

China and North Korean “Refugees”

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March 21, 2002

By Thomas F. McCarthy

I. Introduction

The following article was contributed by Thomas F. McCarthy. McCarthy has traveled frequently to the DPRK as an agricultural development consultant and has worked in Washington, most recently in cooperation with the Atlantic Council's 'Korea in Transition Program.' McCarthy argues that NGOs have no right to risk the consequences of Chinese or DPRK decisions to prevent people from receiving continued aid because of misdirected efforts to turn their plight into an international political issue. Instead, these groups could be more effective by supporting World Bank and IMF efforts at development assistance programs.

This article was written shortly after the February 2002 International Conference on North Korean Human Rights and Refugees."

II. Essay By Thomas F. McCarthy

China and North Korean "Refugees"

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February's "International Conference on North Korean Human Rights and Refugees" concluded with a demand that China not only grant legal refugee status to North Koreans in its border areas but that it also allow foreign NGOs and religious groups to help these people resettle in third countries. One conference speaker, Norbert Vollertsen, the German doctor who left North Korea a year ago, stated that pressure on China to open official refugee camps along its border would assist in forcing change in the DPRK. Dr. Vollersten reportedly said,

"We would try to create a flood, spreading information about the camps through the underground railroad across North Korea"

The Tokyo conference raised awareness of something that was already well underway. An array of NGO and missionary groups in Europe, Canada, and the United States are joining with South Korean groups to "internationalize" migration issues on the China - North Korea border. They are pressing -- in the U.S. Congress and elsewhere -- for China to grant formal refugee status to North Korean migrants and to begin internationally-managed programs to help them move to third countries.

It might be useful for the conference supporters -- and their various allies -- to reflect for at least a moment on the almost certain consequences of their actions: China is no more likely to tolerate this sort of international intervention than would the United States in, for example, Texas. At a minimum, China can simply tighten its borders with North Korea and refuse entry to would be migrants or temporary workers, thereby solving everybody's "refugee" problems. At worse, it could also decide to ask the foreign NGOs and church groups that it has allowed to work in Yanbian to end their humanitarian and missionary work and leave the country.

The clear losers would be the North Koreans living in border areas.

Most of the NGO and church groups seeking to assist these people are unquestionably well intentioned. A few aim also at disrupting North Korea's efforts to open relations with European Union and other countries. Both groups share a common misunderstanding of what China has in fact been doing to help in North Korea. Some readily verifiable facts about China and North Korean "refugee" issues are summarized below.

China is clearly the most important single source of humanitarian and development assistance to the DPRK. It provides at least as much food aid and other help as any "donor" nation or humanitarian agency. Agricultural research centers in China are major sources of technical assistance to their North Korean counterparts. When asked, China also furnishes advisory support for DPRK efforts to modernize its economy.

China permits the World Food Program, the UNDP, and foreign NGOs to use Beijing as logistical and "R&R" "support bases" for their programs in the DPRK, and as a platform for publicity and press events, including a major May 1999 conference on NGO humanitarian assistance in North Korea.

China allows NGOs and church groups to freely use its domestic as well as international banking, communications, and transport facilities to purchase and deliver food as well as agricultural supplies and other assistance goods to North Korea. NGOs regularly receive full support from Chinese railway authorities to move supplies from Dandong to Sinuiju.

Most importantly, China has allowed -- and often actually facilitated -- the various humanitarian activities of foreign NGO and missionary groups in territory bordering North Korea. It has complemented this de facto support for their assistance efforts with extremely tolerant policies toward the North Koreans who enter Yanbian and other areas in search of food and temporary or permanent employment.

Some NGO and church groups have a peculiar arrogance about Chinese behavior toward North Koreans. China is no less concerned than they are about human suffering. It has demonstrated that concern in many practical ways - including permitting an NGO presence that few countries would tolerate. But China must also manage other dimensions of its border problems. In particular, it cannot let the availability of humanitarian assistance become a magnet for uncontrolled migration that would weaken its sovereignty or destabilize its relations with its neighbor. China simply is not going to give up control of its borders. What country would?

If NGOs and churches want to reduce human suffering in North Korea, they should support efforts to

accelerate development and change by admitting the country to the World Bank and the IMF and by improving the quality of ongoing assistance programs. In the meantime, they should continue to discretely provide humanitarian help to families in the border areas. There is no indication that China is unwilling to allow this. But NGOs should not risk the consequences -- to North Korean migrants and not to them -- of Chinese or North Korean decisions to prevent people from receiving continued help because of misdirected efforts to turn their plight into an international political issue.

Less than fully thought out humanitarian initiatives -- with their attendant publicity -- are unlikely to calm the waters at the exact moment when the Bush Administration is asking China to assist in opening a dialogue between the DPRK and the U.S.

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