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North Korea: Kidnapping Incorporated

By: Doug Bandow – February 20, 2013

A year has passed since Kim Jong-un became the nominal ruler of the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Nothing much has changed as Pyongyang has continued its provocative behavior, including the latest nuclear test.

A rapacious elite holds an otherwise productive and entrepreneurial people in poverty and privation. After creating hell on earth, the Kim family forced as many outsiders as possible to live in it.

Pyongyang has made slavery state policy. Yoshi Yamamoto detailed North Korean practices in "Taken! North Korea's Criminal Abduction of Citizens of Other Countries," a report released by the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea.

Wrote Yamamoto: "North Korea's practice of abductions was neither insignificant nor short-lived." The North may have seized as many as 180,000 people. Yamamoto counted 82,959 South Koreans forced north during the Korean War, 3,824 South Koreans, mostly fishermen, captured since the conflict's end, more than 93,000 ethnic Korean migrants lured from Japan, roughly 100 Japanese kidnapped off beaches and streets, 200 Chinese, mostly ethnic Koreans aiding defectors from the DPRK, taken from China, and at least 25 other foreigners held captive. There may be others.

Only three days after invading the Republic of Korea, Kim Il-sung's government issued instructions to capture "Southern political, economic, and socially prominent figures, reeducate them, and strengthen the military frontline with them." They ended up as de facto slaves. Soviet records reported that "the plan of transferring Seoul citizens to the North for their job placement in factories, coal mines and enterprises is being implemented in each related sector."

There also was a concerted effort to attract ethnic Koreans from Japan with "the idea of helping to rebuild North Korea," wrote Yamamoto. The effort started well, with some 50,000 people heading north from late 1959 to 1960. But "rumors of harsh treatment" soon cut the number of migrants dramatically.

About 3,800 South Koreans were abducted, most of them fishermen grabbed on the high seas. Some fishermen were released over the years, but as of 2010 Yamamoto estimated that 450 were still held captive in the North, along with 56 other South Koreans.

Pyongyang also targeted South Koreans active in China aiding refugees. In 2000 regime agents abducted Kim Dong-shik, a minister. One of the most celebrated kidnapping cases involved the seizure of South Korean movie star Choi Eun-hee and later her husband, director Shin Sang-ok. Kim Jong-il was a movie aficionado who wanted to create a world-class North Korean film industry.

At least 100 Japanese were kidnapped by DPRK operatives. These victims had nothing to

do with Korea. In most cases the people, including children, simply disappeared, leaving their families with no idea what happened.

Occasionally Pyongyang attracted its victims by fraud rather than force. Regime operatives offered employment, academic opportunities, art exhibitions, and translation jobs to a variety of foreigners, including from France, Guinea, Japan, Lebanon, Romania, and South Korea. Often people thought they were going somewhere other than North Korea – to Hong Kong, for instance – but ended up in the DPRK. Some knew they were being hired by the North Korean government and were not allowed to leave.

Even Chinese citizens are at risk. Explained Yamamoto: “In an effort to target the underground refugee network, North Korea has abducted over 200 citizens of the People’s Republic of China.” Although this practice obviously violates Chinese sovereignty, Beijing “has never filed any official complaints against North Korea, as it is said to view the abductions as a problem between Koreans.”

Finally, there were occasional defectors from other nations who fled to the North but then were prevented from leaving. Japanese “Red Army” terrorists hijacked a Japanese airplane and sought asylum in the North. Four American soldiers deserted through the Demilitarized Zone. Their story has been told by Charles Jenkins, who was released a decade ago along with his wife, who had been kidnapped from Japan. As he explained, “once you step in, most people never could get out.”

Those kidnapped were always reeducated, generally isolated, usually mistreated, and sometimes imprisoned. Many were forced into marriages, sometimes with other abductees. Observed Yamamoto, all “found themselves trapped in a world where they were no longer free to make fundamental decisions over their own lives.”

There are other criminal regimes in the world. But the DPRK stands in a category of its own. Once reform does come to the North – hopefully sooner rather than later – Pyongyang must take responsibility for the mass kidnappings. Unfortunately, so far “Great Successor” Kim Jong-un gives no evidence of being such a reformer.