

# Survival Strategy: the Human Face of North Korean Hunger

Wednesday 14 May 2008, by [CHANG Henri](#) (Date first published: 7 May 2008).

## Women who fled starvation in North Korea face still more risks in China

A mass of jet-black hair accenting her thin, white face, she has the look of a telegenic cosmetics model in Seoul, an image hardly evocative of a tough officer in the North Korean People's Army. And yet that was what she said she had been before illegally crossing into China by wading through the chilly water of the Tumen River one night last September.

Today the 28-year-old woman is a fugitive on the run in a northeastern city in China, trading on her looks to live the precarious life of a bar hostess with neither passport nor work permit. Her only hope is to earn enough money to pay a broker to take her and her mother to South Korea, she said, a dangerous journey of several thousand kilometers disguised as Chinese travelers on a train or in a car, eventually to reach the border with Thailand, Laos or Vietnam where they would ask for asylum. Until then, she is constantly on the move to avoid arrest by the Chinese police, never spending more than a few days in one place.

Her plan is not impossible, given that a thousand other refugees like her have already done so. Thailand now hosts four or five hundred such refugees waiting to be flown to Seoul. The risky journey toward asylum is necessary if they want to avoid being arrested and sent back to the North, where public execution may await those who "betray" their country by making contact with South Korean relief workers who try to aid refugees in China.

The food shortage in North Korea has grown worse over the past year, the woman said, with rations dwindling even for military personnel, a privileged group that has almost never run out food. In the woman's case, she had more reasons to escape. When she was discharged from eight years of active military service last year, her party unit gave her an assignment that she found beneath her rank. She was assigned a factory job, with the party determining that her family was of worker-class background.

*"In the North, once you're from a worker's family, you are always treated as a worker,"* she complained. In order to survive starvation and get ahead, she said, *"you must either engage in trade or do marketplace peddling."* Corruption or connections are essential to land a good job, she said.

When a friend who had already escaped to China sent her money to bribe her way across the border, she was ready. She paid 3,000 yuan (US\$429.41) to a border security guard to allow her to slip across the Tumen River estuary separating the countries. Later, she paid a middleman 7,000 yuan to smuggle her mother out.

One needs to be extraordinarily tough and brave to plan an escape from North Korea, said another woman interviewed in a village outside Tumen city. Five years ago, the woman said, she was twice apprehended and sent back by Chinese border patrols. On her second repatriation, to the mining town of Onsong, she was severely beaten by her interrogators, who demanded to know if she had

established contacts with South Korean relief workers. She screamed at them, shouting at the top of her voice that she was able to escape because she had bribed border guards.

*"They were so terrified their superiors might hear me that they hurriedly tossed me out of the building,"* said the tiny, gaunt woman. She escaped once more, this time by jumping out of a moving Chinese police van, extricating her thin wrist from the handcuff that bound her to another escapee. Today, she is in hiding in a village not far from the border, living with a Chinese farmer twice her age.

For this coal mine conveyor belt operator, the overriding motivation was hunger. There was never enough food, with rice given only three times a year on state anniversaries. Food was so scarce people lived on corn porridge, with pork provided once a year.

Even from the relative safety of China today, she would not criticize the regime or Kim Jong Il himself. But the attractive army officer turned hostess was more forthcoming: *"Look at China,"* she suggested, *"it's full of food everywhere, likewise, our fatherland must open up to better feed our people."*

When asked if she thought economic opening was possible without bringing down the Kim dynasty with it, she fell silent, clearly afraid to speak her mind.

Tighter security, with North Korea reinforcing border troops and China adding barbed-wire fencing to key sections along the estuary and installing remote camera equipment, has made it much harder to cross into China without detection. Compared to last year, the refugee outflow has dropped almost to zero. But as the threat of famine steadily rises across North Korea, that can change, Korean analysts in China warn that shutting the border tight may increase deaths from hunger. One such analyst with a good knowledge of developments inside the North questioned the figure of up to two million people perishing in the last famine of 1995-2001. He said the real figure was much higher.

With men finding it harder to look for jobs and shelter in China, they said more refugees will be women. Human traffickers help move women for a fee, turning them over to brothels in major cities like Qingdao or Tianjin. Some even run underground transportation to the Thai or Vietnam borders for a hefty share of government-provided settlement payouts disbursed in Seoul.

*"Borders are certainly tighter than before,"* conceded the former army officer. *"But they will not stop hungry people determined to leave,"* she said.

---

**P.S.**

From Asia Sentinel.

[http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1189&Itemid=31](http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1189&Itemid=31)