**Escape From North Korea**

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In an archipelago of safe houses here, part of a 21st-century Underground Railroad, I met groups of people who live every moment with sickening fear.

These are North Koreans who have escaped to the ''free world'' -- China -- and are now at constant risk of being captured by Chinese police. The Chinese government, in a disgraceful breach of its obligations under the 1951 Refugees Convention, hands these escapees back to North Korea, where they face beatings and imprisonment, occasionally even execution.

In one shelter is a 14-year-old North Korean girl: shy, sweet and terrified. Her parents led her across the frozen Tumen River from North Korea in the middle of winter, but then they became separated while trying to flee the police. ''I don't know where my parents are, or if they are even alive,'' she said.

Now a joint crackdown by the North Koreans and Chinese is greatly increasing the peril for people like her.

The North Korean authorities used to detain citizens returned by China for a few weeks or months and then release them after a bit of ''re-education.'' But about a year ago, North Korea greatly increased the penalties.

Now those returned by China are often sentenced to prison for several years, and repeat offenders or Christians can be sent with their entire families to labor camps for life.

Some North Koreans told me that their government now holds regular sentencing rallies, at which the punishments are publicly announced -- or in extreme cases, such as those who became Christian evangelists while in China, the accused are executed in front of the crowd by firing squad.

One Christian I spoke to had been beaten so badly after his return by China that he tried to commit suicide by swallowing a handful of pins. The prison, not wanting to have to dispose of a corpse, freed him -- and he eventually made his way back to China.

''If he is sent back again,'' said his wife, ''he'll be beaten to death.''

China has also increased its punishments for its own citizens who are caught helping North Koreans. The penalty used to be a fine, but now it is jail for a year or two -- or for a decade or more if someone smuggles escapees to South Korea.

''Now most Chinese don't dare help the Koreans,'' said one local official who secretly protects a safe house full of North Koreans -- and who even stood guard outside as I interviewed them. ''But I feel so badly for them. They're just wretched.''

With the help of incredibly courageous conductors on the modern Underground Railroad, I visited four shelters that together house dozens of North Koreans, and residents of a fifth shelter were brought to my vehicle so that I could talk to them safely. My entire visit was conducted under very tight security to make sure I did not lead police to the safe houses.

The North Koreans I talked to described a society that is increasingly corrupt and disillusioned. One said that even with the latest crackdown, a $400 bribe to guards will win a prisoner's immediate release. Another estimated that up to 20 percent of North Koreans in her area are disaffected enough that they listen illegally to Chinese broadcasts.

Chinese and South Korean missionaries are also beginning to evangelize secretly in North Korea, a sign of weakening government control. One Chinese Christian I talked to had made four trips into North Korea to evangelize. ''If I'd been caught, I don't think I would have been executed,'' she said, ''but it wouldn't have been good.''

All the same, none of these North Koreans thought an uprising was imminent. Indeed, a surprising number of them are so steeped in propaganda that they still insist that ''Dear Leader'' Kim Jong-il is a good man. ''The problem is with lower officials, not with Kim Jong-il himself,'' claimed one man who has arranged for smugglers to bring his entire family out to freedom in China. (For more on the North Koreans, go to my blog, www.nytimes.com/ontheground.)

President Bush should raise China's breach of its international obligations with Hu Jintao. Mr. Bush might think of that 14-year-old girl, who spends her days minding two 9-year-old boys whose mothers were caught and sent back to North Korea. Those three children are modern reminders of the terrors of Anne Frank. They fear with every footstep outside their door that China will arrest them and send them back to their national torture chamber.