

North Korea's stranded migrant workers

Hermit kingdom sent labourers overseas to fund cash-starved regime and weapons programme, but shut borders during pandemic



For more than 30 years, North Korea has been sending workers abroad to support its sanctions-hit economy (Image credit: Illustration by Stephen Kelly / Getty Images)

BY HARRIET MARSDEN, THE WEEK UK
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Thousands of North Koreans working illegally in China have reportedly rioted to demand years of unpaid wages alleged to have been spent on funding Pyongyang's war machine.

About 2,500 [North Korean](#) labourers were owed a total of \$10 million, Cho Han-bum, a research fellow at the Korean Institute for National Unification think tank, told [NK News](#). Workers in 15 Pyongyang-operated factories in northeastern China are said to have "erupted" into riots after discovering that their wages had instead "been put towards [building weapons](#)", said [BBC News](#).

According to South Korea's [The Korea Times](#), at least one North Korean government official sent to monitor the labourers was killed during the "violent protests", near [the North Korean border](#).

China denies the existence of the "closely guarded" factories, said the BBC's Seoul correspondent Jean Mackenzie, as employing North Korean workers abroad is prohibited by the UN. But South Korean intelligence told the broadcaster that there had been "multiple incidents" resulting from "poor working conditions" – sparking concern for the "tens of thousands of North Koreans working overseas, earning money for the cash-starved regime".

Where are North Korean migrants working?

For more than 30 years, North Korea has been sending workers abroad to support its [sanctions-hit economy](#). They have "toiled in logging camps in Russia, factories and restaurants in China and farms and shipyards in Eastern Europe", said [The New York Times](#). Workers' passports are "confiscated for fear that they may flee", and they leave behind families as "hostages". These workers are a "crucial source of cash" for the regime as it pours scarce resources into its "[growing nuclear arsenal](#)".

An estimated 100,000 North Koreans are now working overseas, mostly in textile factories and construction sites in China. Most of their earnings are "transferred directly to the state", said the BBC's Mackenzie: an estimated \$740 million (£586 million) between 2017 and 2023. These jobs are "highly competitive", paying as much as 10 times more than jobs in North Korea.

But female workers, speaking on conditions of anonymity, describe being "held in compounds, sometimes behind barbed wire", and threatened with "severe punishment" if they try to escape, said [The New Yorker](#). Many "described enduring sexual assault". Several said they were "beaten by the managers sent by North Korea to watch them". "It was like a prison for me," one woman told the magazine.

Despite China's denials, "their presence is an open secret", said the magazine, with many companies relying on the "vast" programme of "forced labour". Since 2012, North Korea has also sent citizens to Poland, Qatar, Uruguay, Mali – and neighbouring Russia.

The port city of Vladivostok, near the border, is "one of the main footholds in the world" for North Korean migrant workers, said [The Washington Post](#). These "in-demand" labourers are cheap, but with "a reputation for quality of work".

In 2017, a UN Security Council resolution banned any country from hosting North Korean workers. But the order to send them home took effect only in December 2019 – a month before the Covid-19 pandemic "shuttered the borders" of the hermit kingdom, leaving tens of thousands stranded abroad.

What's the latest?

Factory managers typically hold on to wages, minus the government's cut, until the workers' terms overseas end. Since North Korea relaxed its strict border controls last year, some workers have been "pushing to return home to recoup their money", said Mackenzie. But Pyongyang "seems reluctant to bring them home".

Meanwhile, new groups of North Korean workers "are being dispatched overseas", said Julie Turner, the US State Department's special envoy on human rights in North Korea. This month, about 300 presumed North Korean workers arrived in Russia by train, reported [Yonhap News](#) of South Korea, "amid [deepening cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow](#)".

The US believes North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has "[stepped up cooperation with Russia](#) through the transfer of arms", said [Time](#), to help Vladimir Putin in [the war on Ukraine](#). Last year, the White House said that Moscow and Pyongyang had discussed a deal in which North Korea would provide weapons in exchange for food.

Living conditions for North Koreans "remain dire", said [Newsweek](#). Kim admitted to his party this month that the economy was in a "terrible situation".

Peter Ward, a North Korean economy expert at the Sejong Institute in Seoul, told the BBC that if the "entirely plausible" reports of riots were true, it would be proof that North Korea is "really struggling for money, to the point where it is now literally stealing from its workers".

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Harriet Marsden is a writer for The Week, mostly covering UK and global news and politics. Before joining the site, she was a freelance journalist for seven years, specialising in social affairs, gender equality and culture. She worked for The Guardian, The Times and The Independent, and regularly contributed articles to The Sunday Times, The Telegraph, The New Statesman, Tortoise Media and Metro, as well as appearing on BBC Radio London, Times Radio and "Woman's Hour". She has a master's in international journalism from City University, London, and was awarded the "journalist-at-large" fellowship by the Local Trust charity in 2021.