North Korea’s Refugees: A Window into North Korea and A Source of Humanitarian Concern

Marcus Noland
Peterson Institute and East-West Center
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Overview

- North Korea presents national security and broader human security challenges
- Refugees of interest for two reasons
  - Humanitarian concern
  - As “window” into North Korea
- Two surveys
  - China, 2004-05, 1,300+ respondents, Yoonok Chang and associates
  - South Korea, November 2008, 300 respondents, Haggard and Noland
- Caveat self-selection, representativeness
- Policy recommendations
Who are the refugees?, I

- Mostly prime age adults
- More women than men
- Mostly from the Northeast provinces
Who are the refugees?, II

- Typically high school educated worker—responses contradict regime educational attainment claims
- Most from “wavering” class
- Parental backgrounds suggest little socio-economic mobility
Why do they leave?

- Mostly “economic motivations” bound up in regime practices
- North Korea criminalizes exit-refugees sur place
- Reveal considerable anxiety about repatriation
Life in North Korea: Background

- Famine largely product of state failure
- 30 percent of respondents in China survey and 33 percent of respondents in South Korea survey report death of family member during 1990s famine
- Marketization from the bottom up to survive
- State attitudes toward reform ambivalent
Life in North Korea: Hunger & Aid

- Many unaware of aid program (43 percent China, 56 percent South Korea)
- Minority believe receive aid (4 percent China, 33 percent South Korea)—profoundly embittered group
- Most believe aid went to army, party, government officials

Who Receives Most of the Food Aid

- Army: 67.4%
- Government and Party Officials: 28.7%
- General Public: 1.6%
- Do not know: 2.3%
Economy: Grassroots Marketization and Policy Ineffectiveness

In addition to regular work duties, I engaged in the following activities:

- Private Trading: 61.2%, 77.3%, 72.5%
- August 3 unit: 12.3%, 21.5%, 13.0%

The nature of my work changed:

- Totally Disagree: 34.4%
- Disagree: 17.2%
- Neutral: 28.7%
- Agree: 13.9%
- Totally Agree: 12.8%
- Unclear/Don’t know: 51%

Government's 2005 attempt to revive PDS - Effect on your access to food:

- Increased my access to food: 23.3%
- No change in my access to food: 20.9%
- Reduced my access to food: 55.8%

The Government frequently changed the rules governing market activities:

- Totally Disagree: 19.9%
- Disagree: 11.7%
- Neutral: 12.8%
- Agree: 51%
- Totally Agree: 11.7%
- Unclear/Don’t know: 20.9%
“Partial” Reforms Associated with an Increase in Corruption, Inequality and Disaffection

- Corruption increased
  - Totally Disagree: 35.3%
  - Disagree: 5.7%
  - Neutral: 28.7%
  - Agree: 18.9%
  - Totally Agree: 4.9%
  - Unclear/Don’t know: 17.2%

- Had to pay bribes to engage in private activity
  - Totally Disagree: 2.6%
  - Disagree: 4.1%
  - Neutral: 8.2%
  - Agree: 50%
  - Totally Agree: 32.1%

- Society became more unequal
  - Totally Disagree: 28.7%
  - Disagree: 8.2%
  - Neutral: 55.7%

- I was better off
  - Totally Disagree: 18.9%
  - Disagree: 21.3%
  - Neutral: 17.2%
  - Agree: 34.4%
  - Totally Agree: 4.9%
Changing Pathways to Advancement

The best way to get ahead in North Korea is...

- Famine Era: Become a government or party official (73.0%), Join the army (8.1%), Engage in business (12.2%), None of the above (2.7%)
- Post Famine: Become a government or party official (83.8%), Join the army (12.2%), Engage in business (2.7%), None of the above (1.3%)
- Post Reform: Become a government or party official (76.3%), Join the army (17.8%), Engage in business (2.0%), None of the above (3.9%)

The easiest way to make money in North Korea is...

- Famine Era: Work hard at assigned job (74.3%), Engage in market activities (4.1%), Engage in corrupt or criminal activities (14.9%), None of the above (7.7%)
- Post Famine: Work hard at assigned job (74.3%), Engage in market activities (2.7%), Engage in corrupt or criminal activities (17.6%), None of the above (5.4%)
- Post Reform: Work hard at assigned job (66.5%), Engage in market activities (0.7%), Engage in corrupt or criminal activities (29.0%), None of the above (3.8%)
Crimes and punishments, I

- Most know of kwan-li-so (political prison/slave labor camp)
- Most believe incarceration unjust
- Almost half had been detained by criminal or political police
Crimes and punishments, II

- Most incarcerated without trial
- Most in jip-kyul-so (misdemeanor facility) or no-dong-dan-ryeon-dae (labor training camp), some in kyo-wha-so (felony facility) or kwan-li-so.
- Average incarceration between one week and one month
Crimes and Punishments, III

- **Forced Starvation**
  - China: 90%
  - South Korea: 71%

- **Executions**
  - China: 27%
  - South Korea: 51%

- **Death from Torture/Beating**
  - China: 60%
  - South Korea: 27%

- **Killing Newborns**
  - China: 5%
  - South Korea: 7%

- **Medical Experimentation**
  - China: 55%
  - South Korea: 0%
Psychological dimensions

- Most would be diagnosed with PTSD in clinical setting
- Experiences in North Korea highly correlated with current psychological state, particularly
  - Denial of aid
  - Famine experiences
  - Incarceration
- Demographic correlates
  - Age, gender
  - But not regional origin--reassuring

"Current Situation is Hopeless"

- [41.4% Agree]
- [12.9% Neutral]
- [3.9% Disagree]
- [12.9% Strongly disagree]
- [29.0% Strongly agree]
The Exit Poll: “Are You Better Off Today?”

North Korea's Economy is getting better

Kim Jong Il's regime is getting better

Inner pie- Chinese Survey, Outer pie- South Korean Survey
Life Beyond North Korea

- Frequent complaints about exploitation in China
- Preferences for permanent resettlement
  - US attracts younger, better educated respondents
  - More might prefer China if policies changed
- Most want unification
Policy recommendations

- Continue to attempt to engage North Korea
  - Emphasize inevitability of a human rights discussion
  - Demand UN/ICRC access to prison camps
  - Emphasize integrity of humanitarian aid program
  - Develop Sullivan-type Principles
- Reach out: Break down information barriers
- In absence of North Korean willingness to engage: get people out of North Korea
  - Encourage China to uphold commitments
  - Work with South Korea and others
Thank you for your attention