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North Korean defectors, who have staked their lives on escape to freedom, deserve the world's help - claims campaigner

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For North Korean defectors fleeing their country, crossing into Laos from China used to mean they were almost out of danger - close to reaching the welcoming embrace of South Korean diplomats in Thailand and, from there, South Korea. Well over 25,000 North Koreans fled their country in the last decade and increasingly many are using the route. But when Laos arrested nine young North Korean defectors on May 10, and then China acceded to their forced return, it may have imperiled a key underground transit route' leaving North Koreans on the run with even fewer places to hide.

The seven male and two female North Koreans, at least five of whom are children, now face a possible lifetime in the North Korean gulag. Human Rights Watch has interviewed other North Korean defectors who were previously caught and returned to North Korea from China and in all cases they faced interrogation and torture followed by a lengthy incarceration in a forced labor camp.

A senior officer of the North Korea Security Department, who worked on the North Korea-China border and then later defected, told us in 2011 that "every captured defector in my area was sent to me" and he described the torture during interrogations of defectors. He said "psychological suffering is first - they are put in solitary confinement and minimum food given, only enough for surviving. A person saying nothing will be beaten. Depending on the reaction, each beating will be different." The officer continued that those identified as having South Korean links suffered the worst treatment.

Following interrogation and torture, these nine youths will likely be bound for long imprisonment since Kim Jong-Un will want to make an example of the nine to discourage others from attempting to flee. Despite protests from various governments and the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, we will probably never see these nine people again.

Quite possibly, they are destined for the 're-education centres', where forced labour and physical abuse take their toll. Or even worse, given the high profile of their case and the fact that they were arrested in the presence of two South Koreans, they could be bound for the much feared political prisoner penal camps from which few ever emerge again.

North Korea's Ministry of Public Security adopted a decree in 2010 making defection a crime of "treachery against the nation". Since taking power after the death of his father, Kim Jong Un has presided over a major crackdown that has cut clandestine departures from North Korea by at least half. What was once a the torrent of North Korean defectors, escaping with their stories and insights into the world's most closed country, is now shrinking to a trickle as it becomes much more difficult to run the gauntlet from the North Korea border all the way to Thailand.

One important explanation for Pyongyang's crackdown on fleeing citizens is the new international diaspora of North Koreans that maintain diversified links back to the country, often helping fund the escape of relatives. Chinese mobile phones are in the hands of many North Koreans and overseas communications is breaking down the isolation of the country and the control of North Korean authorities.

Adding to the mix are other external elements that pose a danger to Pyongyang's absolute social and political controls such as an influx of money connected to people smuggling, cross-border trade, bribery of local officials, contraband goods including CDs and DVDs of Chinese and South Korean entertainment and news shows - and increased movement of people for trade and flight in contravention of North Korea's strict regime of travel permissions.

As the international community mulls the fate of these nine North Korean refugees - and they were clearly entitled to asylum since they faced severe punishments based on the fact that they fled in the first place - an agenda needs to put into action to ensure their sacrifice

was not in vain. First, the upcoming UN Commission of Inquiry into human rights abuses in North Korea should spotlight the fate of fleeing North Koreans in China, Laos and elsewhere.

Second, China should be castigated for its violation of international law in forcing refugees back to North Korea. The UN must demand made that Beijing not repeat such actions. Finally, concerted diplomatic and donor pressure must be applied to the Lao government to let North Koreans pass in peace on their way to Thailand. Defectors, who have staked their lives on escape to freedom, deserve the world's help.

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