

Perilous Journeys: North Korean Famine and Flight to China and Beyond

The International Crisis Group

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By The International Crisis Group

With the worsening food crisis in North Korea in the mid-1990s, thousands of people from the food-deficit areas of the country crossed the border into China. While many returned to North Korea with food or money, some stayed in China. Several thousand of these made their way, usually through great hardship, to South Korea.

The North Korean food situation, while better than the mid-1990s, remains precarious. The flow of people into China might again increase this winter and early spring, after food stocks run out. China remains at best indifferent, at worst hostile, to the North Korean border-crossers. To maintain good relations with Pyongyang and yet reach out to its Korean brothers and sisters, Seoul has engaged in largely quiet diplomacy to bring thousands of asylum-seekers to South Korea. The U.S. government has spoken very loudly about what China, South Korea, and North Korea should do to mitigate the situation, but itself has

accepted only a handful of North Korean refugees.

The International Crisis Group has conducted wide-ranging interviews with North Korean refugees in China, South Korea and Thailand, the people who ferry them across borders, government officials, and humanitarian workers. The ICG's recent report reminds us that the issue of North Korean refugees has become a semi-permanent feature of the political and economic landscape of East Asia, north and south. The lives of these vulnerable people cannot and should not be ignored. While the governments concerned may cite sensitive questions of sovereignty, security, and capacity, they should nevertheless coordinate their different strategies to protect the human rights of the truly disadvantaged.

The ICG report makes recommendations, with the interests of the refugees at the fore, to the major governments involved. It points out, for example, that while the US has actively encouraged refugees to flee North Korea, it has to

date accepted only twenty refugees. Noting that mechanisms are now in place that could enable the US to accept more refugees, the report calls on the government to do so. Left undiscussed, however, are the consequences of US encouragement of refugee flight for the US-North Korea relationship. John Feffer

The article is available here (http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/north_korea/erilous_journeys_the_plight_of_north_koreans_in_china_and_beyond.pdf).

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