

North Korean refugees treated like prisoners in their own country

By Dan Chung, Washington Post

I have had thousands of interactions with North Korean refugees in China. There is one that I can't get one out of my head, however.

I met her during a visit two years ago at her small farming village. I was staying the night in a dreary, one-room house. The roof was made of mud and the interior walls and ceiling were covered in newspaper.

I was there to help her and other North Korean refugees like her find access to resources and medical care. It was part of my work with the nonprofit organization Crossing Borders.

I was taking notes for the doctor when this woman approached our table. She was just 38 years old, but she had a sad face with wrinkles around her eyes. She had no rights or protections. China routinely arrests refugees and sends them back to North Korea, where they face spending time in the world's cruelest prison camps.

Same Birthday, Different Lives

As I took down her essential information, she told me her birth date. Shocked, I stopped typing and asked her to repeat herself. We shared the same birthday. We had been born on the same day, but in different worlds, on the opposite sides of the Korean Demilitarized Zone that separates North Korea and South Korea.

I was born in Seoul, the capital city of South Korea, and she was born in Chongjin, a North Korean mining town about 200 miles to the north. Though our births were separated by just moments and miles, the details of our lives couldn't be more different. My family was able to come to the United States when I was a baby, in search of a better life.

Meanwhile, she had spent years of her childhood trapped in a devastating food deficiency that killed up to 3 million innocent North Koreans. Her family starved to death. Many refugees have told me they ate bark and grass to survive at the instruction of their government.

Escaping To China No Guarantee Of Freedom

Though it is a crime to leave their country, hundreds of thousands of North Koreans have risked imprisonment to find their next meal. To the south is the most heavily militarized border in the world, so they escape to China.

This refugee made her journey in 2001 by walking across the frozen Tumen River, which makes up her country's Northern border. I have seen footprints on the Tumen in winter, small records of hope left by people fleeing the North Korean border guards. The guards are not just there to keep people from entering the country, but even more so, from leaving.

After she crossed the border, she was captured by a group of criminals, who sold her to a poor farmer whom she was forced to marry. She still lives with him today.

China regularly arrests and deports aid workers like me, forcing us to leave the country. I've been surrounded by Chinese soldiers holding giant guns. I've fled the country out of fear for my safety. I've organized a plan to smuggle people out of the country.

Earlier this year, my team and I decided that I would stop going to China, so that I can publicly promote the work that we do. This means that I will never be able to go back without fear of arrest. The publication of this essay will ensure that.

Tense Relationship With The U.S.

I was able to walk away from China on my own terms, but refugees like the one I met two years ago aren't. While Americans were spared this week from North Korea's threats of nuclear war, she likely will never escape the risk of death at the hands of that government. This is the definition of injustice: 200 miles. That's all it took for us to live two completely different lives.

She had been taught her whole life to hate America. In school, North Korean children are taught that Americans are baby-eating monsters. But as I travel the world to raise funds for Crossing Borders, I've come to appreciate the generosity of the American people. Though we have donors throughout the world, there is something unique and beautiful about the American way of thinking that makes us give to charities like Crossing Borders.

When this woman and I discovered that we were born on the same day, we stood up from the table, grabbed each other's forearms and looked each other in the eyes.

"Thank you, thank you," she said to me, mumbling some of the only English words she knew.

I don't think she meant to thank me; I hadn't done anything for her at that point. Still, she continued to thank me.

I didn't know how to express the heartbreak that I was feeling at the moment. I'm still figuring out how to express it today.