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Exclusive: Chinese seafood made with N. Korean forced labor floods S. Korea

By Lee Min-seok=Washington, Lee Jung-soo

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A still shot from a promotional video shows a seafood processing factory in Dalian, China. The factory has been accused of employing North Korean workers (on the left). In another image, the South Korean flag is displayed in front of a seafood processing factory in Dandong, China, which is also suspected of employing a large number of North Korean workers./Screenshots from Chinese social media

Over 4,000 tons of seafood processed by North Korean workers under forced labor conditions have been exported from China to South Korea, violating UN sanctions and potentially supporting North Korea's nuclear development.

On Jun. 24, it was confirmed that the scale of seafood exported to South Korea by Chinese seafood companies found to have illegally employed North Korean workers exceeded 4,000 tons. This is more than ten times the amount previously reported to have been sold to South Korean companies by these Chinese processing firms.

The United Nations Security Council's sanctions against North Korea prohibit the employment of North Korean workers by third-country companies, as the foreign currency earned by North Korean workers could be diverted to North Korea's nuclear development.

Amid recent indications by the U.S. government of possible sanctions against these Chinese companies, there is speculation that the U.S. may also demand that its allies, including South Korea, join in the sanctions.

According to data provided by the U.S. financial sanctions and supply chain analysis firm 'Sayari' and analyzed by the Washington D.C.-based nonprofit organization 'Outlaw Ocean Project' and The Chosun Daily, five Chinese seafood processing companies that employed North Korean workers in violation of UN sanctions exported approximately 4,360 tons of seafood to 36 South Korean companies across 158 shipments between 2021 and the end of 2023.

These seafood products were shipped from Dalian and Dandong ports in China to Incheon and Busan ports in South Korea and then distributed nationwide. The imported seafood is estimated to be worth around 30 to 40 billion won (\$21.6 million-\$28.8 million). This means that a large amount of Chinese seafood produced through the forced labor of North Korean workers is being imported and distributed in South Korea, inadvertently supporting North Korea's nuclear and missile development.

Last year, the members of the Outlaw Ocean Project visited factories in Donggang, Dandong City, Liaoning Province, the center of seafood processing in China, and interviewed North Korean workers. They revealed that at least 15 Chinese companies employed more than 1,000 North Korean workers.

Based on meetings with these sources, Chinese companies exported products such as dried pollack strips, dried monkfish fillet, frozen salmon and cod, and clams to South Korea. North Korean workers processed these products under conditions that can be described as 'forced labor.'

Chinese seafood imported by South Korean companies has been distributed in large supermarkets run by major corporations and local seafood markets across the country, including in Busan, Gyeonggi, and Incheon. Following recent reports, some large supermarkets announced plans to stop selling certain Chinese seafood products, but a significant amount of seafood continues to be consumed nationwide.

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