

North Korea Freedom Coalition

9/24/09 International Protest to Save North Korean Refugees

Testimonies of North Korean Defectors

Special Eyewitnesses Participating in Events

The “Seo” Family Testimony (Eastern US):

The reason for my defection from North Korea was in the early 1970's when my father was accused of treason by the state. Soon we were expelled to the San-Su-Gap-San area in Yan-gan Province. This area in Yang-gang Province was where all the traitors of the state were sent to. My father was a supporter of Kim Il Sung during the Korean War and went to the North during the war.

This was how I went from living in Pyongyang, to being expelled to Yang-gang Province, thereby losing my opportunity to go to the military or to attend college to study. The societal structure in North Korea is quite different than here in the US; it is a very strictly classified and stratified society. In the village where I spent my 20's, there were some who could not go to the military, some who could not join the Communist Party, and some who could not leave the village boundary at all.

I got married and had 5 children. However during the famine in the 1990's, in 1996, 1997, and 1998, in the span of three years, my children aged 1 ½ years, 1 year old, and a newborn baby all died from malnutrition and starvation and I felt to the core of my being the pathetic and fatal situation North Korea was in. According the words of the elders and old people at that time, the situation of North Korea at that time was worse than during the time of the Japanese occupation of Korea.

The first time I escaped from North Korea was 1998. I ended up in Wang Ching County in China, earning money through a job I found there, and in July of 2002, I was caught by the security forces and repatriated to North Korea.

After much suffering and spending close to a year in detention in North Korea, I escaped again in 2003, and got caught again towards the end of 2004. After being repatriated from the end of 2004 to the middle of 2005, I suffered indescribable and unendurable suffering at the hands of the various North Korean security, detention, prison, and hard labor officials. I was on the verge of death, and at that time I weighed myself wearing all my winter clothes, and instead of my usual weight of 143 pounds, I was down to 77 pounds. No one at that time expected me to live.

Because of my advanced state of weakness due to malnutrition, the authorities realized it would be useless to keep in a labor gang, and a waste of resources to continue to

detain me, and since they expected me to die anyways, they sent me home to die. In my state of hunger and weakened body, I walked 25 miles in two days to reach my home. When I got home my wife was sick and bedridden herself. When I look back now I have no idea and cannot fathom how I got home. I was so weak that I could not walk up the stairs without grabbing on to the handrails.

Thanks to God my health recovered and I started thinking to myself that if I stayed in North Korea my whole family will die; I then took my youngest son and escaped into North Korea gain. This was in the fall of 2005. From this point I realized that I might be caught and repatriated again, and if it happens to me one more time, I will most likely die, and I was determined to escape China and seek freedom; and if I was going to escape and seek freedom in the outside world, I decided I might as well go to the United States. If I were to go to South Korea, I would have no language problems, but I felt that the pro-North sympathizers of the Kim Dae Jung and No Moo Hyun administrations were too strong in the country and feared that I might have to deal with the communists again, and therefore just decided to forgo all that and go to the United States.

Also, when I went to the United States I wanted to take revenge on Kim Jong-il. My own father did so much and was so faithful to the Party and to Kim Il Sung, and it seemed like North Korea just used people for their benefit and when the need was no longer there, they just abandoned my family like we were worse than dogs or pigs. I gritted my teeth every time I thought about the Kim Jong-il regime.

In order to go to the United States I had to bring my wife and my other child out of North Korea. After spending about a year and half in China and saving money, and with the help of my relatives in China, I was able to bring my wife and son out. During this time, I started listening to Radio Free Asia and Voice Of America broadcasts, and plotted to take my revenge on Kim Jong-il when I landed in America. Also, I felt bad about the fact that as a father I was unable to provide education to my sons, who were at the age when all they should be doing was studying. I wanted my sons to go to America and study all they want. From that moment, I listened to the broadcasts daily and prayed to God that an opportunity would open for us to go to America.

Through the broadcasts I called one of the numbers that was broadcast through the radio and requested help. Through one of the staff reporters at VOA I was put in contact with Mr. Steve Kim of 318 Partners, and through his concerted efforts and help our whole family was able to escape China, and via, Laos, finally come to the United States.

I was caught twice by Chinese PSB officials in China and repatriated twice to North Korea. The Chinese officials not only send the North Korea refugees back, but also detailed info/intelligence regarding that particular refugee to their North Korean counterparts, and whatever other personal documents they may have of the refugees, so that when these refugees are repatriated they are sent to political prison camps or suffer a worse fate as those who committed grave political sins. I personally have seen many inmates die from beatings in these prisons. Also, the Chinese officials meticulously go through the personal belongings of the refugees, and confiscate whatever money or personal belongings may be on these refugees, money earned by the refugees through blood, sweat, and tears. What other countries steal the belongings of refugees like China

does? This is unacceptable. Instead of helping the refugees, these people steal and rob from them. During my repatriation I had all my belongs taken from me, though I was able to hide 600RMB by rolling up the money very tightly, swallowing it, and after passing through my system after two days, hiding the money in my anal cavity. If I had money my sentence or punishment could have been lessened or eased.

It is my understanding that there are quite a few numbers of North Korean refugees who desire to come to the United States. However, the waiting period is so long that most give up, and some have no idea how to even come to the US. The Korean embassy officials block information regarding how to go to the US, and to put it simply, the Korean embassy blocks the refugees from trying to go to America.

Our family was able to enter the Korean Embassy in Laos through the help of Mr. Steve Kim in 2008. As soon as we entered the Korean Embassy there was no action from anyone, so the next day I met a Korean embassy employee and told them about my desire to go to America. I was told by the employee that it would be hard to go to the US, to think it over, and tried to steer us into going to South Korea instead. However, I did not bow to pressure and since that was our goal I continued to press them about going to America. If not to America, then to send us to immigration detention center in Thailand (so that we can apply for asylum to the US from there). We stood our ground and waited to go to America, even if other refugees were going to South Korea. After about two or so months we were able to meet an American embassy official and clearly stated our desire to go to the United States to that official. However, we still had to wait long in silence and worry. There was NO ONE to tell us when, how, where, to go. We just prayed and prayed and waited.

The Korean embassy told the owner of the restaurant we ate our meals in to not lend us their phones. So, we could not even get in touch with the outside world. One day while out running some errands, I met a South Korean citizen, a total stranger, and told him my situation, and pleaded with the South Korean to get in touch with Steve Kim of 318 Partners in America. Thankfully through his help I was able to get in touch with Steve Kim and he heard of our plight. After hearing our story Mr. Kim promised to find ways to help. The next time we spoke on the phone Mr. Kim updated us on the situation and what he was doing to help from America, and encouraged us to continue to pray and wait.

Then this past January, we met a Congressional Staff Member from the US Congress and an American embassy official at the South Korean embassy. I found out later, but the Congressional Staff Member's visit was arranged by Mr. Steve Kim and a US-based human rights organization. I've heard that other people were able to come to the US after only three interviews with US officials, whereas we went through 5 to 6 different interviews and meetings to come to the US. Finally in the middle of 2009, after THREE years and NINE months since the time I escaped North Korea and decided to come to America, and after EIGHT months after escaping China to Laos, we finally landed at an airport in America, a scene that was played out many times in our dreams. Once we landed in the United States I realized how much more advanced and rich than China is. Everything was developed and modern beyond my wildest imagination.

These days we go to school to learn English, and work even during the weekends and do our best to adjust to American life. However, we don't have a car so things are somewhat difficult. We cannot speak English that well and we don't own a car, so for the time being we would even consider riding our bikes to work, but our desire is to work in an American business and learn English and work, rather than in a Korean business. I want to be assimilated as soon as possible to the American society so that I can better help the North Korean people who are being fooled by Kim Jong-il. I want to see my kids attend school and earn a living and help those folks who are helping to bring human rights to North Korea and helping refugees.

I thank God for bringing us to America, and for the US government, and to Mr. Steve Kim and 318 Partners and other North Korean human rights organizations for rescuing our family from China and bringing us to America. I would also like to extend my thanks and appreciation to the officials of the US government who are continuing to help us. Thank you. We love America, and God bless the USA.

September 9th, 2009

The Seo Family

Mrs. Park's Testimony (Southwest US)

Hello, my name is H. Park.

I escaped North Korea in the summer of 2003, and entered the United States in 2009.

I arrived in Thailand in the spring of 2007, and spent three years at an immigration detention center in Bangkok, and after much hardship and difficulty, came to the United States

For three long years, not months, I lived with my young child in the detention center, and one of the hardest things to endure for me while in the detention center was the overcrowding in the detention cells; there were over 400 in the cell my child and I stayed in, and there was no space to stand, let alone sleep, and so we had to sleep in the bathroom, and the hardest was during mealtimes when we had to hold our dishes in our hands in the bathroom and eat in there.

Especially hard for me was to see my young child, so young, and eating in the bathroom; that pathetic sight was truly excruciatingly painful to behold.

There were many difficulties and many hardships that I went through, but the hardest to endure and bear was the inability to get treated for illnesses and injuries during our incarceration.

As inmates in the detention center, and especially as those who chose to go to America, there was no way we could go out of the facilities and go to the hospital or see a doctor unless we were dead and they carried us out as cadavers.

Of course even if we had gone to the hospital we would not have been treated properly, which was most unfortunate.

My heart breaks and I shed endless tears when I think back to that time, but I am so grateful now looking back, since I have come to America and to a land where human rights are recognized, from the time I escaped North Korea.

Physically it was very difficult to live for three years as an inmate in a detention center in Thailand, and even to this day I suffer physical aftereffects from that period and difficulty adjusting to life in America.

What was worse than the physical agony was the mental anguish.

That is because after we applied for asylum in the US after making the decision to go America, we waited for a whole year without any promises or pledges from the US government – that waiting period was the hardest.

And out of the more than a dozen North Korean refugees who were in the same detention center as I was, 9 waited for three years, and in the process just got sick and worn out and in tears had no choice but to go to South Korea instead.

From May of 2007 to the summer of 2008, after waiting for over a year without any news, the first interview began in September, and after 9 months from the time the first interview began, in May of 2009 we finally came to the United States.

It's the same situation for those who were with me in Thailand who desired to go to the US; not only myself, but there are some folks who waited 4 years, women and men. After enduring such long hardship and suffering they have arrived in America and living here just like I am.

Although after many difficulties I am now here in America, when I think about my people in North Korea, in China, the difficulties that the refugees endure, my heart breaks and the tears start flowing.

Every time I think about how I can help the people in North Korea who are suffering just like I did, my heart breaks and the tears start flowing.

I will stop at nothing, do whatever I can, and offer all my help to expedite the process of bringing these refugees to the US, just like I am here, to this land of freedom and where human rights are respected and honored, and to help them settle here and find happiness.

And I would be so appreciative and thankful to the American government and society, and especially, to the Korean community here in America, as Koreans, to help and aid the North Korean refugees in coming to the US as fast as possible. There is so much to say but this is it for now. Thank you.

Ms. Jo's Testimony (Eastern US):

I escaped North Korea in July of 1998; and entered the United States in 2008. The waiting period from the time I decided to seek asylum and when I actually set foot in America was about 1 year and 5 months.

Even though our family lived in fear and in hiding, and was subject to being sent to prison or even execution, through a US-based missionary's help and his help with securing funds of \$10,000, we were able to pay off the North Korean security agency officials and escape. However, a short while after we escaped North Korea, our dealing with the officials was discovered and the officials who took the bribe were all arrested and orders were handed down to find and arrest our family, even into China. For about two months we then lived in hiding and with the nervous hope that the U.N. would rescue us.

As our family was forcibly repatriated to North Korea four times, and lived in imprisonment for such a long time, our wait with the U.N. for well over a year was extremely difficult on our emotional and mental state.

Other North Korean defectors who were with us were longing for freedom so much and when they realized the waiting would go on, they attempted suicide twice, and one woman just gave up and walked out of the U.N. H.C.R. building.

It was extremely hard to wait for a long time for a year, unable to freely go out, living a meaningless existence.

I believe that North Korean refugees must be granted asylum quickly and successfully because they have a duty to seek out and come to live in freedom and help their remaining family members who are still in North Korea.

These North Korean refugees who are in China or other third countries have lived through a long time of physical and mental suffering; some do not even have any ideas about how a human being should live, let alone what true freedom is, and these are the people who must be brought over at once to a world of freedom and humanity.

I plead with the human rights groups to talk to people in America, and myself to South Koreans, and educate them about why I had to escape from North Korea, suffer through lifelong separation between parent and child, and how our people need to unite in one spirit and purpose and rescue the over 300,000 North Korean refugees, by having more events and activities and focusing our efforts in telling the world about the reality of North Korea.

Some of the South Koreans whom I have met have never heard about the reality of what is happening in North Korea, nor understand the situation.

The only request I have is for everyone involved in this work to work even harder.

Mr. Kim's Testimony (mid-West US):

Mr. Kim's Letter to those who work in NKHR issue

To whom it may concern:

My name is Brian Kim and I live in a small city in the mid-West of the United States. Just three years ago I was living in China as one of many North Korean refugees, as an illegal alien, living day by day in harsh conditions. I have suffered though my own share of life struggles and have gone through hardships, but I considerate myself fortunate to be living now in the United States. Also, I have a constant attitude of appreciation and thanks to the American government that accepted me into this country, the various NGOs and organizations that helped me with the resettlement, and to others in my life.

I've been told that you are interested in the human rights situation of North Korean refugees, and also discussing the many ways to find solutions to this problem. Although I am a refugee myself, I haven't put much interest or care about my fellow brothers and sisters who are in China and Thailand, who are suffering through difficulties. I am really embarrassed to admit this. I am committed to change that however I can, by my testimony.

I've put much thought into this. I really don't have much to show for myself, but I was very afraid of telling others about my background. I believe you know why without me explaining. I too have family back in my hometown in North Korea. I hesitated a lot, thinking my testimony might bring harm to my parents. Anyways, I've decided to write and send this, and I will put my trust in you. All I wish for is my life story to help you understand the North Korean defectors better and to aid you in your work. Thank you.

Brian

Mr. Kim's Testimony

On July 8th 1994 the God of North Korea, Kim Il Sung, died. Many people are aware that after the death of Kim Il Sung the living conditions of North Korean citizens deteriorated rapidly. I was 12 years at that time. EVERYONE wept and it was a truly chaotic outpouring of emotions. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the entire nation literally became a sea of tears. However, even before those tears dried up, the North Koreans experienced another suffering. A day or two, a month or so, as time passed, the rice containers became empty, and even the food distribution from the state stopped; as such people died from hunger, thieves and robberies, illegal border crossers all mushroomed in numbers.

The happy North Korean family shattered into many pieces due to that one reason – hunger, as children became orphans overnight when their parents died from hunger; as children turned to crime and were executed and punished; as parents abandoned their children and vice versa... It was a daily spectacle of tears.

My family was not an exception either. Even though more than 10 years have passed, I cannot erase the memories I have of that time. I was born the second son of two boys. At an age when I should be going to school and studying hard, it was not unusual for me to spend whole days in the fields and mountains. We got our hands on whatever was edible, such as grass or tree bark, and anything that could be turned into money, wherever it was, whatever it was, we stole those things and sold them. Not all kids did what I did. Just like in other countries, like South Korea or the United States, even in North Korea those who are well off can live comfortably. I am not however, complaining about that fact (Except for the members of the elite class).

Four years passed by like this.

No matter how hard I tried to eat to fill my stomach, it was useless. I weighed, at the age of 16, 57 pounds and my height at that time was 4'4". Despite the reality that in the following year I was to graduate from school, I was hopelessly small and short, way below my age standard. However, I had a house, a family that welcomed me when I walked into that home, and I think that is one of the things that allowed me to carry on despite the harsh conditions. Eventually my whole family could not stay and live together and we all went our separate ways, I do not resent my parents. Because, they gave me life...

When it became really hard there were times when I let my complaints be known to them. "Besides giving me three words for my name, what have you done for me?"... I still vividly remember my parents' expression at that time. The silent tears that they shed in front of me... Right now I am by myself in the U.S., but in my dreams I picture a day when our whole family can live together.

People who are not North Korean refugees ask me why I escaped from North Korea. Other North Korean refugees ask me from where and how did I escape.

Even though every North Korean refugee has a different story for why they escaped, I think the reasons are the same, in my personal opinion – in that they did not want to live in that kind of society.

Mr. Kim's experience at the China-North Korea border

-In early August of 1998 at the age of 16 crossed the border for the first time via the Tumen River

- Returned to North Korea via the Tumen River in mid-February of 2000; was 18 years at that time and by this time weighed 121 lbs. and was 5'4" tall.

On my way back home was arrested by the border security guards in the city of Y****, and all my money and belongings were confiscated. Was forced to do hard labor for one month, and in the process fractured my right leg. Surprisingly, I was released sooner than I expected, and ended up resting and recuperating from home for three months; thereafter found a job as a truck driver at a brick factory in my hometown.

- In mid-October of 2001, at the age of 19, I crossed the border for the second time. Settled in another area of China than the first place I went to. I found a job in a farm deep in the mountainside. The daily pay was 30RMB. Just when I thought I could work and safely for about a year, someone reported me to the Chinese PSB and I was arrested. I didn't even get paid for my year's work.

- On October 19 2002 I was arrested by the Chinese PSB while working in the woods, and was repatriated to North Korea a month later (I was 20 years old at the time). Before that I was held in a Chinese detention center for 20 days, spent with real criminals. Afterwards I was transferred to the Tumen border area detention center where I was interrogated for 10 days (the Chinese treat North Korean refugees like dogs). I was then sent back to North Korea and ended up in the security agency jail where I was interrogated for 19 days. 30 people were held in a cell that was approximately 32 square feet in size. The food provided by the prison consisted of noodle porridge, but they only cooked about 7 pounds of food for 200 prisoners to share. Thanks to the meager servings I had no bowel movement for 19 days. There were very severe beatings during interrogations (28,000 times worse than the Chinese). After the 19 days I was transferred to the local Labor Workforce. I was there for 20 days, and did backbreaking hard labor for all the 20 days I was there. As the work force grew in size to about 30 to 30 people, I was then transferred to another local prison where I spent about two weeks. On my way to being transferred to yet another detention center, that is when I escaped. I ended up hiding out in my relative's house for about two months, and then crossed the border again.

- In mid-February of 2003, when I was 21 years old, I crossed the border for the third time via the Tumen River. I almost froze to death trying to cross the icy cold river, parts of which were already starting to melt. I was arrested again by the Chinese Border Guards after having walked over 10 hours towards my destination, and was repatriated the very next day, and in North Korea went through double the suffering I went through the first time. Because I was an escapee, I was harshly beaten, and other prisoners stole my food, so for the first week I could not eat anything. Only after about a week was I able to eat a little bit of food, allowing me to survive. By the time I was released from the detention center I was on the verge of death; I got really sick and was not detained any further in any other prison or jail. I arrived home almost a walking corpse. I could not eat on my own, let alone go to the bathroom by myself. Only through sheer determination and will to survive I ate to gain nourishment, exercised, and recuperated for a month until I successfully escaped North Korea again.

- On May 4th of 2003 I crossed the Tumen River for the fourth time. Unfortunately, due to the SARS outbreak in China at that time, I could not find transportation and so had to walk for a week to my destination, and once I arrived I just went straight to the woods. Due to the fear of contracting SARS, I could not safely stay at one place, and instead went from house to house of people I knew. Instead of paying lodging costs I did work for these people. After about a year of living like this, through a good friend I ended up in Yanji. I lived for two years in Yanji, doing all sorts of jobs, such as labor, construction, delivery, waiter, cleaning etc. In September of 2005 I met a broker through a friend who could take me to South Korea. I had saved almost 6000RMB, which I gave to the

broker, and promised that I'd pay 4,500,000 KRW once I got to South Korea and followed the broker. The first place we went to was a school, and then next to the ROK Consulate in Shenyang. I lived in the consulate for some time until escaping in mid-May, 2006 to the American consulate. After about a two month stay in the American consulate, I received papers to go to America as a refugee in the middle of 2006. I had successfully entered the United States.

It was about two month's time from when I decided to go to the US and when I actually set foot in America. There haven't been difficulties since I've been here. There were frustrating moments, however...

The greatest concern for North Korean refugees in China is security, in not getting caught by the Chinese authorities.

And the timeliest help they need is for them to safely go to a secure and safe place.

Those that go to Thailand or Mongolia, for example, have no fear of being forcibly repatriated back to North Korea.

There are a lot of people who help the North Korean refugees in China. But I see quite a few problems. It is hard to describe, but there are times when it seems like these people who help seem to pay more attention their personal needs or how they are viewed by others in society.

Of course, they are courageous people, but through my NK defector eyes, I saw that not everything seemed positive.

I've met missionaries and people from various NK democracy groups and other organizations, but I feel some of those help the refugees out of greed.

I think that when you help someone you should try to help so that issues will be resolved in the way that the people getting help want them to go...

Testimonies Submitted for Events

Mr. H's Testimony (mid-West US):

It has been 16 years since I've left North Korea, during which I worked in a third country for more than 10 years, and at factory from 1993 to 1998, when I escaped from the factory to another city nearby. In December of 2006, I ended up in the capital city of the country I was in for the purpose of seeking asylum in the United States of America, and it was here that I was interviewed by the U.N. In September of 2007 I received a letter from the U.S. accepting me as a refugee, and in the middle of the year 2008, I came to the United States. The waiting period of nearly a year before coming to the U.S. was the hardest for me during my 15 years of living in outside of North Korea.

The reason why that time period was the most difficult for me is because the North Korean government found out about my asylum seeking and put out a bounty on me (and others in my group) with the ethnic Korean Chinese citizens and North Korean laborers working for North Korean construction companies who were living in that third country at that time. A reward was offered to these people if they captured me, and living in hiding was a truly hellish experience. There was no system to protect me (and others in my situation), and a South Korean pastor who sheltered me was discovered by the police authorities and his residence and church were put under surveillance, searched and ransacked, and I only eluded escape by running away at the last minute.

Unfortunately, the pastor was deported to South Korea. Just because he was helping North Korean refugees this pastor had to be deported to South Korea. I do not know how he fared once he arrived in South Korea but it is very unfortunate to see someone like him who dedicated his life to overseas missionary work end up like he did.

When our group of refugees made the decision to go to the United States, I was one of the very few who was able to come. My friends decided to wait out that one difficult year during the whole interview process, but all were rejected at some point during the interview process. They had been in that third country for a similar amount of years, and went through similar hardships, as I did. I found out later that three of them ended up going to South Korea instead, one person passed away, and one person is still in that country.

There are a variety of reasons why they were rejected for asylum in the U.S. during the interview process; one was a former member of the elite class, one was suspected of being a North Korean security agency spy; we were also told that it was because we didn't believe in God and that we also could not speak the native language. The interview itself was conducted in the native language with interpreters, but their reasoning was that if we were in the country for over 10 years and could not speak the language, we would not be able to speak English if we were to go to America. But now that I am here in the U.S., that is not the reality. Why? Because I see Arabs who are here as refugees, asylum seekers from Burma, Nepal, and Cuba who are here, who are not even religious, and I ask myself why were we, the North Korean refugees, put under extra scrutiny and nitpicked regarding religion? I do not know or understand the suspicion when it came to us, the North Korean refugees.

Another thing I noticed is that when refugees come from other countries, the whole family is able to come together, whereas for North Korean refugees, the ones who are here, most of them are single (or ended up here alone). The REAL refugees are North Korean refugees in my opinion, because in North Korea the whole family is sent to the political prison camps or executed, and why these North Koreans have such a hard time being granted asylum is hard for me to understand, when they risk their lives to escape from North Korea. I don't know if it's because we are escaping from a communist country. Right now there are a lot of North Korean defectors and refugees who wanted to come to the United States, but when they hear of us (the ones who came initially) having such a difficult time, they all become disappointed and think that even if they begin the interview process, if they are rejected later on, the time spent waiting will be

wasted. In my opinion there is quite a bit of vagueness when it comes to the whole asylum/refugee/resettlement process.

This is all I can say at the moment. I still have family back in North Korea and worry for them.

Mr. L's Testimony (Eastern US)

A story of a North Korean refugee's American asylum

I escaped North Korea in the winter of 2006, and after going through China and several Southeast Asian countries, I ended up in an immigration detention center in Thailand where I applied for asylum in the United States. I finally came to the U.S. in the spring of 2009.

There was much difficulty and hardship that I endured since the time I escaped North Korea and ended up here in the US, but I want to talk about what North Korean refugees go through while waiting to go to America while in the Thai immigration detention centers.

It was in early fall of 2007 when I arrived at the Thai immigration detention center, with the aid of a Korean Embassy official, after much struggle and hardship of trying to escape China, getting chased by the authorities, and injuring my leg in the process.

When I entered the Thai detention center, the police authorities determined that I, along with other North Korean refugees, were illegal aliens and we had to stand trial and pay a fine; those who could not pay a fine were jailed in a prison located outside Bangkok for one month.

It was an awkward situation for us refugees to be tried as illegal immigrant, who had crossed the death line to find freedom and life and escape persecution, but what was more unbelievable was the fact that we were fined what was for us a huge sum of 6,000 Thai Baht (approximately \$180).

We as North Korean refugees who escaped death and persecution were dealt again with more human rights violations and misfortune by the policies of the Thai government that didn't recognize us as refugees but rather as illegal aliens.

The situation was especially hard for those defectors who desired to go to America, since we were not aided by the Thai government, and also, the South Korean government did not come to our rescue either.

At that time in the detention center, there were more than a hundred male and a few hundred more female North Korean refugees incarcerated in a facility that was designed to hold a maximum of 60 to 70 inmates, and as you can imagine the situation quickly spiraled downward.

Since Thailand has a tropical climate, in that overwhelming heat and humidity the sanitation situation was far below what was acceptable for humans, and hundreds of people had to squeeze in such a limited space that some were forced to spread vinyl tarp on the bathroom floor and use that as space to sit down, and young children, old people, pregnant women, and sick people of course could not receive any proper medical treatment or protection and their cries of discomfort and hardship went on for months in the prison.

After coming close to death in escaping North Korea and coming to Thailand, the refugees faced a desperate situation in the prison cells of Thailand – and in this situation only desperation remained, to the point that there were daily fights and arguments over space to sit, and among the women there was even the sad spectacle of selling and buying of space.

There is a sense of how hard and difficult the situation became for the North Korean refugees when these people, who made promises to pay back brokers with money earned through work and/or resettlement money once they landed in South Korea, ended up selling and buying living space in prison for as high as 12,000 Baht (almost \$360)

It was fortunate for those who decided to go to South Korea because the South Korean Embassy provided assistance and medical help, and the immigration process was done with ease so that within three months the refugees were able to go to South Korea.

Those that decided to go to the US however, there was no help or assistance whatsoever from the South Korean government and since the background check was still done by the South Korean government, it was not unusual to wait for over a year without any progress.

In my own case when I hurt my leg even though it was a treatable injury I could not receive proper medical care, and now I have lifelong injuries as a result of the injuring being untreated.

At that time the United States was the first country of choice for asylum for the North Korean refugees, and a large number of them chose America as their country of asylum, but almost all gave up as the detention situation worsened and the reality set in that it may take few years before they would be able to set foot in America.

When I decided to seek asylum in the US, there were around 60 or so North Korean refugees in the detention center who also sought asylum in the US, but today there are fewer than 10, including myself, who have ended up in America from that group.

As a year passed without any word or action from the American Embassy, the refugees who desired to go to the United States decided to have a hunger strike to get things moving, but the only response we received was harsher treatment from the Thai authorities, who sent us to an even worse prison farther away in the countryside, and cut off all outside communications and exerted more control over our incarceration.

Although only 12 people were left of the number of North Korean refugees, men and women, who desired to go to America, after a very long period of waiting and suffering just 7 ended up coming to the US after almost 4 years of waiting.

Among the 7 who entered the US this year, one refugee celebrated three birthdays while in detention.

Only after going through such costly suffering and hardship were these people able to come to the U.S., these defectors who decided to come to the U.S. because they viewed America as a nation of hope and a place where freedom and happiness was guaranteed.

I believe it is a desecration and defilement of freedom and a violation of human rights for these North Korean refugees to tragically suffer years of wrongful incarceration in a prison cell and not even have their rights and difficult situation as political asylum seekers recognized.

I personally think that the suffering and human rights violations of these North Korean refugees who seek asylum in America should be corrected as soon as possible.

The United States, as a free, democratic country, and one that's passed the North Korea Human Rights Act, should recognize and fix the international plight of these refugees and work actively to quickly process them into the United States.

Finally, the American government should positively help the process of these North Korean refugees entering the U.S. by directly intervening and simplifying the procedures, so that the waiting period will be reduced and also decrease their unfair suffering.

September 21st 2009

From Washington, D.C.