

Canada urged to crack down on forced-labour imports after North Korean revelations

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Canada should take a tougher stand on imports made using forced labour, experts say, after an investigative journalism project that found seafood imports into the country are being processed by North Korean workers.

An investigation by the Outlaw Ocean Project, a non-profit journalism organization, published in The Globe and Mail, found that the Chinese seafood industry is using North Korean workers and that these products are entering U.S. and Canadian markets. Using North Korean labour is a violation of United Nations sanctions.

The probe, based on leaked government documents, corporate promotional materials, satellite imagery, online forums, interviews and local news reports, identified at least 15 seafood processing plants that together have used more than 1,000 North Korean workers since 2017.

Canada does not have full diplomatic relations with North Korea, and the federal government has said on its Global Affairs website that it is “deeply concerned by North Korea’s egregious human rights violations.”

Canada should step up efforts to combat forced labour and other human-rights abuses, said Penelope Simons, law professor and Gordon Henderson Chair in Human Rights at the University of Ottawa. “Canada is lagging behind peer countries on this issue.”

New legislation on forced labour, Bill S-211, came into effect in January that requires some companies report on efforts to reduce the risk of forced labour and child labour in their supply chains.

Rights advocates say this falls short of efforts elsewhere. France and several other European countries have introduced due diligence laws, which require companies to publish plans to identify human-rights and environmental risks – and take steps to prevent harms.

Canada’s Fighting Against Forced Labour Act “is woefully insufficient,” says Prof. Simons, “not only because it does not require companies to do more than report on steps (if any) they have taken to eradicate forced labour in their supply chains, but also because it does not meet Canada’s international human-rights obligations” to take measures to prevent human-rights violations by Canadian companies and to provide remedies to victims of such harms.

The Outlaw Ocean Project investigation found that Chinese plants are using North Korean workers, sent by their government to toil in conditions of captivity, to earn money for the state. Workers, most of them women, described beatings, sexual assaults, confinement, threats, gruelling hours and withholding of wages. “They kick us and treat us as sub-human,” one worker who spent four years at a seafood plant said. “When he doesn’t get his way [sexually], he gets angry and kicks me,” another worker said of her manager.



An investigation by The Outlaw Ocean Project reveals that China uses workers from North Korea in its seafood industry. Many at the seafood processing plants recount long shifts, labour abuses and sexual assault.

THE OUTLAW OCEAN PROJECT

Canada’s laws on forced labour imports should be strengthened, and enforcement beefed up, said Jack Kim, board chair of HanVoice, an organization that advocates for human rights in North Korea. There should be “more enhanced reporting but also enforcement when it comes to goods, especially if it’s coming from countries that we know or may suspect of forced labour.”

Hartley Witten, press secretary for the office of Minister of Labour Seamus O’Regan, said the federal government will table “strong” legislation by the end of this year, “to eradicate forced labour from Canadian supply chains, no matter where it comes from.”

This legislation will build on Bill S-211, he said in an e-mailed statement, “by ensuring that Canadian law not only has the tools to identify these goods, but has the teeth to act on them. It will send a clear message to the world: forced labour has no place in Canada.”

The Outlaw Ocean Project, based in Washington, found North Korean labour linked with Canadian companies. Nova Scotia-based High Liner Foods Inc., for example, has purchased seafood products from Dalian Haiqing, a Chinese business which the investigation found has used North Korean workers. (Dalian Haiqing told the journalists that it does not employ overseas North Korean workers.)

High Liner, which sells white-fish products to Walmart, Costco and Loblaws, told the project it was starting an investigation into the allegations about Dalian Haiqing and was “suspending all business dealings with them effective immediately while further information is gathered and assessed.”

The U.S. passed a law in 2017 called the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act which imposes fines on businesses that import products tied to North Korean labour. The law established a “rebuttable presumption” that categorizes work done by North Koreans as forced labour unless proven otherwise.

In Canada, the federal government amended the Customs Tariff Act in 2020 to prohibit imports made with forced labour, but that law does not include the rebuttable presumption in the American legislation. As of late last year, Canadian authorities had not stopped a single shipment of forced-labour goods from entering the country since the rules took effect.

The federal government should introduce mandatory due diligence legislation to address the problem of human-rights abuses in supply chains, said Lori Waller, spokesperson for Above Ground, a human rights and corporate accountability project. It should also boost transparency about efforts already underway to stop forced-labour imports from entering Canada, she said.

“There’s no routine reporting of how many shipments have been stopped. That’s one change we’d really like to see is just more disclosure” from the government on how many shipments have been blocked and when, how many investigations have been carried out, and what products and manufacturers are involved. It’s important to name them publicly, she says, as the U.S. does, as it “puts more pressure on the manufacturer because there’s a reputational cost of being named.”

The recent story in The Globe about North Korean workers comes just months after earlier parts of the same investigation revealed an extensive use of another type of state-sponsored forced labour, namely Uyghurs, in Chinese seafood processing plants that supply Canada, including High Liner. Uyghurs are an ethnic minority in China that the UN and others have said are severely repressed by the Chinese government.

With reports from Ian Urbina and team at the Outlaw Ocean Project

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