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Exclusive: North Korean forced labor behind Chinese seafood sold in South Korea

By Lee Min-seok (Washington), Park Su-hyeon

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Seafood being sold at a wholesale market in Donggang, Dandong City, Liaoning Province, China, in April 2023./Lee Beul-chan

It has come to light that a significant amount of Chinese seafood entering South Korea is produced through the forced labor of North Korean residents. This practice violates sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council, aimed at preventing North Korean workers' earnings from being used for nuclear weapons and ballistic missile development.

Investigations conducted by The Chosunilbo, in collaboration with The Outlaw Ocean Project, a non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C., have revealed that at least three out of six Chinese seafood processing companies confirmed to employ North Korean workers exported around 420 tons of goods to South Korea between 2020 and 2022. These products, processed by North Korean laborers, were distributed across the country after arriving at Busan Port from Dalian Port in China. It has been identified that there are over 400 North Korean workers employed at these three companies.

The Outlaw Ocean Project's interviews with over 20 North Korean workers in factories in Donggang, Liaoning Province, have shed light on the scale of this issue. They found that at least 15 Chinese companies employed over 1,000 North Korean laborers across various industries. This detailed revelation of the supply chain structure, where products made by North Korean workers in China end up being distributed in South Korea, is unprecedented.

While the confirmed 420 tons are just a fraction of the total volume exported by Chinese companies to South Korea, the investigation found that various seafood items, including clams, squid, Alaska pollock, and sea cucumbers, were processed and exported to South Korea. These products are widely available in major supermarkets and online shopping malls.

For instance, products exported to South Korea by Dandong Taihua received high ratings on supermarket A's website, praised for their convenience due to the removal of shells, likely performed by North Korean laborers. Another Korean importer, purchasing various shellfish and seafood from Dandong Taifeng Foodstuff, advertised their products being used in the seafood corner of large supermarkets.



The North Korean flag flutters at the North Korea consular office in Dandong, Liaoning province, China, on April 20, 2021./Reuters Yonhap News

Despite legal export procedures, it is challenging for distributors or consumers to ascertain whether North Korean forced labor was involved in production. Last October, The Outlaw Ocean Project revealed that over 70 American importers had imported seafood from ten Chinese companies employing North Korean forced labor, including major retailers like Walmart and McDonald's, as well as food distributor Sysco.

The detailed accounts of human rights abuses suffered by North Korean workers in Chinese factories have sparked significant outrage in the United States. The Outlaw Ocean Project's encounters with anonymous North Korean laborers revealed instances of daily physical abuse and sexual violence. One female North Korean worker employed by Dalian Haiqing Food, which exported 276.2 tons of frozen Alaska pollock intestines to South Korea from late 2019 to May 2022, testified to receiving death threats if caught trying to escape. Another female worker recounted being coerced into sexual acts during parties.

The Outlaw Ocean Project highlighted that North Korean laborers in Chinese factories endure constant surveillance by security personnel, working up to 18 hours a day with only one day off per month.

The U.S. Congress urged American companies to stop importing goods from these companies immediately, warning that 'American consumers are unknowingly exposed to products tainted by North Korean labor.' Many companies announced they would suspend their trade with them. Ian Urbina, representing The Outlaw Ocean Project, highlighted in an interview with The Chosunilbo on April 3, "The profits from the forced labor of North Korean residents go straight back to North Korea," and pointed out, "Ironically, the profits earned by South Korean consumers could fund cyber hacking or the development of mass destruction weapons, posing a direct threat to South Korea."

The United States, under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) enacted in 2017, impose hefty fines on companies importing products made by North Korean labor. Acting upon this, the Biden administration seized shipments of Chinese goods made by North Korean workers at ports nationwide in 2022 and imposed import sanctions on three Chinese companies found to have illegally employed North Korean workers.

South Korea, however, lacks specific legislation prohibiting the import of goods produced by North Korean labor, relying on individual assessments based on UN Security Council resolutions. A South Korean government source stated, "The South Korean government needs to directly assess the forced labor conditions of North Korean workers employed by Chinese companies to determine the necessity of sanctions."

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