The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

The Forgotten Victims of the North Korean Crisis

By Tessa Morris-Suzuki

As the slow and difficult negotiations on North Korean denuclearisation unfold, one small group of a hundred people or so in Japan are watching proceedings with a unique personal interest. Some are Japanese, others ethnic Koreans. All are survivors of one of the modern world's most bizarre, tragic and utterly forgotten "humanitarian" projects.

Between 1959 and 1984, these few were among the 93,340 people who migrated from Japan to North Korea in search of a new and better life. There were several particularly ironic features of this migration. First, it took place precisely at the time of Japan's "economic miracle". Secondly, although it was described as a "repatriation", almost all those who "returned" to North Korea originally came from the south of the Korean peninsula, and many had been born and lived all their lives in Japan. Third, the glowing images of life which tempted them to Kim Il Sung's "worker's paradise" came, not just from the North Korean propaganda machine but from the Japanese mainstream media, supported and encouraged by politicians including key members of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party.

After decades in North Korea, around one hundred migrants have now escaped the harsh realities of life there, and made the perilous return journey back to Japan. Other survivors of the same project who managed to escape have settled in South Korea.

The story of their migration has been almost entirely unheard by the rest of the world. But it urgently needs to be heard, not least because it involves an injustice that resulted in the deaths of thousands of people, and is still causing the deaths and untold suffering today. The history of this migration also reveals the complexity of postwar Japan's connections with North Korea: and without understanding this, it is impossible fully to understand the impasse which their relations have now reached.

As secret documents from the Cold War era are declassified and testimony from survivors emerges, the true story of this mass movement is now starting to emerge for the first time. We now know that it was the product of a deliberate policy, very carefully designed and implemented at the height of the Cold War by the North Korean and Japanese governments often working in concert, and supported in various ways by the Soviet Union, the United States and the International Red Cross movement. It is a history that sheds important light on the complex background to Northeast Asia's contemporary conflicts. It also evokes chilling echoes of other coerced or manipulated migrations, including the repatriation of Eastern Europeans to the Soviet Union and other Communist countries in the immediate post-war era.

The story starts in the mid-1950s at the height of the Cold War. Some 600,000 Koreans were living in Japan, most having migrated to Japan from the southern part of the Korean Peninsula during the colonial period (1910-1945). Having been unilaterally designated "foreigners" by the Japanese government, they had no legal right to permanent residence and faced continual discrimination, prejudice and poverty. South Korea was then an impoverished nation under the authoritarian rule of Yi Seung-Man (Syngman Rhee) and had no interest in taking them back.

The newly released records show that from 1955 onwards, some Japanese bureaucrats and politicians (notably members of the ruling party then and now) began to develop strategies to encourage Koreans in Japan to "return" instead to North Korea. Knowing that this was a politically explosive issue, they tried to keep their role in the scheme covert and to ensure that the exodus was carried out under the auspices of the neutral and humanitarian Red Cross. However, as a leading Japanese Red Cross official put it, his government's real aim was "to rid itself of several tens of thousands of Koreans who are indigent and vaguely communist".

Via their national Red Cross Societies, Japan made secret contact with North Korea in 1956 and 1957, urging its government to accept a substantial influx of Koreans from Japan. The Japanese government and Japan Red Cross officials placed intense pressure on the International Committee of the Red Cross to lend its name and support to a mass "repatriation", thus enabling the scheme to be presented to the world as an apolitical, humanitarian venture. To this end, they provided the international body with some highly questionable information.

Meanwhile, the limited welfare payments available to Koreans in Japan were being drastically slashed - a measure that must surely have made the prospect of life in communist North Korea look more appealing. At the same time, the Japanese Red Cross was engaged in a secret search for ships to carry out the project.

Japan Red Cross Center in Niigata

At first, the North Korean response to the proposal was cool. It was happy to accept a small number of "true believers", but it was having enough problems feeding its own people in the wake of the Korean-US War without accepting a mass inflow of immigrants. In 1958, however, North Korean leader Kim Il Sung dramatically changed course. Apparently seeing the scheme as a valuable source of skilled labor, and as an international propaganda coup which might damage Japan's relations with South Korea and the US, he issued a public

welcome to ethnic Koreans from Japan, promising them housing, jobs, education and welfare.

Immediately, propaganda campaigns began to sweep through Japan's Korean community, orchestrated by a local pro-North Korean organization, but amplified by a flood of articles in the Japanese mass media. A special "Repatriation Cooperation Society", involving politicians from across Japan's political spectrum, was set up to distribute information encouraging Koreans to "return" to North Korea. Leading members included former Prime Minister Hatoyama Ichiro and prominent ruling-party politician Koizumi Junya (whose son Koizumi Junichiro was to become Prime Minister in 2001).

Copy of a Repatriation Cooperation Society Recruitment Poster from ICRC archive

Another troubling aspect revealed by declassified documents is the United States attitude toward the scheme. The US State Department was at that time focussed on renegotiating its all-important security treaty with Japan, a process for which it relied on the enthusiastic cooperation of Japanese Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke (grandfather of the present Japanese Prime Minister, Abe Shinzo).

The US appears to have been unaware of the secret contacts between Japan and North Korea in 1956 and 1957. When it first became aware of the repatriation plan a couple of years later, the Eisenhower administration regarded it with concern. But once the Japanese and North Korean Red Cross Societies reached an agreement on a mass "return" in mid-1959, the Eisenhower administration did not take any practical steps to halt the unfolding tragedy.

US Ambassador in Tokyo Douglas MacArthur II (who played a key role on the US side) told his Australian counterpart in 1959 that the "American Embassy had checked Japanese opinion and found it was almost unanimously in favour of 'getting rid of the Koreans'". At this sensitive moment in US-Japan relations, the State Department was clearly cautious of intervening in a scheme that was an obvious vote-winner for the Kishi regime. Besides, MacArthur personally sympathised with the public emotion, commenting (as the Australian Ambassador at the time reported) that "he himself can scarcely criticize the Japanese for this as the Koreans left in Japan are a poor lot including many Communists and many criminals."

In fact, although some were doubtless ideologically committed to the Kim Il Sung regime, those who "returned" to North Korea included tens of thousands of people whose only dream was a better future for themselves and their families: people who included entrepreneurs, technicians and university lecturers as well as the poor and unemployed. While most were ethnic Koreans, their number also included over 6,000 Japanese nationals (mostly spouses of Korean men). Many thousands, of course, were children.

"To our dear fatherland!" The first one comes up the gangway

The first to board the ship for North Korea

The International Red Cross "confirmation of free will", which was set in place to guarantee to the world that this was a voluntary migration, proved (despite the best intentions of some of those involved) to be little more than a public ritual, too poorly-staffed, lacking the necessary information, and carried out too late in the day to have its intended effect.

Testimony from the small number of former "returnees" who have recently slipped across the border out of North Korea recalls the shock they felt on first arriving and realising the desperate poverty of the country to which they had come. Their plight was made worse some years after the start of the "repatriation", when the North Korean government began to regard "returnees" from Japan with growing suspicion and prejudice. Thousands were sent to labour camps. Of these, many were never heard from again.

North Koreans at Cheongjin
welcome the repatriates

Today in Japan, relatives of those who "returned" to North Korea in the Cold War years watch the difficult process of nuclear diplomacy quietly but with intense concern. The support they send through unreliable communications channels is often the only means of survival for family members left behind in North Korea. While the story of the Japanese kidnap victims of North Korea has dominated news headlines, this tragic story of the 93,340 who were "returned" remains little known, and hostility to North Korea (as well as fears for the fate of relatives in the North) makes it difficult for the small group of survivors now living in Japan to raise their voices. Fears of a mass "re-return" of the ethnic Koreans who left under the repatriation scheme is also a little-discussed factor at work in Japanese government calculations on its relationship with North Korea.

The slow process of dialogue that began at the Six Party Talks in Beijing holds out a faint ray of hope for the future of these divided families. In the meanwhile, it is surely time for their story finally to be told.

This is an expanded version of an article that appeared at the Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network at Nautilus on March 13, 2007. It is published at Japan Focus on March 15, 2007.

See a YouTube presentation on the repatriates with North Korean footage by the author here.

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