

KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM

Laos Betrays “Gentlemen's Agreement” on North Korean Refugees

By Dennis Halpin
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The opening scene of the classic refugee movie “Casablanca” shows a map of Europe and North Africa. The narrator describes how “a tortuous, roundabout refugee trail sprang up.” Seventy years later another such trail has appeared. This one begins on the Sino-North Korean border, then moves south across the vast and dangerous Chinese mainland, to the rugged border area of Yunnan province. There refugees must hire a guide to lead them along old drug smuggling trails into Laos. The refugees then must navigate the Mekong River to reach safe haven in Thailand.

Despite a universal pledge after the Second World War to “never forget,” these new refugees are largely ignored by a world seized with headlines connected to Pyongyang's nuclear program and saber-rattling. Yet things are very bad in North Korea, especially for repatriated refugees. And, as the refugee girl observes in “Casablanca”: the devil has the people by the throat.

Nine North Korean refugees about the age of that refugee girl – mere kids really, between the ages of fifteen and twenty-three – were recently forcibly sent to China by Laotian officials and then, accompanied by North Korean agents, flown back to Pyongyang. These young people had no political agenda and were not a threat to anybody – although unconfirmed press reports indicate one of their fathers may have been involved in the past abductions of Japanese citizens. These youth had their whole lives ahead of them. Now their dreams are dashed as they enter the North Korean gulag.

I had first learned of the Laos refugee connection at a Congressional briefing given by Mike Kim. This young Korean-American spent four years assisting North Korean refugees in China, as described in his book *Escaping North Korea*. It was with some consternation that I, as a former consular officer, learned that Mike had been crossing the Chinese-Laotian border without proper documentation to lead North Korean refugees to freedom. I was equally amazed when U.S. Embassy officials in Vientiane said that they were not aware that an American citizen had been involved in illegal border-crossings in their country of responsibility. I told them to get a copy of Mike's book – and to read it.

Certainly not by coincidence, a Lao delegation was recently in Pyongyang. How much blood money did Kim Jong Un pledge in return for the forced repatriation of refugees? Did this lead the Lao to renege on the “gentlemen's agreement” on North Korean refugees which they had previously reached with the South Korean Embassy in Vientiane? I know something of this agreement as I heard of it directly from diplomats in Vientiane.

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What brought me officially to Laos in January 2009 was a Congressional delegation to the Asia Pacific Parliamentary Forum led by Representative Eni Faleomavaega. My real reason for visiting was to assist a family of North Korean refugees, under instructions from my Committee Chairman, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a former refugee herself. This family had expressed an interest, through human rights advocate Suzanne Schulte, in being resettled in the United States under the provisions in the North Korean Human Rights Act.

There had been long-term concern in the Congress that fewer than one hundred (at that time) North Korean refugees had been resettled in the United States. My mission was to meet with the refugee family, confirm their wish to come to America, and see that all diplomatic efforts were made to get them safely out.

When I arrived in Vientiane, I met with U.S. Embassy staff, who informed me that their contact with the family had been indirect, through the South Korean Embassy. The South Korean Embassy, according to the “gentlemen’s agreement,” was holding the family at a safe house in Vientiane on the condition that they kept a low profile. The American Deputy Chief of Mission accompanied me and a senior South Korean Embassy official to a restaurant where we met with only the father of the family – it was considered too dangerous to bring the whole family out. The South Korean diplomat confirmed the special, unofficial arrangements for refugees agreed to with Lao officials.

The refugee father said that he had decided that his family should go to America after listening to U.S. broadcasts while hiding in China. Our Embassy, aware of Ms. Ros-Lehtinen’s personal interest, moved expeditiously. The family left only a few months after our meeting. The next time I met them all was when Suzanne Schulte brought them to Capitol Hill after they were resettled.

Thus, the news from Laos of the recent repatriation was especially disturbing. It seemed a break with long-term, unofficial arrangements under which Lao officials looked the other way with regards to North Korean refugees. It is a major blow to the underground refugee network. For, like Casablanca seventy years ago, Laos had become a major stopping point on the tortuous, roundabout refugee trail. Without Laos and the “gentlemen’s agreement,” escape from North Korea, always an arduous and perilous task, has become even more difficult.

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