

## A sordid bargaining

# North Korean Workers in Russian Hell

***On February 16, through numerous events, North Korea celebrated "in people's jubilation" the 64<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il. However, the country still falls a prey to an economic disaster and its population remains a regular victim of shortages. To such an extent that, to pay its debt to Moscow, the state does not refrain from "selling" to Russia some work force subject to tallage.***

By Alain Devalpo, journalist

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"I am not afraid of telling you my story because it is true." The man seems to come right from the depths of the forests of the Far North. Years of efforts are tattooed on his face. "I am from Nampo, in North Korea," he says in a hesitant voice. "I was a driver, I worked for ten years for the government before getting health problems. I have been left penniless. I decided to try my luck by coming to deforestation camps in Russia. I was sent to the camp of Tynda (1).

For several decades, lumbermen have been eating away at the taiga of the Russian Far East, especially in the Amur region, north of the city of Khabarovsk (2). The Russian "Far East" represents 5% of a territory covering a third of the huge federation. A human desert where labor force is getting scarce. For historical and geographical reasons, this region has always maintained privileged relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea). These links have survived the collapse of the Soviet regime. There are regular official meetings. A weekly flight connects Vladivostok with Pyongyang and the railway between both countries has been re-opened.

"In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were three waves of migration of North Korean workers," Mrs Larisa Zabrovskaya, a historian in Vladivostok, sums up. The first one started after WW II and the liberation of Korea. The fish factories then called on North Korean workforce. In the 1950s, these workers and their families numbered about 25,000 people. "The second wave took place after a secret meeting between Leonid Brezhnev and Kim Il-sung (3), in Vladivostok, in 1966. Both leaders decided to send lumbermen to deforestation camps. Their number varied between 15,000 and 20,000 in time."

At that time, they were convicts - criminals or opponents of Kim Jong-il's regime - who were heading to these inhospitable lands where there was no need for barbed wires around the gulags to discourage escapes. It is not the case any more, Mrs. Zabrovskaya continues: "These last few years, president Vladimir Putin and the leader Kim Jong-il met on two occasions. They talked about the North Korean debt, a legacy of the time when the Soviet Union was helping the North Korean ally." Mr Putin is inflexible. Despite the economic deadlock in which North Korea is stuck, there is no question to annul its debt. "To reimburse it, Pyongyang has proposed to go on sending workers. But, no use any more to empty prisons. Volunteers now go

to clearing camps or are employed on construction sites. According to customs statistics, more than 10,000 Koreans in possession of a labor visa cross the border every year." Although this agreement is not secret, the work conditions of these migrants remain surrounded by the biggest mystery.

To collect snatches of information and to rebuild the jigsaw, the collaboration of South Korean pastors who settled in the region is necessary. Out of ethnic solidarity and proselytism, some of them have built up relations with "juche" supporters – the North Korean ideology created by Kim Il-sung and advocating self-sufficiency. It is also necessary to elude the surveillance of the Russian authorities which has increased since two former workers took refuge in the consulates of the United States and South Korea, in Vladivostok, in November 2004.

The meeting with the man who escaped from the cold is taking place in a church, in the middle of a quarter where you can see babuchkas (4) coming back from the banya (public baths). At this point, the man resumes his story. " The working hours vary from one camp to another. I was working in a remote camp for sixteen or seventeen hours every day. Those who were involved in the distribution or in other tasks in the main camp only worked for twelve or thirteen hours. Putting together New Year, Kim Il-sung's birthday, Kim Jong-il's and the anniversary of the creation of the Party, we had one week vacation per year. In winter, it was very cold. During the night, the temperature could fall to -60°. Hands, feet, face, everything was frozen. But the major problem was food. We were only given 150 gr of rice per meal and a salty soup. That was all."

### ***Numerous Volunteers***

To recruit lumbermen, the authorities of Pyongyang paint in glowing colors to the privileged of the regime the possibility of getting rich with foreign currencies by signing a contract for three years or more in Russia. Pushed by the economic crisis, volunteers are not lacking. All of them are members of the Party, all of them are hand-picked: "To come to Russia, there are several conditions," our witness specifies. "You must be in good physical condition. You need the guarantee of official members of the Party. Only married men with a family (who is kept as a hostage) are allowed to come." Many are ready to do anything: "As I was not in good health, I had to pay to be selected."

The more the story progresses, matching up with numerous other testimonies, the more the details weigh like the wood of the trees in the taiga. To run away quickly when a trunk goes crashing down... Many accidents happen at that time, provoke fractures, crush and lead to amputations. And if there are medical doctors in the camps, medicines are lacking or have expired. "If we can pay, we get a better treatment. I was personally injured three times. One day, I was numbed with cold; I was working too slowly and my chest was crushed by a trunk. I was lucky not to die. On another occasion, my leg was injured and I was immobilized for a month without getting any salary."

No possibility to get a treatment in a Russian hospital, camps work cut off from the world. It is strictly forbidden to have contacts outside. Although they are isolated from the neighboring villages, some workers however manage to traffic secretly with the Russians. To do that, they must elude the surveillance of the Powibo members (North Korean security service) who are present on the spot. According to testimonies, any breach of discipline leads to severe punishments. For a quarrel or a

wrong word. For an escape attempt, it is solitary confinement. The companies who are in charge of the camps decide what amount must be produced in agreement with the Russian and North Korean authorities. The wood of better quality, the lower part of the trees, is intended for Russia. The wood of medium quality goes to North Korea. The rest is intended for China or Japan. "I was being given coupons by way of salary. I was told that it was possible to exchange them but I was never able to buy anything with them. I sent some to my family I had left at home. From workers back from Korea, I heard that the shops where we could exchange them were always empty."

During their trip to the camps, the voluntary workers can only briefly catch a glimpse of Vladivostok, the big port of the Japan Sea, through the window of the train. Here too, the workforce is lacking. At the time of the Soviet Union, it was a forbidden area but the city has now got open to the winds of change. It tries to forget the chaos which followed the collapse of the Soviet regime and the building sites are climbing to the clouds. Chinese and North Koreans are welcome to work here. In 2004, the Primorié (5) officially registered the arrival of 262,775 Chinese citizens (most of them ordinary tourists) and 13,294 North Koreans.

"I met more than a hundred workers on the building sites of Vladivostok, and all of them told me they were coming from Pyongyang. I was surprised," the pastor said. "I made some investigation and, that is right, companies prefer to recruit people from the North Korean capital because the cultural shock is less violent to work in a city. Their adaptation is easier. It is also meant to limit escape attempts."

There are six companies, employing about 3,000 workers. "Fast, cheap and hard-working," are the adjectives used by the local press to qualify the *Koretsky* ("Korean" in Russian). "They agree to be paid once the building site is finished," reveals a contractor. Individuals also hire them to build a wall or to repaint an apartment. Of course, everybody in Vladivostok knows that they do not have rosy lives. They often sleep on the building sites, work like beasts of burden, but people think "After all, they earn money."

Wrong. The perversity of Kim Jong-il's regime is boundless (6). The companies mentioned by the pastor do not provide work in exchange of a salary, as we could naively think. The only duty of these North Korean companies is to collect the passports of the workers on their arrival, to keep them under surveillance at their place of residence and finally to levy a tax which partly transferred to Pyongyang. It is up to the workers to find an employer, through personal contacts or advertisements. Whether they get a job or not, the privilege to come to Russia has a price: the equivalent of 250 EUR to be paid every month to the companies. A tidy amount in a region where the salaries are much lower than in Moscow and where a professor earns 125 EUR per month.

It is only by working as a beast on several building sites at the same time that the worker can pay off his "debt," face his daily expenses and maybe save some money. Some give up. "It is too hard and after three years of work, I would like to go back to Korea," explains one of them who has signed up for five years. He lives in one room with three other companions in misfortune and despite his efforts, he has not managed to save up money. Though, he still tries to believe he will manage it: "As soon as I have some money, I will go back to Korea and I will try to go to Malaysia or to Koweit. People say it is possible to earn more."

Whether in deforestation camps, on construction sites or on local farms, the disappointment is great for these people loyal to a regime which offers them hell instead of paradise. Despite the consequences for their families, some only see safety in flight. After working for a year and a half like a slave and discovering he was being fobbed off with empty promises, one of our interlocutors decided to escape: "I ran away one night at about 2 or 3 am. There were four of us. It was impossible to take a train at a station near the camp because the order is not to sell us tickets. We had to bribe a camp driver to take us to a more distant city where we could take a train."

One of the defectors knew some words of Russian but they had to make common cause to survive. "We were always traveling together. We went to a place near the Chinese border where there are uranium mines. For a year, we worked on a construction site depending from a mine. In 1999, we came to Vladivostok with the hope to go to South Korea." To live underground is a bitter trial... "I am always afraid of getting caught by the police. I have been hiding in the region of Vladivostok for six years."

The physiognomy of the North Koreans makes them vulnerable in a region where the police hunt illegal Chinese workers. How many of them hide in Russia? The pastor mentions the number of 2000 scattered all along the Transsiberian railway line where some have settled, 9000 km from Vladivostok to Moscow.

According to the U.N. Convention on Refugees, our interlocutor should be in a position to ask for asylum but the Kreml rejects any application (7). If any of these North Koreans falls in the hands of the police, he will be almost automatically sent back to his country. A one-way ticket to the worst.

- (1) Medium-sized city in the Amur region.
- (2) Khabarovsk, 1000 km north of Vladivostok, is the official capital city of the Russian Far East.
- (3) Founder of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. He died in 1994. His son, Mr. Kim Jong-il succeeded him.
- (4) Familiar name used for grandmothers.
- (5) Region of Vladivostok.
- (6) See Selig S. Harrison, "Derrière la façade du régime de Pyongyang", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, September 1998.
- (7) China's policy is much more repressive. Beijing has put in place a policy of denouncement towards North Korean refugees. Anyone who helps them faces seven years in prison.