



## Kidnappers Incorporated

*Kidnapping of foreign nationals is yet another of many crimes yet to be repudiated by the North Korean regime.*

By: Doug Bandow on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012

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North Korea is in the news again, preparing to test a missile. A new Kim may be in charge, but Pyongyang's provocative policies remain the same.

Kim Jong-un is the nominal ruler of the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea. A one-time Chicago Bulls fan, the 20-something "Marshal of the DPRK" now appears to be fascinated by Disney characters.

Alas, the system he represents is anything but entertaining. A rapacious elite holds an otherwise productive and entrepreneurial people in poverty and privation; malnutrition and even starvation are routine. A brutal system of prison camps awaits anyone who dissents. The worst punishment is meted out to the religious, who believe there is a god apart from the latest exalted "leader" in Pyongyang.

Yet this horrid system is not only inflicted upon those unfortunate enough to be born into it. After creating hell on earth, the Kim family forced as many outsiders as possible to live in it.

In 1950 North Korea's "Great Leader" Kim Il-sung sought to conquer the entire peninsula through war. Although thwarted in that attempt, Pyongyang pressed thousands of South Koreans into service in the North. The DPRK also lured immigrants with promises of a socialist "paradise," prevented visitors from returning, and kidnapped a variety of foreigners including South Koreans, Japanese, Chinese, and Europeans.

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 in 2011 by the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea. Yamamoto has worked with families of Japanese abductees. A decade ago their plight focused attention on the North's many crimes.

On September 17, 2002, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited Pyongyang. In an apparent attempt to win Japanese financial assistance, DPRK "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il admitted that his nation had kidnapped several Japanese citizens "to enable

Japanese language training in special agencies and for agents to obtain false identities to infiltrate."

Nevertheless, Kim refused to acknowledge the magnitude of the practice. Explained Yamamoto, Kim's "admission was not the whole truth, his government has provided false and unsubstantiated assertions since the admission, and demands for thorough bilateral investigations have repeatedly been denied by North Korea." Japanese-North Korean relations remained stalled.

The scandal is far bigger than Japan, however. Wrote Yamamoto: "The information collected shows that North Korea's policy of abducting foreigners was not limited to Japan or to small numbers of individuals. Of course, even a small number of abductees from Japan or any other country would be a severe violation of the rights of those abducted, a violation of international law, and a crime that would warrant international attention and concern. But 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 of 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.

The ruthless program was systematic and well-organized. Noted Yamamoto: "North Korea's policy of abducting foreign citizens was intentional, directed by Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il themselves, executed by an extensive well-trained bureaucracy, and far-reaching in its scope and geographic reach." At least four departments in the Korean Workers' Party were involved and answered directly to the Kims. Wrote Yamamoto: "There is ample evidence that the regime had an official bureaucratic structure that employed, managed and monitored those abducted while they were in North Korea."

In 1946 Kim Il-sung, installed as leader in the Soviet occupation zone in the northern half of the peninsula, announced: "In order to solve the shortage of intellectuals, we have to bring intellectuals from South Korea." That could have meant creating a prosperous and free society to attract human talent voluntarily. However, Kim had very different intentions.

Yamamoto noted that only three days after invading the Republic of Korea, the KWP Military Committee issued instructions to capture "Southern political, economic, and socially prominent figures, reeducate them, and strengthen the military front line 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." Tokyo's tortured relationship with both Koreas grows out of turning the once independent kingdom into a colony. More than two million Koreans were living in Japan at the end of World War II.

Most of the ethnic Koreans -- to this day treated as second class citizens in Japan -- who returned home went south. But the DPRK "continually played up the homeland's need for individuals with knowledge and abilities," explained Kang Chol-hwan, the grandson of a returnee. The effort started well, with some 50,000 people heading north from late 1959 to 1960.

"Rumors of harsh treatment in North Korea, however, began to leak out immediately," wrote Yamamoto. The number of migrants dropped precipitously, though the Returnees Project formally continued through 1984, during which more than 93,000 Japanese moved to the North. Most found their choice to be irrevocable.

About 3,800 South Koreans were abducted, most of them fishermen grabbed on the high seas. North Korean warships would simply capture ROK vessels and hold their crews. 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, with the aid of an ethnic Korean-Chinese businessman. 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. They were abducted separately and were met by Kim Jong-il, a movie aficionado who wanted to create a world-class North Korean film industry. Ultimately they were trusted to travel abroad, when they fled their minders.

At least 100 Japanese were kidnapped by DPRK operatives. These cases may be the most poignant since the victims had nothing to do with Korea. Among the cases reported by Yamamoto:

1. "On the afternoon of November 15, 1977, 13-year-old Megumi Yokota was walking home from badminton practice at her high schools in Niigata when she was seized by North Korean operatives."
2. "Yasushi Chimura and his fiancée, Fukie Hamamoto, both 23, were abducted from rocky shores of Wakasa Bay in Obama, Japan, on the evening of July 7, 1978. The young couple [was] on a date when they were attacked by North Korean operatives and forced into a nearby boat."
3. "On August 12, 1978, 19-year-old Hitomi Soga and her 46-year-old mother, Miyoshi, were kidnapped from Sado City. "The two had stopped for ice cream on the way home from shopping when they were suddenly accosted by three men who quickly bound and gagged them."

In most cases the victims 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 two hundred citizens of the People's Republic of China." These operations have the dual benefit of eliminating those who aid defectors and discouraging others from offering assistance. 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 rather than a national or humanitarian problem."

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."

Their treatment depended on their perceived usefulness to the regime and how they responded to their new lives. Those kidnapped were always reeducated, generally isolated, usually mistreated, and sometimes imprisoned. Many were forced into marriages, sometimes with other abductees. But even those treated relatively well in a material sense, such as the movie couple Choi and Shin, lost their freedom. Observed Yamamoto: "they found themselves trapped in a world where they were no longer free to make fundamental decisions over their own lives."

Of course, since the Kim dynasty treats North Korea's entire population as slaves, the regime has no compunction about kidnapping foreigners. Some South Koreans were used as spies. A number of the abducted Japanese "had special expertise in telecommunications, printing, and physics," according to a commission on those seized.

However, most of the Japanese were used to teach North Koreans the Japanese language and culture. A few abductions apparently were conducted to steal identities for further operations. Several victims were used in North Korean propaganda. Other apparent objectives included stealing registration documents, finding spouses for other abductees, and silencing regime opponents.

Unfortunately, Kim Jong-il's limited confession did not end North Korean kidnappings. Operations such as snatching hapless Japanese off of the beach or street may have ceased but, noted Yamamoto, "Recent abductions have been carried out inside China by North Korean military personnel -- border guards -- and have focused on those persons helping North Koreans to defect." Moreover, "North Korean foreign intelligence operations since 2000 include a more militarily aggressive strategy involving clandestine military operations in neighboring countries."

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. The regime must end abductions as policy, make an accounting of the past, and allow families to be reunited.

That might seem to be a long-shot, but Yamamoto argued that such a shift would be a good test of "the bona fides" of any purported reformers: "It would be difficult to expect a new group of leaders to make decisions that would be politically charged and immediately destabilizing, such as a decision to halt the nuclear program, open nuclear

facilities for unannounced inspections, or forswear Kim Il-sungism. New leaders could be expected, however, to account for the captive citizens of foreign nations. There should be little domestic opposition to such a move, yet it could be a very reassuring signal for concerned nationals around the world."

So far "Cute Leader" Kim Jong-un gives no evidence of being such a reformer. The regime's planned rocket launch demonstrates continuity in the family dictatorship. Since his wife likes designer handbags, perhaps the Kims will offer designer hand-cuffs in North Korea's prisons. Still, some day the North's desperate need for outside cash and expertise may lead to real change. If so, the rest of the world should expect the North Korean regime to firmly repudiate kidnapping as policy.