

# Activists Say China Complicit in Suffering of NK Refugees

## Refugees

from North Korea and activists are gathering in Seoul, South Korea, this week to highlight human rights violations in the closed communist nation. But their attention is also turning to China, which they say is often complicit in North Koreans' suffering.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) estimate anywhere from 30,000 to 250,000 refugees from North Korea are living in China, either in border areas or deeper inland. But China remains impervious to the refugees' plight.

"China fears being flooded by refugees if they show compassion," said Suzanne Scholte, co-chair of the North Korea Freedom Coalition, which is hosting its seventh-annual North Korea Freedom Week in Seoul through Saturday. "But refugee flows aren't going to collapse the [North Korean] regime. If that was going to happen, it would have happened already during the famine, so their argument doesn't hold

water.”

(Read “‘Pinpricks’ of Truth Making Way Into North Korea”)

Few  
refugees are Christians when they emerge from North Korea, but  
the whispered  
advice among  
refugees is to “head for a cross,” signaling a Chinese church  
that may  
assist  
them, according to a February 2009

National Geographic report.

Since China  
will not  
allow the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees access  
to border  
areas,  
Chinese Christians work with Christian NGOs to provide an  
“underground  
railroad”  
moving refugees via several routes to safety, most often in  
South  
Korea.

Chun  
Ki-Won, director  
of Christian NGO Durihana, admits that some of the refugees  
adopt  
Christianity  
to win favor with their rescuers, but others retain and  
strengthen their  
faith  
on arrival in South Korea.

China  
insists that the

refugees are economic migrants and pays police a bounty to arrest and return them to North Korea. On arrival, North Korean officials pointedly question the refugees about contact with Chinese Christians or Christian NGOs. If any contact is admitted, execution or imprisonment is likely, according to David Hawke's 2005 report, "A Prison Without Bars."

As one refugee told Hawke, "Having faith in God is an act of espionage."

Still others choose to return to North Korea with Bibles and other Christian resources at great risk to themselves. For example, officials in June 2009 publicly executed Ri Hyon-Ok, caught distributing Bibles in Ryongchon, a city near the Chinese border, South Korean activists reported.

Scholte noted that North Koreans don't want to leave. "They leave because of Kim Jong-Il," she said. "Those [North Korean refugees] in South Korea want to go back and take

freedom  
with them.”

Two U.S.  
Christians  
entered North Korea in recent months with the same goal in  
mind. Robert  
Park, an  
evangelical Christian missionary, crossed the border on Dec.  
25 with a  
letter  
calling for Kim Jong-Il to resign. Officials immediately  
arrested Park,  
according to the regime’s Korean Central News Agency. He was  
later  
sentenced to  
eight years of hard labor but released in late February after  
making  
what many  
experts believe was a forced confession.

Fellow  
activist Aijalon  
Mahli Gomes entered North Korea on Jan. 25, the same news  
agency  
reported.  
Officials sentenced Gomes to nine years of hard labor and  
fined him 70  
million  
new Won (\$518,520).  
At  
press time Gomes remained in detention.