

Testimony of Mrs. Hae-Nam Ji  
North Korean defector  
June 5, 2003  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs

I was born in Namun-ri, Hamhung city, Hamkyungnam-do on May 17, 1949. My family was poor but I graduated from a college of light industry. As a propaganda member, I went around explaining and promoting party policy to everyone in several factories. I shouted out slogans such as "What the Party decides, we follow" encouraging all workers with my songs to complete their tasks within the set timeframe. In 1989 when the 13th Party Convention was held I began having skepticisms about the inappropriate actions of party cadres. At that time anyone who raised an issue against the wrongdoings of the deified cadres was punished. Against this backdrop, I divorced my husband who failed to take care of my family in 1989.

I sank into depression managing to stay afloat by selling my own blood because I was unable to find a job. Then on the night of December 25, 1992, my friends gathered together in Hamju-kun, Hamkyungnam-do. That night I tried to drown my sorrows away by singing. Five people including a fortuneteller who read palms, and three friends came together to sing and dance. I enjoyed time with my friends by having fun and singing a South Korean song called "Don't cry Hongdo." I learned the song from a film based on President Park Jung Hee's time called "Nation and destiny" where a singer belts out "Don't cry Hongdo" in a café in the fifth series.

A few months later on May 15, 1993 an inspector from the Security Protection Agency of Hamju-kun Hamkyungnam-do summoned me. I followed him without a second thought to the grounds of the Security Protection Agency. However to my dismay I was locked in jail with no further words or going through preliminary hearing (place where interrogation takes place before being incarcerated).

The beatings I received in jail were so severe that my entire body was bruised and I was unable to get up for a month. I was sent to an enlightenment center after receiving a sentence of three years. I was confined in the Security Protection Agency of Hamju-kun for being the leader of disseminating revisionism in the society instead of singing songs of loyalty to Kim Il Song and Kim Jong Il. At that time according to the decree regarding social order, those who criticized the social order, those who sang foreign songs, those who wasted state assets, those who ate but did not work, those who drink, those who swindle were harshly punished and were even subject to a death sentence.

The four people who were together with me that night received a sentence of eight months of forced labor while I was sent to the Security Protection Agency in Myungchun-kun, Hamkyungbuk-do after 15 days in the Security Protection Agency in Hamju-kun, Hamkyungnam-do for teaching "Don't cry Hongdo" to the four others. I was subject to torture and sexual harassment that cannot be imagined by another human being. The detention center guards were around 22-24 years old. I was mortified and wanted to die rather than be locked up. I tried swallowing cement cut into four pieces of squares as well as sewage, rubbish and hair but I didn't die.

From then on the guard increased surveillance and I wasn't able to do anything without them watching. That is when I was once again moved to the Security Protection Agency in Hwasung-kun. Even though the Administration of the Preliminary Hearing made a call to say I wasn't subject to a preliminary hearing, judicial officers managed to send the confined people to penal servitude by adding some other defects. As I was accused of a misdemeanor of simply singing a wrong song, my preliminary hearing was relatively lighter than others. Imagine what the others with more serious sentences endured?

The daily ration in the enlightenment center was 700g however we only received 180 grams a

meal since the rest of the ration was set apart as "economy rice". For the new comers who were sent to "new inmate class" the ration was 100 grams per meal. I became so emaciated that I felt that the pickled cabbage they provided together with the ration was the most delicious food.

The convicts were put into labor from 8 in the morning till 6 in the evening officially. However we normally had to work 22 hours for any urgent tasks the state mandates. In addition the male guards would summon female inmates to their offices under the pretense of individual interrogation and sexually harass them without hesitation. After work each day, for an hour, a mutual criticism session was held. The inmates would give false accusations against others or else a portion of their ration was taken away.

I was released in September 1995 from the enlightenment center out of the supposed special consideration of the Dear Leader. I was sent to Hamju-kun but doors to jobs were closed for me as a released convict. I felt hurt because people would turn their backs on me and at that time, my husband and beloved son came to make amends and I accepted my husband back out of forgiveness. With the stigma of being a released convict during the time of an economic crisis, I had to resort to selling my blood to transfusion centers to feed my husband and son. I walked 200~250 ri (~393m) a day as a peddler but my husband ran away with my son taking the money I saved up with him.

I then decided to defect to China with South Korea in mind as the final destination. Disgruntled with the corrupt regime, cut off from the society and my family, I turned away from my son and cursed North Korea as I fled in early September of 1999. I had 1000 won in North Korean currency when I took the train headed for Tuman River and arrived at Musan in Hamkyungbuk-do where they check passes since it is close to the border. I hid inside restaurants and bribed the innkeeper to take shelter and sleep during the night. I brought 200 won worth of food on top of 200 won in cash to a guard from National Border Patrol in Musan telling him that I will give him more when I come back from China after selling my merchandise. He believed me and let me pass and I arrived in China after crossing the Tuman River at 3:30 p.m. Even the soldiers are starving in North Korea that they would do anything for money and their goal is to accrue 500,000 won by the time they are dismissed from the military service.

They would not shy away from doing anything to get their hands on money regardless of military regulations. I was able to use this opportunity to escape to China by crossing the Tuman River and hid in the mountains until night fell. I went down to the village and asked an ethnic Korean family to let me sleep one night but was refused. Anxious, I stayed awake all night in a shed eating pre-ripe fruits. The next day I was caught by the owner of the grove who held me as a captive for eating too many fruits. A car drove into the pear grove when we were working at three in the afternoon and I quickly lowered myself into the pepper field to hide in vain but was captured and pushed into the car. I was frightened because I thought they were North Korean soldiers but I was brought to a place called Long Jiang in Ji Lin. Along with another woman, I was locked up in a widower's house. The other woman was sold the next day and I became the sexual toy of the lone old man. I couldn't resist because I was afraid I would be sent to the Security Service. For 15 days I became the sex toy of a widower, looking out for any opportunity to escape while getting some food into my stomach. Then one day an ethnic Korean offered to take me to my sister's house in Heilongjiang. I followed what ever he told me because I was afraid only death would await me if I was captured by the Security Service. However I realized later that the widower gave me to the other ethnic Korean because he had no money.

Eventually, I was sold for 4000 yuan to a Chinese in Hwangnihu Tonghua Ji Lin and had to live in his house against my will because Ji Lin was a city with tight security. The Chinese man's height was only 145 cm and he had a very strange appearance. During my stay at his house, I had to hide inside the closet for hours whenever policemen came to investigate. Afraid that I would escape, he installed locks on every door and I was kept inside all day. I even had to relieve myself inside the room. At night I was reduced to becoming a sex toy of someone who looked like a monster and only the thought of escaping ruled my every moment in the house.

The man became suspicious that I was thinking of escape and he brought me to the brick factory where he worked to watch over me day and night. Whenever the Security Service rushed in I would flee to the mens toilet and stay there for hours and even had to hide myself in the brick oven until I felt as if my whole body would burn. Even on the coldest winter days I had to hide for hours in the rubbish storage place. Several times, I hid in the closet in the factory changing room. Chinese men would come to where I hid because they thought North Korean women were pretty. They would stare at me as if I was an animal in the zoo and sexually molest me and their actions were revolting. I didnt have any chance to escape for several months.

Then with the help of an ethnic Korean I lead the Chinese man to my sister's house near Heilongjiang. I used this chance to follow my sister's friend to Weihai Shandong where I found work in a restaurant. I was humiliated and insulted during the three months at this restaurant because I was a woman from North Korea. I was not paid on time and I had to do the most arduous and dirty tasks but I never complained because I feared that even a small slight might cause them to send me to the Security Service. I was determined to go to South Korea so I only worked and tried not to think. With the small amount I managed to save, along with six other North Koreans, I bought oil, life-jackets, binoculars and a compass with 700 yuan.

We made out to a beach in Weihai and succeeded in stealing a speedboat at around midnight. As we headed for South Korea the gauge broke down and water filled in the boat and a Chinese fisherman rescued us at daybreak after spending the night fighting against high waves. We had 50 yuan tied around our thighs and a saw in case if we were caught to use the saw in order to break free or commit suicide.

The six of us stayed together trying to seize another opportunity when a South Korean gave us 3000 yuan. We bought life jackets, binoculars, compass and some bread. After stealing a motorboat we waited for a good day to start off when the weather would be mild in a place called Hopo in Weihai. We left at 12 midnight but the boat broke down several times and three days had passed but we had not reached the international waters yet. It became stormy and a typhoon came upon us. A woman called Chunsil became sea sick and kept dropping in and out of consciousness. We thought we were destined to die in the sea until we spotted two ships towards South Korea with our binoculars. After making a quick calculation we thought we were near South Korean waters and waved a white sheet believing the two ships to be South Korean but they were Chinese boats. We tried to flee from getting captured but were too tired.

We were confined for fifteen days by the Chinese border guards and our money 1000 yuan was taken away from us. A North Korean man was shackled for trying to escape from the guards and the females were also shackled even when we went to the bathroom. I demanded that the shackles should be taken off because we were not yet proven to be criminals so I yelled in a high voice that I will jump out from the third floor window if the shackles were not removed. However instead of taking the shackles off, a male security guard kept watch over me all through the night by standing right next to me when I slept. For fifteen days I was questioned shackled. I persisted in arguing that I was a South Korean but I had to remain in shackles because no one believed me. The ten days I was confined in the security service jail was traumatic. The Chinese inmates were quite free to do what they wanted but we, two North Korean females, were starved for three days. We could not go to the bathroom freely, we did not have toilet paper and were treated as animals.

The Chinese Security Service sent us to Tandong Detention Center where thirty out of fifty inmates at the detention center were North Koreans. The female Chinese Security Service guards stripped us naked and made us jump 30 times to see if we hid any money in our vagina. They even tried searching by inserting their hands in our vagina. I had swallowed 400 yuan anticipating that I would be searched thoroughly and was badly treated until I was repatriated to a jail of the Security Affairs Agency in Shinuiju, Pyunganbuk-do North Korea early December. We were treated like animals for the twenty days detained in jail. Women were both impregnated and

contracted venereal diseases during their confinement in China. No one was normal. Pretty women were confined in a solitary room to be used as sex toys. The inmates were beaten and given 50 grams of half-cooked maize filled with insects. A pregnant woman used to bite off and eat her own nails because she was craving for food. A woman with venereal disease would rub salt on her lower body out of pain. Could you believe this is a place for human beings?

The other women were caught in China but since Chunsil and I were caught trying to defect to South Korea, our punishment was more severe. We were locked up in separate rooms beaten with clubs. I developed hemorrhoids and wasn't able to sit on the cold floor of the jail. I had to lie face down with my bottom up in the air moaning like a mosquito. After 20 days I was sent to a detention center where they began to select inmates to release after seven weeks. I thought I would be released because I was selected as a monitor before anyone else but I realized they were just going to release me as an example to prove that even those who were repatriated from China are released. I found out that I was to be arrested again when I reached home. I limped my way to Musan, Hankyungbuk-do arriving at Hamhung station on the morning of January 1st. All my family members except two brothers were dead and I wasn't able to find out about my son, if he was alive or not.

With a heavy heart, I crossed the ice thin waters from Musan at 3 in the afternoon to China. This time I was fortunate to meet kind ethnic Koreans who I stayed with for seven weeks doing odd jobs. With their help, I returned to Weihai and hid myself in the office of a Korean company. For three months, I hid up in the mountains whenever the Chinese Security Service searched the area. I left in October 2000 and passed through four Southeast Asian countries within a span of four months and arrived in South Korea January 14, 2002. I could fill up thousands of pages about my suffering in jails but I would like to stop here.

I would like to ask the human right activists and those working for human rights in North Korea to expose the human right abuses inflicted by the feudal and corrupt North Korean government to the world so that the people in North Korea could escape from a life of humiliation and live freely as soon as possible.