

**Human Rights Abuses in North Korea:
A Survivor's Perspective**

**Testimony before
House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Asia & the Pacific**

**“The Shocking Truth about
North Korean Tyranny”**

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Survivor of North Korean Human Rights Abuses

Mr. Chairman, ranking member, and members of the Subcommittee, please accept my sincere appreciation for the opportunity to testify before the subcommittee today. My name is Minhee Jo. I was born in 1991 in North Hamkyoung Province, in North Korea. (We were protected under UNHCR for about a year in Beijing, China, and upon receiving refugee status, my family came directly to the United States on March 20th, 2008.) The story of my family is as follows.

Starting in 1993, our family started to have shortage of food. In 1997, my family lost my father, maternal grandmother, younger siblings, and big sister. Since I was born, my parents have tried many different ways to raise me and my siblings. We tried to find sustenance in wild vegetables, grasshoppers, rats, tree barks, and even cattle in government-operated farms. In North Korea, killing a cow is considered a crime comparable to homicide, so a person caught killing a cow could be sentenced to death by shooting. Full aware of these facts, my parents risked their lives in order to feed my family. Our family did everything we could try, but due to the government's prohibition, we could not do any business, and eventually when my parents ran out of ways to feed our family, they made the hard decision to illegally cross the border to China. In Spring, 1997, my parents illegally visited a relative in China and purchased some food with their help.

However, when they arrived home, my father was arrested by the police, and officials of our town came with clubs and took my mother away after ruthlessly beating her. They also took away all of the food. My grandmother, my younger brother who couldn't walk at the time, my older sister, and I all cried as we tried to hold on to the things that they were taking away. In one day, we lost our parents and our food, and our house was in ruins with nothing left for us.

My grandmother cursed this world, and there wasn't anything that any of us children could do other than crying and staring at the road where we last saw our mother being taken away. We survived each day on wild plants and water as we earnestly waited for our parents' return. Three months passed, and we could finally see the contour of my mother coming back through the woods. We all ran towards her and greeted her with tears and hugs, filled with joy. She could barely walk due to the tortures she had suffered. Her body was all bruised, and she just lay on the floor, unable to get up, for about a month. In her conversation with my grandmother, I could hear all the tortures she had to undergo.

When she was jailed, she was forced to sit still, not allowed to move. They stepped on her legs as she sat still. They made her put forward her hands so that they could step on them with their heels. As a result, she couldn't use her legs. Although she said that the tortures were not as bad as they could have been, at the time she had been pregnant for 3 months, so from our standpoint, they could have put her life in danger. We learned afterwards that my father had told the officials about my mother's pregnancy and begged for her release. It was thanks to him that we could see our mother again.

However, my father admitted all the charges that they were accusing him of, and he was punished. Because he was a man, he had to suffer from all kinds of torture by the police. Being

kicked by the heels is only normal. They beat him with a club till it broke. And in order to hear the response that they wanted from my father, they forced him to starve for longer than 10 days with no water, tortured him, and beat him everyday. In the end, while he was being transported to a prison on a train, he passed away unable to withstand any further.

5 months after my mother was released, we heard the news of my father, and due to the shock, my mother bore a child at only 8 months. My youngest brother was born in the break of dawn with no light. My grandmother helped with the child-bearing, and all of us children were scared to death hearing my mother scream with pain.

Afterwards, many things happened that led us to leave our hometown and escape to China. However, we were deported back to North Korea 4 times, and it is still very difficult for me to explain the sort of torture and pain we suffered each time we were sent back. When we were sent back to North Korea, I myself did not receive too many punishments since I was a minor. However, the miseries I saw ripped my heart. When minors are sent back to North Korea, Bo-Wee-Bu (North Korean State Political Security Department) take them to orphanages called Koo-Ho-So (“Rescue Station”) The first orphanage I was sent to was located in Sinuiju. The second was on Onsung-kun. In Sinuiju, among the people who were staying at the orphanage included a five-week-old infant to an 18 year-old. There was also a family of three, a mother and two daughters, who had lost their home due to fire. The directors at the orphanage gave only 40g (1.4 oz) of baby formula per day. 16 year-olds were less than 4 feet tall. There were two groups of children at the orphanage. The first group was those few children who had enough strength to go out to the market field and steal food. And there were those who could only stay inside the orphanage. Those who could move built storage rooms and did other labor. Inside the orphanage, there were about 10 rooms, and 15-20 children stayed in each room. The space was so small that everyone had to sleep in the same direction at night. There wasn’t enough water. And for food, instead of rice, we were given barley and radish soup. We became hunger soon after eating. After waking up at 6 each morning, we had to work until 7pm, and we didn’t receive any education. For the smallest incidents, the directors would punish us, and because guards stood post every day, we couldn’t escape outside the orphanage over the wall. If someone was caught trying to escape, he or she was beaten until the instrument of beating broke. When a 15 year-old who was caught escaping tore his left leg tendon as a result of beating, and there was no one to take care of his condition. Some of these children who were beaten, had their food taken away, and worked endlessly died because of their weakness. I am 5’3, but when I was sent back to North Korea in 2006, they used to call me a giant, and one time, I was slapped on the face on account of my height. Likewise, many others born in and after the nineties couldn’t grow due to malnutrition. Education was available only for those children from families with good backgrounds, with ties to the government, and with ties to communist heroes. Only those from families who did well enough to give money or other goods to the teachers or schools could attend schools. Children from families like ours that was caught after escaping from the country could only attend classes focused on ideological indoctrination, and the only study materials

available were in poor quality such as “paper” made from tree barks for writing. At train stations and public places, there were young children sleeping under a bench as well as those children who had their clothes and shoes taken away by stronger kids. There were also those children who were suffering injuries from beating when they had been caught stealing food. Lastly, on October, 2006, there were three boiled potatoes that the orphanage was giving out to the children. Our family, before being released, was staying together for three days at an orphanage, and when we asked the girl who brought the potatoes to us, she said they had been living on those potatoes for the past two weeks. I was well over 10 years old, but North Korea had not changed at all during my lifetime.

A country that beats people to death like they are animals for having a religion, a country that sends a family of three generations for one family member’s trivial comment, a country that requires a travel permit for someone to attend his or her parents’ funeral... In novels, books, biographies, and poems, nothing else can be written but praises of the Great Leader. It is a country with absolutely no freedom. A country that abuses its senior citizens and mistreats its children though it labels them as “treasures.” A country that has beaten its citizens for the past over 20 years. A country in which the soldiers rob the civilians of their food. I believe in the U.S. and the U.N., a country and an international body that actually do treat the children as they should be as “treasures.” I would like to please ask the U.S. and U.N. to rescue the suffering North Korean people.

I would like to please ask you. Please remember the Holocaust. At least the survivors have finally found their freedom and may live freely as all of you do. However, the people in North Korea have been living under tyranny over the past several decades and even right now, as the people suffered under the Nazi regime. Please be their voice, and be advocates of their human rights.

There are many more stories I would like to share, but since the time is limited, I will conclude here. Thank you for your precious time, and thank you for listening.