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N. Korea plans to minimize economic damage from world's moves to block imports of Chinese seafood

North Korean government officials are saying that it is "absolutely impossible" to withdraw North Korean workers from China, a source told Daily NK

By [Lee Sang Yong](#) - May 1, 2024



AFILE PHOTO: A window of a factory staffed by North Koreans in China. (Daily NK)

North Korean authorities are drawing up plans to minimize the economic damage the international community's moves to block imports of Chinese seafood produced through the forced labor of North Korean workers, Daily NK has learned.

In late February, the New Yorker ran an expose documenting how North Korean workers were forced to work in terrible conditions in Chinese seafood processing plants based on a report by the Outlaw Ocean Project, a non-profit investigative journalism outfit.

In response to criticism that seafood produced by slave labor by North Korean workers in Chinese factories was exported to the United States, South Korea and Japan, the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China called for an end to imports of Chinese seafood produced by North Korean forced labor. The commission warned that U.S. consumers and the U.S. government were at risk of unintentionally supporting North Korean forced labor and financing North Korea's weapons programs.

Afterward, Sysco and Trident Seafoods — the world's largest food and seafood distributors, respectively — said they would suspend transactions with Chinese seafood processing plants suspected of using forced labor by North Korean workers. South Korean companies Coupang and Lotte Mart did likewise.

According to Daily NK sources in North Korea and China on Monday, the North Korean authorities — believing this is a grave matter that could have the negative impact of reducing a significant source of foreign currency income — have begun drawing up measures to minimize the economic harm in cooperation with their Chinese counterparts.

"There must be no drop in foreign currency income"

Speaking on condition of anonymity, one source in North Korea said the North Korean authorities are, as a broad principle, cooperating as much as they can with plans to respond to the economic crisis impacting Chinese seafood processing plants as a result of the U.S. and South Korean bans on Chinese seafood imports.

Another source in China said that problematic seafood processing plants in Dandong, Dalian and elsewhere in China "plan to bolster their quality control to meet or exceed international standards and, in so doing, restart exports by restoring their credibility."

The factories also have internal plans to conduct international marketing, engage in negotiations and other diplomatic efforts and diversify their markets, the source said.

In other words, the factories in question plan to aggressively market themselves as in compliance with international quality control standards and safety regulations while holding quiet discussions with U.S. and South Korean companies to convince them to reconsider or ease import bans. In particular, the plants emphasize that they must take a strong attitude in their discussions with U.S. and South Korean companies by arguing that they have "done nothing wrong" rather than leveraging their cost competitiveness.

They are also considering plans to open new export markets beyond the United States and South Korea. Relatedly, they plan to strengthen their sales promotions in Southeast Asia, Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere with broad advertising campaigns emphasizing that their seafood is "cheap and high-quality."

The factories are also considering using China's domestic market in case the other plans fail to unfold in the desired direction. "The seafood processing plants can produce more products to match Chinese demand by adjusting their production lines," the source said. "Ultimately, China and North Korea agreed there must not be a drop in income."

"Dispatches of workers must continue"

Meanwhile, North Korean government officials are saying that it is "absolutely impossible" to withdraw North Korean workers from China, even if the latest series of events worsens exports from Chinese seafood processing plants and hurts foreign currency earnings, the source in North Korea said.

"Even in the past, whenever one pathway was blocked, North Korea would closely cooperate with China to find another source of income," he said. "Now, the cabinet and other organizations are competing to find Chinese traders with whom they can engage in workforce export projects and to draw up related plans."

While the international community has criticized the export of North Korean workers as a violation of UN Security Council sanctions, the source's report suggests that the North Korean authorities will continue to regard the criticism as a "violation of national sovereignty."

He added: "Domestically, the authorities have a strong tendency to leverage the overseas worker issue using arguments about resistance against the West. That is to say, they tell the people that [the ban on sending workers overseas] is a plot by the imperialists who want to stop us from living well while trying to find ways to send workers overseas in close cooperation with China.

"We have long been closely connected politically and economically with China, so we decided to find a satisfactory resolution to the worker dispatch issue, and we also discussed it [with China] when Zhao Leji [the chairman of China's Standing Committee of the National People's Congress] visited North Korea."

In short, the source's report suggests that North Korea's government plans to continue sending its own workers overseas, avoiding the international community's sanctions and surveillance through closed-door cooperation with China.

Translated by David Black. Edited by Robert Lauer.

Daily NK works with a network of sources living in North Korea, China, and elsewhere. Their identities remain anonymous for security reasons. For more information about Daily NK's network of reporting partners and information-gathering activities, please visit our [FAQ page here](#).

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