

Headline Analysis & Opinion Interviews

N. Korea, China appear to respond to criticism about human rights abuses in seafood factories

"They used to only give us five or ten minutes for our lunch break, but that's gone up to thirty minutes," one North Korean laborer at a Chinese seafood factory told Daily NK

By Lee Sang Yong - May 17, 2024



FILE PHOTO: The national flag of the People's Republic of China. (Daily NK)

North Korea and China have taken surprising steps to respond to The New Yorker's coverage of the severe human rights abuses suffered by North Korean workers at seafood processing plants in China. The New Yorker article was based on a report released in late February by the Outlaw Ocean Project, a nonprofit investigative journalism outlet.

While North Korea and China focused on ways to minimize the economic fallout of international efforts to block imports of Chinese products made by North Korean workers, the two countries also seemed to be responding to criticism about human rights abuses.

Of particular note were North Korea's encouraging instructions to local officials to improve working conditions, impose strict regulations at each worksite and instruct workers on their right to file complaints.

But how did conditions change at Chinese factories after the North Korean authorities ordered officials to pay more attention to protecting workers' rights? Daily NK recently reached out to a North Korean worker at a seafood processing plant in China to hear about the situation on the ground.

Daily NK's interview with the North Korean worker appears below.

Daily NK (DNK): The international community is focusing on the human rights situation of North Koreans working at seafood processing plants in China. Have you heard anything about it becoming tougher to export products following the recent media coverage?

I don't know any details, but I've heard the gist.

DNK: What did you think after hearing that?

My first thought was that if there are fewer buyers, we'll end up with less money.

DNK: North Koreans are said to be in poor working conditions. Do you agree with that?

Of course. Considering how little we get for working like oxen under these conditions, all [workers] probably think that.

DNK: The reports came out in late February. Have your working conditions changed at all since then?

For some reason, we've recently been getting more break time and have been working less at night. There's no telling why that is, but it's been great.

DNK: Can you describe that in a little more detail?

They used to only give us five or ten minutes for our lunch break, but that's gone up to thirty minutes. And we often had to work on Sunday, but nowadays we generally get the day off.

DNK: There's testimony about managers making sexual remarks. How has that been recently?

They still do that sometimes, but they seem to have really cut back on that.

DNK: A lot of women have apparently been forced into sexual relations.

That's not happening anymore.

DNK: Do any workers try to run away or defect?

Right now, few people would dare to think about defecting, even if they wanted to, because the surveillance of workers has gotten so strict.

DNK: Do any workers want to communicate with the outside world?

No doubt some do, but they don't have any way to do so.

DNK: Do you think a lot of North Koreans still want to work overseas?

A lot probably do because they figure they'll make money without realizing what people actually do when they come to China. But I don't think people like me with work experience [in seafood processing] would want to leave the country. That said, I guess that when I go home and have to rejoin organizational life and get dragged around to various functions, I'll probably feel like it would be better to go work in China.

DNK: What do you wish for the most in your current circumstances?

I wish I were paid wages that are appropriate for how hard I work. I wish workers like me were just left alone.

Translated by David Carruth. Edited by Robert Lauer.

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