

News Inside China Headline China-North Korea Relations

# North Korea urges managers to prioritize workers' rights in China

North Korea is considering plans to replace senior officials who regularly sexually assault workers by filing internal complaints against them

By **Lee Sang Yong** - May 10, 2024



North Korean women on a bus heading over the Sino-North Korean Friendship Bridge into China. The women appear to be heading to work in Dandong from their homes in Sinuiju. / Image: Daily NK

North Korea recently ordered its officials to pay attention to protecting the rights of workers sent to China. The order appears to be a response to international criticism of human rights violations suffered by North Korean workers deployed overseas.

In late February, The New Yorker reported on serious human rights abuses suffered by North Korean workers in Chinese seafood processing plants, based on an investigation by the non-profit investigative journalism outfit, the "Outlaw Ocean Project."

According to The New Yorker story, North Korean workers who agreed to be interviewed said, "They [the officials who supervise the workers] kicked us and treated us as subhuman" and "When they drank, they touched my body everywhere like playing with toys."

Faced with these circumstances, some workers have chosen to take their own lives, but one worker said if somebody dies, "then the manager is responsible, so they keep it under wraps to keep it from being leaked to other workers or Chinese people."

## "Pay attention to the protection of workers' rights"

Speaking on condition of anonymity, a Daily NK source in North Korea and another source in China said Tuesday that when international criticism of human rights abuses arose after The New Yorker story, North Korean authorities ordered managers of workers overseas to pay more attention to protecting workers' rights and providing a safe working environment.

"The government believes that poor working conditions are a major reason for international sanctions," the North Korean source said.

"In response, the authorities have ordered officials to draw up strict regulations for each workplace to improve working conditions, and to regularly review working conditions and systematically write monthly reports on the matter."

In particular, North Korean authorities ordered that overseas workers be constantly reminded of their right to file complaints. They also stressed the importance of workers filing their petitions directly with the embassy, consulate or security officials to prevent managers from suppressing their complaints.

While this could be seen as an effort to make managers more accountable, the regulation may be designed to prevent workers' complaints from coming to light by dealing with them internally.

"This will probably turn into getting workers to spy on each other and report immediately so that no one is treated unfairly," the source said. "Of course, both sides [North Korea and China] will try to improve their image by saying that they have worked to protect workers' rights, and they will fill the workers with propaganda that they have done their best to protect them. But in the end, the workers' viewpoints will be trampled."

## "Never let word of sexual assaults leak out"

Workers who participated in the Outlaw Ocean Project interviews exposed sexual assaults suffered by female workers in Chinese seafood processing plants. In general, North Korean authorities either ignore the problem or try to cover it up.

"In general, the state does not consider such crimes [sexual assault] to be serious, so they are rarely reported through official channels, with local managers handling most cases on their own," the North Korea-based source said. "However, they are cracking down to make sure that news of such cases never leaks out, believing that if the outside world learns of cases [of sexual assault], the government would come under international criticism and pressure, and the DPRK's image could be damaged."

North Korea is considering plans to replace senior officials who regularly sexually assault workers by filing internal complaints against them.

The source said authorities want to "quietly replace" male managers who are frequently accused of sexual misconduct "by seizing on other problems." This means that the authorities are preparing to replace the officials for tarnishing the state's image by giving the international community excuses to criticize the country or for not behaving properly, rather than holding them accountable for sexual crimes.

North Korea is also considering other plans to nip the sexual assault problem in the bud. "The authorities are considering reducing the number of female workers sent abroad this year, as well as several other measures, including sending female officials who are highly loyal to the party," the source said.

*Translated by David Black. Edited by Robert Lauer.*

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