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The British dilemma of North Korean refugees

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According to a UNHCR statistic report as of 2010, 581 North Korean refugees reside in the United Kingdom.^[1] Great Britain has accepted more North Korean defectors than other country.^[2] Since 2004, the UK government has provided homes, financial supports, and other social benefits for refugees from North Korea. However, it is noteworthy that the increasing trend of NK refugee has stagnated since 2008 – only scores of applications were accepted between 2008 and 2010. There are various interpretations of this new trend: firstly, I will introduce the general viewpoint of a decreasing trend in the number of NK refugees in the world: some NK refugees were able to acquire citizenship in their place of asylum during the statistic period, and these people are no longer counted as “refugees.” Secondly, the political and economic changes in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) affected this trend by preventing the escaping of its citizens, such as tightening guard arrangements in the NK border areas, harsher punishment for fugitives, and activation of illegal market trading.^[3] Therefore, the number of applicants for refugee status in other countries could decrease. However, these two general interpretations cannot fully explain the recent trend in the UK

-Refugee Population -> Refugees and people in refugee-like situations -> Originating from -> World -> Ref. and ref.-like sit. ori. from -> Dem. People’s Rep. of Korea
(Periodicity: Year, Applied Time Period: from 1994 to 2010)

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Australia			1	1	2	2	3	4	4	3	3	6	8	15	14	15	25
Belgium										0		0	0	7	9	13	22
Cambodia		2	3														
Canada	2	1	1		2		0	0		3	4	4	4	4	4	4	23
Denmark							2	2	7	7	7	7	7	8	8	9	9
France		1	1		3												
Germany							0	0	225	258	276	193	239	204	180	156	146
Ireland								1	5	5	5	5	5	6	6	6	6
Israel														2	2	2	2
Kazakhstan																	0
Kyrgyzstan													2	5	6	7	3
Luxembourg															0	0	
Mexico												1	1	1	1	1	1
Netherlands							3	7	9	14	15	18	20	27	29	31	32
New Zealand								1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1
Norway						3	3	3	3	3	3	4	5	9	13	14	14
Russian Federation													0		6	10	14
Singapore		1	1														
Sweden									2	2	2	6	7	7	7	8	8
Switzerland								1	2	1	1	1	6	6	6	4	4
Thailand						4	0										
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland										0	17	33	64	281	570	574	581
United States of America					2	2	2			7	9	9	30	22	23	25	25
Uzbekistan	1	2	4						1	0							
Yemen															1	1	1

In Britain, the refugees need to work for five years in order to have their permanent residency and then work for additional one year for British citizenship. Considering the UK immigration rule, the NK refugees who came to UK in 2004 were eligible for citizenship in 2010, and arithmetically, the maximum number of those applicants are seventeen. In other words, there are not many NK refugees who were excluded from the category of refugees due to their acquisition of UK citizenship. Moreover, the number of applications for refugee status in the UK did not appear decreased dramatically. According to UK Home Ministry, the number of applications was 245 in 2008. Regarding this figure, the general interpretation for recent UK refugee trend does not apply to British case.

In fact, facing the massive inflow of NK refugees, the British border agency started to apply more strict criteria for application. And these regulations were designed to specify the ‘real refugee’ who desperately needs ‘British’ protection. For instance, the UK government rejects the application of defectors who already have a South Korean citizenship or are supposed to apply for that citizenship. Britain requires those defectors to provide their fingerprints in order to check whether they came to the UK via the Republic of Korea. In 2008, it decided to deport North Korean defectors who claimed that they came directly from DPRK

but actually have resided in ROK.[4] South Korea recognizes the North Korean immigrants as its own citizens. Therefore, Britain does not need to accept 'the South Koreans,' and it also appeared that some Chinese citizens of Korean descent pretended to be NK defectors and acquire refugee status. These illegal immigrants from China studied North Korean history, songs, geography, and political system. In some case, they even presented North Korean notes, birth certificates, IDs, and other official documents. According to operational guidance notes for a North Korean refugee applicant, the UK border agency tries to identify these Chinese citizens of Korean descent through a series of interviews.[5] This is not easy to pass: sometimes, even the real North Koreans failed to prove their nationality, and the North Korean bank notes or Kim Il sung badges are not a valid evidences of their North Korean identification any longer. These kinds of North Korean 'merchandise' can be purchased even in online market places.[6]

Then, why has the British government raised the barriers to entry of North Korean refugees? First of all, in economic terms, it is because the UK does not need more low-skilled labours due to eastern European immigration.[7] The North Korean defectors usually do not speak English and hence normally find only physical jobs, especially in London. The most popular places where they work are Korean stores and restaurants.[8] But the Korean community in UK is not big enough to provide full-time jobs to these North Koreans if their number increased dramatically as they did between 2007- 2008. Moreover, because most of those work places are situated in London where the influx of low-skilled of immigrants is already heavy, their opportunity for a legal residence in Great Britain became far more limited. It turns out that many recent successful applicants have the capability to work in relatively sophisticated fields, such as electronic engineering.[9] This group of North Korean refugees, about six hundreds, is not significant to affect the labour market of Britain so far. Yet regarding the increasing trend of NK immigrants in UK up to 2008, the UK government decided to manage the number of groups under control in order to lower the pressure on the British labour market in the future.



Secondly and more importantly, in terms of international politics, the diplomatic relations with DPRK limited Britain's generous policy for North Korean refugees. The UK is one of the two Western European countries, in terms of Cold War logic, which recognises DPRK as a legitimate country in the Korean Peninsula along with ROK.[10] In this context, the lenient view toward North Korean defectors definitely conflicts with British foreign policy. Moreover, the conflict between these refugees and DPRK government in the UK has worsened the situation. In September 2010, for instance, the Federation of North Korean Residents in Europe (FNKR), a defector organisation based in the Great Britain, held a demonstration right in front of the DPRK embassy in London. The protestors denounced the NK embassy's event commemorating the establishment of Kim Il sung regime and the tenth anniversary of the diplomatic relationship between UK and DPRK. The FNKR was established in July 2010, and its aggressive anti- Kim Jung il activity made the British position awkward. Despite its title, the Federation of North Korean Residents in Europe, the majority of its members are from the UK.[11] It is clear that Britain does not want to be a battlefield of North Koreans. The recent conflict between defectors and NK regime could result in political violence in Britain and further undermine the liberal argument for human rights. The past record of North Korean terrorism and recent violent actions of Pyongyang toward its defectors provide the rationale: for example, NK agents tried to kill Hwang Jangyop, one of the most prominent defectors in ROK, who made a series of criticisms of the Kim Jung il regime.[12] This will be the case in UK if the DPRK regime cannot tolerate criticism from refugees on the regime in the UK. In addition, the demonstrators, FNKR members, demanded that the UK government cut off relations with DPRK. Needless to say, this criticism from refugees on British diplomacy is not what Westminster expected and wanted from them.

The recent restrictions in NK refugee application in the UK reflect Britain's hardship in their labour market and international relations. The present economy of UK does not need an influx of low-skilled labours. And this clearly affected its policy toward North Korean defectors. Moreover, the past record of fake refugees undermined the voice for humanity. The anti- Kim regime movement of NK defectors did also adversely affect its immigration regulation due to UK-NK diplomatic relations. The conservative approach toward the NK refugee will be maintained until the British government can manage its labour market under its control and find any diplomatic solution to prevent the conflict between the defectors and NK government.

[1] UNHCR Statistical Online Population Database, <http://apps.who.int/globalatlas/dataQuery/reportData.asp?rptType=1>

[2] In fact, the Republic of Korea, aka South Korea, recognizes those refugees as its own citizens. Hence the UNHCR does not count the North Koreans in South Korea as refugees.

[3] Radio Free Asia, "A decrease in North Korean refugee: thanks to activation of illegal market", 19 Oct, 2010, http://www.rfa.org/korean/in_focus/private_market-10192010182051.html

[4] Asiancorrespondent.com, "Fraudulent North Korean Defectors to be Expelled From UK", 29 July, 2008, <http://asiancorrespondent.com/22663/fraudulent-north-korean-defectors-to-be-expelled-from-uk/>

[5] UK Border Agency, *Operational Guidance Note, North Korea (DPRK)*, Issued July 2010

[6] Interview with North Korean defectors in New Malden, London, 15 Oct, 2011

[7] Dan McCurry, *Lump of labour*, LabourList, http://www.labourlist.org/a_lump_of_labour_dan_mccurry

[8] *Interview with North Korean defectors in New Malden*, London, 15 Oct, 2011

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] The other Western European nation recognising DPRK, except Germany which succeeded the foreign relations of East Germany, is Italy. See "Embassy of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea", Foreign and Commonwealth Office (UK). <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/foreign-embassy-in-the-uk/korea-dpr-north-korea>.

[11] Mok Yongjae, *Defectors Protest at London Embassy*, DailyNK, 10 Sep, 2010, <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?cataId=nk03100&num=6789>

[12] Kim Taehong, *Further Hwang Assassin Unmasked*, DailyNK, 20 Oct, 2010, <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?cataId=nk00100&num=6928>

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