was a politically explosive issue, they tried to keep their role in the scheme covert and to ensure that the exodus was carried out under the auspices of the neutral and humanitarian Red Cross. However, as a leading Japanese Red Cross official put it, his government's real aim was "to rid itself of several tens of thousands Koreans who are indigent and vaguely communist".

Via their national Red Cross Societies, Japan made secret contact with North Korea in 1956 and 1957, urging its government to accept a substantial influx of Koreans from Japan. At the same time, the limited welfare payments available to Koreans in Japan were being drastically slashed - a measure that must surely have made the prospect of life in communist North Korea look more appealing.

At first, the North Korean response to the issue was cool. It was happy to accept a small number of "true believers", but it was having enough problems feeding its own people without accepting a mass inflow of immigrants. In 1958, however, North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung dramatically changed track. Apparently seeing the possibility of an international propaganda coup which might damage Japan's relations with South Korea and the US, he issued a public welcome to ethnic Koreans from Japan, promising them housing, jobs, education and welfare.

Immediately, propaganda campaigns began to sweep through Japan's Korean community, orchestrated by a local pro-North Korean organization, but amplified by a flood of articles in the Japanese mass media. A special "Repatriation Cooperation Society", involving politicians from across Japan's political spectrum, was set up to distribute information encouraging Koreans to "return" to North Korea. Leading members included former Prime Minister Ichiro Hatoyama and prominent ruling-party politician Junya Koizumi (whose son Junichiro Koizumi was to become Prime Minister in 2001).

Another disturbing aspect revealed by declassified documents is the United States attitude to the scheme. The US State Department was at that time focussed on renegotiating its all-important security treaty with Japan, a process for which it relied on the enthusiastic cooperation of Japanese Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi (grandfather of the present Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe).

The US appears to have been unaware of the secret contacts between Japan and North Korea in 1956 and 1957. When it first became aware of the repatriation plan a couple of years later, the Eisenhower administration regarded it with concern, but once the Japanese and North Korean Red Cross Societies reached an agreement on a mass "return" in mid-1959, the Eisenhower administration did not take any practical steps to halt the unfolding tragedy.

US Ambassador in Tokyo Douglas MacArthur II (who played a key role on the US side) told his Australian counterpart in 1959 that the "American Embassy had checked Japanese opinion and found it was almost unanimously in favour of 'getting rid of the Koreans'". At this sensitive moment in US-Japan relations, the State Department was clearly cautious of intervening in a scheme that was an obvious vote-winner for the Kishi regime. Besides, MacArthur personally sympathised with the public emotion, commenting (as the Australian Ambassador at the time reported) that "he himself can scarcely criticize the Japanese for this as the Koreans left in Japan are a poor lot including many Communists and many criminals."

In fact, although some were doubtless ideologically committed to the Kim Il-Sung regime, those who "returned" to North Korea included tens of thousands of people whose only dream was a better future for themselves and their families: people who included entrepreneurs, technicians and university lecturers as well as the poor and unemployed. While most were ethnic Koreans, their number also included over 6,000 Japanese nationals (mostly spouses of Korean men). Many thousands, of course, were children.

Testimony from the small number of former "returnees" who have recently slipped across the border out of North Korea recalls the shock they felt on first arriving and realising the desperate poverty of the country to which they had come. Their plight was made worse some years after the start of the "repatriation", when the North Korean government began to regard "returnees" from Japan with

growing suspicion and prejudice. Thousands were sent to labour camps, of these many were never heard from again.

Today in Japan, relatives of those who "returned" to North Korea in the Cold War years watch the difficult process of nuclear diplomacy quietly but with intense concern. The support they send through unreliable communications channels is often the only means of survival for family members left behind in North Korea. While the story of the Japanese kidnap victims has dominated news headlines, this tragic story of the 93,340 who were "returned" remains little known, and hostility to North Korea (as well as fears for the fate of relatives in the North) makes it difficult for the small group of survivors now living in Japan to raise their voices.

The slow process of dialogue that began at the Six Party Talks in Beijing holds out a faint ray of hope for the future of these divided families. In the meanwhile, it is surely time for their story finally to be told.

### **III. Nautilus invites your responses**

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: [bscott@nautilus.org](mailto:bscott@nautilus.org). Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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