

Why China must stop sending refugees back to North Korea.

Of all the unbearable stories told to the U.N. Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea perhaps the most horrifying was that of 34-year-old Jee Heon-ah on 20th August 2013, the opening day of the hearings in Seoul.

During the late 1990s, famine and desperate hunger drove thousands of North Koreans to cross into China. Jee, lured by an offer of work cutting grass, fell into the hands of traffickers who sold her to an old man. The Chinese police soon found her and returned her to North Korea. She ended up in a prison camp – one of those whose existence the regime denies. Many inmates were women who, like her, had been handed back to North Korea by the Chinese. Some were pregnant. One of them Jee Heon-ah will never forget.

‘She worked all day,’ Jee recalled. It was farm work, hard long hours, but the guards made no allowance for her condition. Many other pregnant women miscarried, but this woman gave birth to a live baby. ‘The baby was crying. It was the first time I’d seen a child born and we were so happy. We had a bucket of water to wash the baby, but it would not stop crying.

‘Then we heard footsteps. An agent of the *bowibu*, the secret police, came in. “Push its head under,” he ordered. The mother sobbed, “Please let me keep my baby, please forgive me.” The *bowibu* man was beating her and the baby was crying. At last, her hands shaking, the poor mother had no option but to hold her child’s face underwater.

‘The crying stopped. A big bubble rose up. This old lady who had helped deliver the child, she picked it up and quietly left the room.’

Some weeks after hearing Jee’s testimony the Commissioners met another North Korean, Park Ji-hyun, whose ordeal is now an Amnesty International film, *The Other Interview*. It tells not just of the physical brutality inflicted on those forced back to North Korea, but of their anguish and emotional torture.

As a girl in North Korea, Ji-hyun was taught she had two lives: ‘real’ and political. And that political life was more important. She was told that two sorts of food sustained her, real meals and ideology. In 1995 the dictator cut real food rations to families. People starved. Teachers stopped asking where pupils were. They had died of hunger. People also knew that if they complained they would vanish. The authorities came for Ji-hyun’s neighbours, saying, ‘These people are going to a place from which there is no return.’

When they threatened Ji-hyun she had to get out fast. She left one freezing night, made it to the frozen Tumen river and walked across the ice to China. Cold and desperate, she knocked at the first house she came to. The people were kind, fed her white rice and an egg, luxuries unheard

of back home. But it was not safe to stay. If caught she’d be sent back to North Korea and prison. She had lived near camp Chongjin *kwanliso* 25 and heard the shots when prisoners were executed.

‘Find a Chinese protector,’ she was advised. ‘Then you’ll be safe.’ There was a man who arranged such things. At his

‘The guard forced the sobbing mother to hold her newborn child face-down in a bucket till it drowned.’

TESTIMONY OF JEE HEON-AH TO THE U.N. COMMISSION OF INQUIRY ON NORTH KOREA, TUESDAY 20 AUGUST, 2013

house people came to examine her. Was she strong? Could she work? She felt like an animal at market.

Ji-hyun turned out to be worth £500 and the man who bought her made sure he got his money’s worth. She scrubbed, ploughed, dug, all for a little bit of rice and a few vegetables.

He used her for his pleasure. Her torture. ‘Don’t make trouble,’ he said, ‘if I turn you out you will end up in a place far worse than this.’ She got pregnant and felt helpless, but the prospect of a child gave her hope, renewed her will to live. She was so starved during pregnancy that her son grew up sickly. One day the man said, ‘Your kid’s a drain

‘We were worked harder than animals. Four women to shift an oxcart loaded with a ton of soil. Two of us in front pulling, two behind pushing. We couldn’t do it at a walk either. We had to run.’

PARK JI-HYUN ‘THE OTHER INTERVIEW’

on me. I’m going to sell him.’ She grabbed a knife. ‘Touch my son,’ she said, ‘and I’ll kill you.’

After six years in China the Chinese army got wind of her and seized her. She was handed to the North Koreans. There was no chance to say goodbye to her son or explain what was happening. He was told she’d abandoned him.

Torture, starvation and executions: North Korea’s horrifyingly cruel prison camps

THE INDEPENDENT, 20th August 2013

The detention centre was hard. She did not know when, if, or ever, she would get out. Once, racked by diarrhoea she rushed to the latrine out of turn and a guard forced her to scoop out the mess of excrement with her bare hands, but the horrific conditions she endured couldn’t exceed the agony of being parted from her boy. Where was he? Was he well? Had the monster sold him? The pain was a knife in her heart. So many women were in the same situation it was a wonder their tears didn’t dissolve the prison walls.

The women knew they would soon be sent to camps. From a labour camp there was some hope of release, but if allocated to a political camp they’d almost certainly die there. Ji-hyun was sent to a labour camp. She worked all hours, all weathers. ‘We had to do the ploughing ourselves, four women to each plough. Not at walking pace either, we had to run.’ She was beaten for being too tired to continue. She starved. Why?

Why all this cruelty, this useless, pointless evil? How had she deserved this? Why must her son lose his mother? She wanted to scream at people living faraway comfortable lives, ‘Don’t I have the right to be happy? Doesn’t my child have the right to be comforted in his mother’s arms just like children in the rest of the world?’ For six months in the labour camp, sobbing herself to sleep, Ji-hyun dreamed of finding her son again. Her longed-for freedom arrived in an unexpected way.

Working in the fields she trod on some rotten wire and tetanus blued and bloated her leg. She thought she would die. So did the camp medical authorities, they wanted her gone. She was released, and in her delirium thought, *thank you, tetanus, you set me free.*

Ji-hyun’s agonised leg stumped across the ice again to China and took her searching for her son. It carried her from place to place until at last... ‘It’s mama,’ said the sunburned wild-haired ghost. The boy looked scared, then smiled. Then laughed and hugged her.

Ji-hyun knew she and her son had to get out of China. They headed for the Mongolian border, a high wire fence. Ji-hyun stood looking at it in despair. No way she could climb it, not with her leg. In the distance a Chinese police car was approaching. From nowhere, a man came running. He lifted the boy through the wire. Then he lifted her.

Wow! Only a very special person would risk his life for theirs! Then and there Ji-hyun fell in love. Eleven years later they’re still deeply in love and her son has a proper dad.

Ji-hyun says, ‘People in North Korea live like slaves in a gargantuan prison, not even aware of the phrase *human rights*. Their plight is beyond description. The global community must help them. Repatriating defectors, as China does, is tantamount to sending them to their deaths.’

Amnesty International’s *Send No One Back* campaign wants people fleeing from oppression in North Korea to be recognised as refugees and protected as such. Please support Amnesty and help to protect them.

Please don’t turn the page. Maybe you feel that the task is impossible and that you are powerless to help. *But no one is powerless unless they choose to be. We need to know that and remember it.* In this world there are rare, wonderful people who save lives. Ji-hyun met one. Please be another.

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