

Thailand faces dilemma with North Korean refugees

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The Nation (06.11.2006) / HRWF Int. (30.11.2006) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Without doubt, Thailand has now become a haven for fleeing North Koreans wanting to join their families overseas. New arrivals are expected to increase in the coming weeks and months as winter sets in and the new UN-sponsored sanctions take their toll on the North Korean economy and people.

The journeys undertaken by thousands of North Koreans are being facilitated by people working for humanitarian and religious organisations. Some, however, fall into the hands of human traffickers, who force them to pay huge sums for help in slipping across the porous Thai border.

Loose immigration and border controls coupled with lenient treatment have attracted new refugees to Thailand. These people have been diverted from tighter controls and better patrols in Vietnam, Laos and Burma. A few years ago, Vietnam was considered an ideal temporary sanctuary for the North Koreans.

Police round-ups in August and October netted 266 illegal North Koreans in Bangkok, which gave attention to this deepening crisis and dilemma faced by Thailand. For decades, Thailand has dealt with refugees, both political and economic, from neighbouring Burma, Laos and Cambodia. The authorities could easily push these people back or let the international humanitarian organisations step in and provide assistance.

However, the North Koreans are a different matter. Once these asylum seekers reach the Thai border, there can be no pushing them away. The authorities can threaten this, but they would never do it. North Korea is, after all, more than 7,000 kilometres away. As a rule, almost all North Koreans give themselves up to the Thai authorities knowing they will be taken care of by international facilitators and South Korea. Seoul has continued its long policy of relocating all North Korean defectors. The 175 asylum seekers arrested in August from a high-end residential area have all been settled in South Korea.

Obviously, this country will soon be overwhelmed by North Koreans seeking resettlement in third countries. At the end of this week, there will be a backlog of 230 people waiting for repatriation mainly to South Korea. Immigration offices along the northern border are not in a position to counter and stop the influx with their limited resources and personnel.

Thailand needs help because its humanitarian policy can only go so far. Currently, the UNHCR and South Korean government are assisting those who have made it to Thailand. But without additional assistance, the Thai authorities could tighten border controls or send them back to Burma or Laos, which would be disastrous as they would face deportation back to North Korea. These countries are not equipped to handle large numbers of illegal immigrants.

As the situation in North Korea deteriorates following UN sanctions, uncertainty about future economic conditions and the threat of famine, more North Koreans are expected to flee. According to the latest report by the International Crisis Group, famine might return to the North. If that is the case, there will be a great outflow of refugees to China. Another damaging report on North Korea commissioned by former Czech president Václav Havel last month revealed systematic human rights abuses in the totalitarian state and called for a debate in the UN Security Council.

For the time being, the Thai authorities are turning a blind eye to the problem. It is a Catch 22 situation. They do not want to stir up international wrath if the North Koreans are mistreated by them in any way. Since the coup, Thailand's reputation has been at stake and its diplomatic actions are very much under the world's microscope. Any perceived harsh response, other than what has already been happening, will immediately be seized upon by international human rights and non-governmental organisations.

For the Thais, the US Congress is the main concern. They fear that in the future some US congressmen might want to punish Thailand for the coup or come up with new laws that will undermine the role of the military in Thai politics. Therefore, any action on North Korean refugees would immediately draw blood in the Congress.

The North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004 has placed the human rights issues at the centre of US foreign policy and future negotiations with North Korea. The act also allows North Koreans, especially those who have valuable information about the regime and its programmes related to weapons of mass destruction, to get special visas for repatriation. Several North Korean families stuck here have been settled in the US this year under that arrangement.

Thai Immigration does not have an exact count of North Koreans settled in the country. However, it is estimated there are several hundreds, a big increase from 20 years ago when only about 70 were registered as living here. Dozens of North Koreans are studying at Assumption University. Some entrepreneurs are doing well in trading and in the restaurant business. There is a local North Korea-Thailand friendship association to boost ties. Thai editions of the thoughts of Kim Jong-il are available in local bookstores.

To keep up with the rise of Korean fever, mainly from popular South Korean TV dramas, a huge new North Korean restaurant complex was recently opened in the Pattanakarn district. It is a joint venture between local politicians and North Korean investors and it entertains its guests with acrobatic shows and dancing and singing North Korean style.