

# The Situation of People Fleeing North Korea and the Political, Economic and Social Impact

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## Introduction

Entering the 1990s, North Korea has experienced economic decline for nine years consecutively. Since then, a food shortage crisis is underway. The 1995 flood gave rise to food shortage and 92 percent of the area in North Korea was struck by long time food discontinuity. Severe food shortage, floods and other natural disasters caused widespread famine. Tens of thousands of people suffer from malnutrition. Since 1996, there have been many incidents in which many hungry North Koreans illegally cross the Chinese–Korean or Russian–Korean boundary to enter China or Russia. North Korea and China have maintained peaceful boundary for several decades; Yalu River and Tumen River, the boundary rivers, are narrow, shallow and have long freezing period, which makes it easy to cross; the boundary extends as long 1,400 kilometers (Jilin Province alone has 1,206 boundary line with North Korea); and there are more than 2 million Korean minority in China (Yanbian area alone has 890 thousand) whose language and living habits are the same as the North Koreans. Based on the above reasons, many hungry North Koreans illegally cross Yalu River and Tumen River to seek a living in China's frontier areas, some of whom have entered the hinterland of China. There are also some who enter Russia and very few who go to South Korea through a third country. These North Korean people who illegally cross boundary are usually called people fleeing North Korea. Recently, there continuously have been many incidents in which some with unknown identity broke in the foreign embassies in China. Some with unknown identity are people fleeing North Korea.

The phenomenon that many people fleeing North Korea and enter China has attracted attention from the international society, especially from South Korea. The media has made this a very big deal, saying that there have been twenty or thirty thousand North Koreans fleeing to China, some of whom are caught and sent back to North Korea where they are punished severely and tortured. The South Korean media believes that, according to international laws, these people should be defined as international refugees, and they insist that South Korean government should contact the Chinese government from the perspective of human rights. The South Korean not-in-office party also uses this event to exert pressure on the government. Some South Koreans even come on a special trip to China's Jilin and Liaoning Province to investigate the situation of people fleeing North Korea and claim to try to seek a solution to this problem by cooperating with China.

So what is the real situation of those people fleeing North Korea? We have been doing field research in Shenyang, Dandong, Longjing, Yanji and Hunchun for several times. Based on our findings, we will interpret and analyze the situation of people fleeing North Korea and the political, economic and social impact.

## The situation of people fleeing North Korea

Firstly, the number of people fleeing North Korea

The international society is very concerned about this figure. One official from the American Embassy in South Korea said, “ the number of people fleeing North Korea to China is our top concern because as the scale varies, the severity of the case will be different.” But it is hard to estimate how many people have entered China and how many have stayed because these people enter China illegally and North Korea never announces the number. Some say it is 30 to 200 thousand and some say it is 100 thousand. In Seeking the Hope of the Nation, a survey report published by South Korea, it says that the North Korean government “during the education of its Labor Party members indicated that in the past difficult march time (referring to the period from the death of Kim Il Sung to 1998), we have lost 2 to 2.5 million people and 200 thousand have fled.” However, the rumor is quite different from the statistics we have gathered. If tens of thousands of North Koreans have fled to China, their food, accommodation, living, work and other problems will be too much for China to bear. We believe that it is believable to say the number of people fleeing North Korea is a few thousands. According to our investigation (incomplete statistics), the number of North Koreans who enter China through the Jilin–Korean boundary (according to the number of people received by the Chinese frontier) was 200 to 300 each year before 1995, increased to more than 580 in 1996, fled to more than 5400 in 1997 and reached over 6300 in 1998. In 1999, the North Korean agriculture increased a little and the famine was relieved, so the illegal runaways were over 3,700 and fewer than before. In 2000, the runaways were over 3100. In 2001, the number rose again and reached more than 5,300, the same as in 1997.

Secondly, the general situation of people fleeing North Korea

Based on investigation, we summarize the following points about the general situation of these people fleeing North Korea.

1. **Sexual structure.** The majority is women because women easily win the sympathy and can relatively easily find job in China. They can marry if there is no way out. They say it is not difficult to enter China across the boundary because the Chinese frontier sentry posts and guards are not many, the interval between patrols is long and thus it is easy to get across. As to the North Korean side, although there are many frontier sentry posts and very close watch, people can get the guarantee of safe passage if they each give the guard 300 RMB or promise to give when they return. In addition, this is closely related to the tight control of young male in North Korea.
2. **Age structure.** Most of them are 20 to 55.
3. **Profession.** The majority is worker, enterprise staff, unemployed and farmers. A few are cadre, students and soldiers.
4. **Living distribution in North Korea and entry place.** Most live in Xianjingbeidao, Cijiangdao, Liangjiangdao and pinganbeidao. A few live in Pyangyong, Nanpu, Huanghaibeidao, Huanghainandao and Jiangyuandao. Entry place concentrates in the Chinese Changbai County along the Yalu River. Since 1998, there has been an increase in various parts of Yanji where more than 2600 have been sheltered. This accounts for 42.8 percent in the whole province and increases 4.64 times compared with last year.
5. **Purpose of illegal boundary crossing.** They unanimously claim to do so for the purpose of supporting themselves and their family, but in fact besides the hungry

and poor people, there are some with unknown identity who enter China among the hungry people for other reasons.

Thirdly, the new features of people fleeing North Korea

Through talk with these people, we find that they have displayed some new features in the recent two years.

1. The previous boundary crossers are usually people living near boundary, but recently there have been more people from inland. Even citizens of Pyongyang, the capital, and Haizhou, capital city of Huanghainandao also join the group.
2. Previously it is individual fleeing, but now it is group, even a whole family fleeing.
3. Previously these people only stayed in the frontier area. Most of them stayed two or three days in China, got (stole or begged for) food or other items and returned to North Korea. However, most flow inland nowadays. They say that China's inland is much safer for them than the frontier area. The Han nationality inhabited area is safer than the Korean minority inhabited area and working for the former is safer than working for the latter. Therefore, after entering China they try every means to move inland to Heilongjiang, Jilin, Changchun, Shenyang, even Inner Mongolia, Hebei or Shandong. In 1999 alone, Jilin Province frontier received from the public security office of 14 provinces, regions and cities over 700 North Koreans illegally entering China, which is 14.8 times of last year. Lately, new circumstances indicate that some people fleeing North Korea are going to South Korea by riskily breaking in the foreign embassies in China and through third country.
4. Previously the illegal boundary crossers were basically hungry people and their aim is merely to make a living, but now the components of the boundary crossers are much more complex.
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### **The impact of this issue and its potential harm**

North Koreans illegally entering China have caused in significant impact on international relation and international society. Specially, there continuously have been many incidents recently in which North Koreans illegally broke in the foreign embassies in China. The quality of event is extremely bad. Its impact and consequence is very harmful. Its potential harm can't be neglected.

Firstly, bringing disorder to the safe political atmosphere and stable social order of the frontier area and seriously menacing the life and property of people in the frontier area.

Thousands of people fleeing North Korea enter Chinese frontier area, some of whom fail to steal or beg and move to criminal acts such as robbing. Multi-national criminal case has risen sharply. North Korean criminals collude with Chinese criminals and smuggling and drug smuggling cannot be exterminated. Since 1998, almost 200 cases committed by people fleeing North Korea have happened. North Korean criminals usually rob in gangs. China Changbai frontier recently tracked down three criminal gangs composed of 27 people fleeing North Korea. These three gangs committed over 80 stealing, robbing and other serious crimes in China. Even some of people fleeing North Korea kill Chinese dweller in frontier area to try to obtain the wealth. Due to criminal case that people fleeing

North Korea acted to Chinese people in the frontier area has risen sharply, the criminals issue is seriously, bringing disorder to the safe political atmosphere and stable social order of the frontier area and seriously menacing the life and property of people in the frontier area.

There are quite some cases of trafficking in North Korean women. North Korean criminals collude with Chinese criminals to multi-national abducting North Korean women. The public security department in Changbai County told us that there have been over 20 trafficking of North Korean women tracked down in this county alone and around 30 North Korean women have been involved. In addition, it often happens that North Korean women become prostitutes in China.

More serious is the problem that the majority of people fleeing North Korea are women, many of whom illegally live with, or illegally marry Chinese men, resulting in many illegal multi-national marriages. Though it perhaps could dull the problem that the percentage between man and woman in local is imbalance, there are more latent unsure. In the recent few years, a lot of Korea young women in Chinese Yanbian area have gone to South Korea for working even settling down there by married South Korean man. It is understood that the number of multi-national marriage between Chinese Jilin province and South Korea in 1995 is 2012, 2325 in 1996, 2898 in 1997. It rises year by year. It results in the disproportion of sex ratio in the locality. Some young men couldn't look for young women in the locality and couldn't marry.

Because most of these women stay in China for living, they will go back their hometown as soon as the economic situation in North Korea firms up. Some women have married and had children in North Korea. After coming to China, they marry Chinese citizens and have children again for a living, thus committing international bigamy. There are many such cases. This has triggered and will continue to trigger a series of difficult international problems and created social unstable factors between China and North Korea.

At the same time, people fleeing North Korea have put on the Chinese government a huge extra economic and employment burden. Because of these people illegally entering the Northeast China frontier area, there have been some cases in which the social order is disturbed and the life and property of people in the frontier area are threatened. Chinese government has to spend a lot of man power and materials, take many means of safety reinforcement, strengthen and enlarge the ability to intercept, catch and hold refugees so as to maintain the stable social order of the frontier area. All these cost China huge economic losses that should not be spent.

Secondly, the issue of people fleeing North Korea has caused violent repercussion in South Korean society, exerting certain political pressure on the South Korea n government.

According to basic statistics, South Korean newspapers like South Korea Daily, East Asia Daily, Great Korea Daily, KBS TV station and periodicals like North Korea and Unification of Korea have reported in recent years dozens of news or articles on people fleeing North Korea. The titles are various like 3.5 Million North Korean Citizens Starved to Death Since 1995 and 300 Thousand Refugees Heading for China. Some civil organizations from time to time hold news release or press conference to announce the so-called situation of refugees fleeing North Korea and make use of radio and television for a lot of coverage. As to the nature of people fleeing North Korea, the views of different parties in South

Korea are the same?they call these people refugees. But the different point is that some civil organizations call them refugees or even political refugees based on the claim that if these people are sent back to North Korea, they will be persecuted because of treason. Therefore, this is a political issue. Meanwhile, the government claims that people fleeing North Korea are economic refugees seeking a living and wants to define this issue as a human right one. To serve their political purposes, some organizations and social institutes claim to help refugees and exert pressure on South Korean government and international organizations. The not-in-office party also avails of this opportunity to press the government to make diplomatic contact with Chinese government from the perspective of human right. Therefore, if this issue is not dealt with properly, it may cause serious international political problems and put both Chinese and South Korean governments in a difficult situation.

Thirdly, putting on China unfair diplomatic pressure.

People fleeing North Korea to China has put undeserved diplomatic pressure on China. In September 1999, Dawei Wu, Chinese ambassador to South Korea, pointed out in a seminar held by the South Korean Forum Financial Group that, "There are many North Korean citizens going between China and North Korea, but most of them go to their relatives or friends...How to treat them is the business of China and North Korea." On March 14<sup>th</sup>.2002, Qiyue Zhang, a spokesman of Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said, "China and North Korea is friendly neighbor. The personal interchanging has been more all long between both countries, and there is a phenomenon of illegally cross boundary. The Chinese position is that we always oppose illegally cross boundary. We deal with them according to international laws, Chinese laws and referencing to international prevalence method while this phenomenon appears. To these people, we have constantly treated them well with humanitarianism. " The majority of North Koreans come to China for food. This is a pure economic problem. As stipulated by the international laws, " people fleeing their home country for pure economic reasons cannot be counted as refugees." The people fleeing North Korea is not refugee by their purpose of illegal cross boundary. And China and North Korea have signed the agreement to extradite illegal boundary crossers. China deals with the issue of people fleeing North Korea according to this agreement, bears extraordinary extra economic burden and loss and gives North Korea as much aid as possible. However, the party to be blames is not North Korea and China instead has been pressed. This is totally unfair.

Fourthly, the issue of people fleeing North Korea has significant influence in the international society. It is changing direction to seriously harming the relations among China and the correlated countries.

Recently, a new trend of people fleeing North Korea appears. Since early of this year, there continuously have been many incidents in which some with unknown identity break in the foreign embassies in China. It was proved that these people with unknown identity are all North Korean latterly. The issue that North Korean breaks in foreign embassies in China has caused bad international impact.

Such as 25 peoples fleeing North Korea broke in Spanish Embassy in China on 14<sup>th</sup> March 2002, 1 person fleeing North Korea broke in German Embassy in China on 25<sup>th</sup> April, 2

peoples fleeing North Korea broke in American Embassy in China on 26<sup>th</sup> April, 2 peoples fleeing North Korea broke in Canadian Embassy in China on 16<sup>th</sup> May, many peoples fleeing North Korea broke in South Korea Embassy in China on 23<sup>th</sup> May, 2 peoples fleeing North Korea broke in Canadian Embassy in China on 8<sup>th</sup> June, 14 peoples fleeing North Korea broke in South Korea Embassy in China on 9–13<sup>th</sup> June, etc. The events that people fleeing North Korea broke in foreign embassies happened again and again, it brings about greatly security pressure to Chinese police, creates a lot of working burden to Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and increases the complex factors to the relations among China and the correlated countries. Some politician and media in some countries issue unconscionable opinion on public affairs and seize opportunity to China. Even American admitted: “The events of breaking in embassies have caused the heavy burden to China.”

If analyzing these events, we can discover three common characteristics: first, all the peoples who break in the embassies are persons with unknown identity; second, the final purpose place where all of North Korean successfully entering the foreign embassies want to go is South Korea; third, all the people who break in the embassies have been helped by third country. The following international impact ought to be recognized from this.

1. It seriously threatens the security of the foreign embassies in China. Chinese guards can not affirm the person who is breaking in the foreign embassies in China is a people fleeing North Korea or a terrorist while the event happens, and the terrorist penetrate everywhere.
2. It greatly harms the friend relation between China and South Korea. It is not accidental that continuously appeared events which some with unknown identity broke in the foreign embassies in China. It is the result that some organization and person plot and instigate, and it is the result that South Korean government connives and encourages. Because South Korea government compensates and subsidizes the people fleeing North Korea whom arrived South Korea, entice more people fleeing North Korea to adventure imitating.
3. It deteriorates relation between China and Japan. On 8<sup>th</sup> May, 5 peoples fleeing North Korea broke in Japanese Embassy in Chinese Shenyang, it caused a disturbance between two countries. This event provides a pretext for Japanese far right force, a few politicians even spread abroad that want to ponder on the relation between Japan and China again, and suggest that Japan discontinues economic aid to China.
4. It brings out the unfavorable influence on the relation between China and North Korea. Perhaps North Korea has thought losing the face. China is in a dilemma.
4. It extremely harms the image of Chinese foreign affair in international society.
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### **The cause of the people fleeing North Korea phenomenon**

Firstly, years of economic hardship and famine in North Korea cause hungry people to run away for a living.

According to relevant estimate, the population of North Korea is 22 million. If we consider 300 kilograms of grain needed per person a year, then the whole country needs 6.6 million tons grain. Plus one million tons seeds and feeds, it needs 7.6 million grain a year. If we consider 250 kilograms of grain needed per person a year, then the whole country needs 5.5 million tons grain. Plus one million tons seeds and feeds, it needs 6.5 million a year. However, the real grain output is like this: in the 1980s it was 5 to 6 million tons; in the 1990s it dropped to 4 to 5 million tons; since 1993, it has been around 3 million tons. On March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1998, the Flood Control Committee, an North Korean government section, announced a set of figures: 4.82 million tons of grain is need a year, but in 1997 the real grain output is 2.68 million tons, short of over 2 million tons. In 1998, North Korea produced 1.461 tons paddy, 1.941 million tons of corn, 110 thousand tons of bean, and 365 thousand tons of other grains. The total was 3.886 tons. In 1999, the agriculture was better, with 5 million tons of grain output. The famine was relieved a little bit and the number of illegal boundary crossers dropped. In 2000, the grain output was 4.8 million tons. Considering the scarce gain reserve, the grain supply in North Korea has been in seriously shortage for the recent years.

The sharp reduction of grain output is linked with fewer farmland and natural disaster, and is also directly related to the economic decline since 1980s. In late 1980s, the economic growth rate of North Korea was around 3 percent. Entering 1990s, it fell for nine years consecutively, resulting in the severe shortage of agricultural production materials like fertilizer. The severe grain shortage has caused the failure of normal grain supply. In all, recent years of severe famine is the most important reason for North Koreans to flee to China.

Secondly, the North Korean authority' s attitude of superficial forbidding and actual letting go as well as the lax frontier management is another factor of groups of North Korea cross the boundary.

Thousands of North Koreans illegally entering Chinese frontier area is contributable to the North Korean policy. The open stance of the North Korean government is to forbid its citizens from illegally leaving the country, but actually they let loose these illegal crossers. For North Korean citizens, illegal crossing of the boundary is against the law. As stipulated by Article 47 of North Korean criminal law, North Korean citizens who betray their country and people, escape to other countries or the enemy side, or have carried out spy activity, or help enemy, will be sentenced to over 7 years of labor punishment for the anti-revolutionary behavior of betraying North Korea. Those committing severe crimes will be sentenced to death and be deprived of all property according to their crimes. It is said that the government once publicly punished such acts, but later when large numbers of hungry people swarmed to cross the boundary river to beg for food, the authority acquiesced. The North Korean authority openly forbids illegal boundary crossing, but in fact it lets loose these people. An evidence is that many old or sick people succeed in crossing the boundary. According to our knowledge, North Korean keeps strict guard along the Tumen River and Yalu River boundary, with dense sentry posts full of frontier soldiers and numerous hidden posts. Under such strict guard, there are still a group of old and sick crossing the river, which displays the fact that the North Korean government is actually letting them cross the boundary illegally. This attitude also find proof in the illegal crossing of those juvenile tramps called "gaozaibee" . In China there are many juvenile tramp beggars who are called "gaozaibee" by North Korea. They are seen in not only frontier cities, but also big inland cities like Shenyang. From this, we can conclude that

the North Korean authority lets loose of those illegal boundary crossers who come to China to beg for a living.

The emphasis of prevention of illegal boundary crossing is placed on preventing anti-government people or people with religion propaganda tendency from leaving or entering the boundary. The North Korea authority has placed the maintenance of national security in an important position. So of course they place the emphasis of preventing illegal boundary crossing on the strict prevention of anti-government people, people with religion propaganda tendency and spies. The frontier authority punishes severely those who are political suspects and let go those who they believe are pure beggars. Generally when people who cross the boundary to beg are sent back or caught by the North Korean government, they will be released from the prison a few days later. Therefore, many beggars do not care about the detainment of the government. In order to seek a livelihood for themselves or their family, they will keep on crossing the boundary when they are released. However, this is not the case with suspects. Since 1999, North Korea has taken strict measures to prevent people from illegally crossing the boundary. It is said that this policy is adopted according to the government's principle of preventing the entry of spies from South Korea.

Thirdly, In North Korean frontier area, fine substitute for enforcing law, corruption is so widespread that bribery of frontier departments and acquiescence in illegal boundary crossing.

During investigating, many peoples fleeing North Korea talked about that they once bribed to frontier guarders of North Korea, the guarders opened their one eye and closed another eye and permitted them crossing the boundary. In case they were caught as they couldn't bribe frontier guarders in advance of crossing the boundary, it happened frequently that they handed over to frontier guarders the amercement and got crossing freely. We can't know if this kind of fine substitute for enforcing law is either the measure of North Korean authorities or the local policy of North Korean frontier station. But it carried the following result. If having money, people fleeing North Korea can cross the boundary freely. Perhaps this is another important reason which a lot of people fleeing North Korea illegally crossing the boundary.

In addition, there is another objective reason. Chinese people in the frontier area sympathize with and take in people fleeing North Korea crossing the boundary illegally and Chinese police of frontier defense department is not enough. It causes that a lot of North Koreans can illegally cross the boundary entering in Chinese frontier area.

### **The analysis of the social reality of North Korea**

During investigation we met some illegal boundary crossers. They come from Pyongyang, Haizhou, Qingjin, Xianxing, Maoshan and Pingannandao and have received secondary education. They are soldiers, middle school teachers, workers, farmers, technicians, "people's monitor" (equivalent of the director of the citizen's committee) and jobless young people. Through them we get to know some social reality of North Korea.

Firstly, the economic crisis and severe food shortage in North Korea have caused that national grain supply system is in paralysis in fact.

One North Korean woman who crossed the boundary told us that the government grain ration has almost stopped since the great flood in 1995. In 1998, Qingjin city and Maoshan city only rationed grain four times on the New Year's Day, birthday of Kim Il Sung, birthday of Kim Jong Il and National Day respectively. However, only two days of grain was rationed each time, which means only the grain of 8 out of the 365 days are rationed and the rest has to be the responsibility of citizens. And this is not unique to Qingjin and Maoshan. Rich people can buy grain and other food at high price in the free market that is called farmer's market in North Korea, while the poor can only eat tree bark, grass root and wild vegetable. Due to severe shortage of commodities, the price in the free market is surprisingly high and is far beyond the reach of worker class. The salary of North Korean is very low. The monthly pay of an ordinary worker is only 80 to 100 Won and that of the middle to higher class is no more than 150 Won. How can they pay for the expensive rice that sells at 80 Won per kilogram with such low salary? Not to mention the fact that in some places no salary has been available for a long time.

Secondly, continuous famine causes the sharp reduction of population.

In the recent few years, it is undisputable fact that the famine in North Korea has starved many people to death, but there is no agreement as to how severe the famine is. Huang Changye, secretary of the Secretariat of the North Korea Labor Party who fled to South Korea in February 1997 recently published a memoir entitled I Have Found the Truth of History, which says, "According to the cadres in the Department of Organization, one million people were starved to death in 1995." "I think in 1997 and 1998, at least one million people were dead of hunger each year." In addition, according to the estimates of the South Korean Our National Mutual Assistance Buddhist Movement Headquarter, between August 1995 to May 1998, 3 million were dead altogether. Our research finding also indicates that the above estimation has certain ground. One boundary crosser said that the North Koreans have eaten up all the rice roots. They mix 10 kilograms of rice roots with one kilograms of corn. After grinded, the flour mixture is used to make soup; they also grind the corn with the corncob into flour, mix it with wild vegetable and cook porridge. A woman from Qingjin said that the women's fate is the most miserable. In order to feed their husband and children, they often have to walk several miles to the countryside to exchange for grain. Because of hunger and exhaustions, many die on the road.

Thirdly, women doing small business have become the main means for ordinary people to survive.

In order to earn a living, except for very few women who do technical work or work in the joint ventures, most women, including career women, have become the small business people. They sell daily items, clothes and foodstuff. Many of them take daily items from city to the countryside and then bring grain from the countryside back to the city. There are also some international profiteers. According to the boundary crossers, 40 percent of the young and middle age women work in the market, while 60 percent move between city and countryside or frontier and inland.

## Conclusions

It has led to people fleeing North Korea by the famine initially, but now, it develops and changes the issue with political nature and international character. Many countries are

involved, and the international relation becomes more complexity from this. So, though a day comes when North Korea is in the famine crisis no longer, to solve the issue of people fleeing North Korea will be still very difficult.