

#MissionKorea

Humanitarian Report on North Korean Defector Protection

Marie Seshat Landry
Marie Landry's Spy Shop
<https://marielandryceo.com>

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“Where liberty is denied, solidarity must rise.”

Executive Summary

#MissionKorea is a global humanitarian awareness initiative developed by Marie Landry's Spy Shop to illuminate the dangerous and often invisible paths taken by North Korean defectors in their search for freedom. This document synthesizes publicly available information to support civil society, human rights defenders, and policy advocates in building safer, legal frameworks for refugee resettlement. It does not facilitate or coordinate escape efforts but seeks to strengthen the global response to one of the most under-addressed human rights crises of our time.

1 Background

North Korea remains one of the most repressive regimes in the world. The right to mobility, free expression, religion, and access to truthful information is heavily suppressed. Thousands have risked their lives to escape through China and Southeast Asia, facing imprisonment, human trafficking, or forced repatriation.

2 Escape Pathway Overview

This section outlines the general structure of known escape routes used by North Korean defectors as documented by humanitarian NGOs, academic studies, and survivor testimonies. It does not contain actionable or real-time instructions. These summaries aim to educate policymakers, journalists, and concerned citizens on the realities of the defection process.

2.1 Phase 1: Entry into China

Defectors typically cross the Tumen or Yalu River into northeastern China. Due to high risks of detection and deportation, this phase requires extreme caution. Surveillance is extensive, and human trafficking is a common threat.

2.2 Phase 2: Underground Safe Houses

Humanitarian organizations such as Liberty in North Korea (LiNK), Helping Hands Korea, and Durihana Mission operate informal networks of safe houses to shelter defectors in China. These networks operate clandestinely due to Chinese law criminalizing such assistance.

2.3 Phase 3: Overland to Southeast Asia

Survivors may travel thousands of kilometers overland to Laos, Vietnam, or Thailand—countries where asylum may be declared. Thailand has historically allowed defectors to reach South Korean diplomatic missions.

2.4 Phase 4: Embassy Asylum and Resettlement

Upon reaching a safe country, individuals should contact:

- South Korean embassies or consulates
- UNHCR field offices
- U.S., Canadian, or EU embassies (in rare, high-risk cases)

Resettlement most often occurs in South Korea with legal refugee protections.

Lived Reality: The Human Toll of Escape

Survivors of North Korea’s escape routes report walking for weeks across frozen rivers, hiding in shipping containers, and facing arrest or forced prostitution. Many are children. One defector shared:

“I had to crawl through the mud, blindfolded. Every noise was a gun. I didn’t know if I’d live the next hour.” – *Anonymous, 2018 testimony via LiNK*

This document exists so that their stories are not forgotten, and their path to freedom becomes safer for others.

3 Policy Recommendations

1. **Redefine North Korean defectors as *prima facie refugees*** under the 1951 Refugee Convention.
2. **Pressure China to end forced repatriation** in violation of international law.

3. **Fund independent safe-house networks through neutral channels.**
4. **Expand information freedom campaigns** using digital and analog tools.
5. **Empower defectors as educators and advocates** for freedom.

4 Digital Solidarity: Join #MissionKorea

- **Journalists:** Investigate and publish real stories.
- **Academics:** Analyze defection patterns and survivor needs.
- **NGOs:** Support field-based protection infrastructure.
- **Governments:** Codify refugee status and expand asylum access.

Use #MissionKorea to unify and mobilize advocacy.

Resources

- Liberty in North Korea (LiNK) – <https://libertyinnorthkorea.org>
- UNHCR – <https://www.unhcr.org>
- Ministry of Unification (ROK) – <https://www.unikorea.go.kr>

Contact

To support or collaborate with #MissionKorea, contact:

Marie Seshat Landry

Marie Landry's Spy Shop

<https://marielandryceo.com>

Email: marielandryceo@gmail.com

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