

Edited Transcript

## Effects of Famine and Other Deprivations on North Korean Refugees in China

*Marcus Noland reports on the results of a survey of 1,346 North Korean refugees at 11 Chinese sites. Conducted between August 2004 and September 2005, the survey indicates flight from famine, poverty, and political repression.*

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Sherman Katz: Welcome to “Peterson Perspectives.” Our conversation this morning is with Marcus Noland, a senior fellow at the Institute where he has been working since 1985. His work encompasses a wide range of topics, including the political economy of US trade policy and the Asian financial crisis. His areas of geographic knowledge and interest include Asia and Africa, where he has lived and worked. He has written extensively on the economies of Japan, Korea, and China, and is unique among American economists in having devoted serious scholarly effort to the problems of North Korea and the prospects for Korean unification. Marcus was a senior economist at the Council of Economic Advisors, and has held research or teaching positions at Yale, Johns Hopkins, the University of Southern California, Tokyo University, as well as the University of Ghana and the Korean Development Institute. Marcus is one of the coauthors of a paper that can be found on our website entitled *Migration Experiences of North Korean Refugees: Survey Evidence from China*, a fascinating and insightful paper.

Marcus, thank you for joining us this morning.

Marcus Noland: Thanks for having me.

Sherman Katz: First, Marcus, would you please describe the key characteristics of the survey you conducted regarding North Korean refugees in China, including the size and nature of the group surveyed and some of the problems in conducting such a survey.

Marcus Noland: We surveyed more than 1,300 North Korean refugees in 11 Chinese cities. The survey was conducted in 2005 by a team of roughly 50 people. The sample is mostly prime-age adults, approximately half men, half women. Since the time we conducted the survey, the increased militarization and policing of the border region would make it impossible to reproduce the survey today.

Sherman Katz: What are the key findings of the survey regarding the impact of famine on the individuals you interviewed?

Marcus Noland: One of the really astonishing things we found in this survey was the continuing long shadow that the famine continues to cast on North Korean society. In the course of doing our study, we examined both the psychological status of the refugees themselves, as well as their attitudes toward the North Korean regime, its intentions, and its accomplishments. In both cases—, their own psychological status and what they thought about North Korea—we found that their famine experiences had a tremendous effect. Let me give you a couple of examples. Roughly 30 percent of our respondents reported having lost a family member to hunger during the famine periods, so it was an extraordinarily traumatic experience for this population. The International Aid Effort, in principle, was feeding more than one-third of the population at its peak, but 40 percent of our respondents indicated that they had no knowledge of this relief program. And among the 60 percent who did know of the relief program, more than 95 percent did not believe that they had personally benefited. The new universal perception was that the food had gone to the military, high party, or government officials. This group—the people who knew of the international relief effort but believed that they were not beneficiaries in their time of need—is a thoroughly demoralized group, and this status has enormous impact on both their own psychological status and their views of the North Korean regime.

Sherman Katz: What is your best estimate of the situation regarding famine in North Korea today?

Marcus Noland: The situation in North Korea today is very difficult. There are three sorts of evidence we can look at, one is quantity evidence about the amount of food in the country. There is considerable disagreement over these statistics. The UN agencies believe that North Korea is about 1.5 million metric tons of food short. Our own estimates suggest that they do not have that large of big a food gap. But nevertheless, the quantity evidence suggests a deterioration in the situation.

A second form of evidence is prices. And what we can observe is that our prices for food have been rising very rapidly in North Korea. They've been raising both faster than they did in the past. They've been rising faster than other prices in the North Korean economy—which means that the real price of food is increasing—and they have been rising faster than global prices. So this is not just a global price increase. The other thing we can observe is that the price of corn relative to rice is rising, and that is very interesting indicator. Rice is the preferred food; corn is the poor

man's food. And what this suggests is, the situation is deteriorating, people are switching to corn as things get tougher.

Finally, in association with the U.S. government pledge to provide half a million metric tons of food aid, the United Nations and some American NGOs have recently conducted some food assessments in North Korea. These were done in a very hurried way; they are not entirely comprehensive. Nevertheless, they document worsening conditions, very serious conditions—not yet famine, but conditions that could tip into famine if the next fall harvest is not very good.

Sherman Katz: This invites the question: Does the situation improve once these folks move from North Korea to China, as far as you can tell?

Marcus Noland: The situation of the refugees in China is a very difficult one. They are not documented legal migrants in China and they have enormous fears of repatriation back to North Korea where they could face imprisonment and, in some extreme cases, execution. One of the things we have had trouble understanding is whether the generally poor psychological condition of these refugees is caused by anxieties over their status in China and fears of repatriation, or whether it stems from their experiences in North Korea.

One of the things we did in our study is use what are called instrumental variable techniques to try to sort this out. What these results suggest is that traumas experienced in North Korea generate these bad psychological effects, not just the experiences that they refugees have had in China.

Sherman Katz: This movement across the borders at enormous personal risks under North Korean law, according to your paper, has led you to some harrowing findings about condition in North Korean prisons and labor camps. Can you tell us what you found in this area?

Marcus Noland: Well, one of the things that we found, it was, again, quite remarkable. Nearly 10 percent of the sample claims to have been incarcerated in North Korean political detention facilities. And what this group attests to have witnessed in those facilities is truly harrowing. About 90 percent attest to have witnessed death by hunger, more than half deaths due to beatings or torture. They recount public executions within the camps. And then one of the allegations that has been made is that women who had been repatriated from China to North Korea while pregnant have been subjected to either forced abortions or infanticide, given North Korean concerns that the children that they were carrying may be bi-national. There is always a concern that people are simply telling you what you want to hear. So when we asked people about this very specific sort of horror, the numbers that report having witnessed this dropped dramatically, to well under 10 percent, which makes the next question we asked them all the more

harrowing. One of the allegations is that medical experimentation has been done on prisoners in the North Korean gulag, and when we asked prisoners about this, the number who report that they believe that such practices were occurring in their camps rose significantly, up to about a quarter of the respondents.

Sherman Katz: Did you find signs of post-traumatic stress syndrome and if so, how might that affect the longer-term economic prospects for these refugees to find jobs? Did they hope to stay in China? Did they hope to go elsewhere?

Marcus Noland: Well, there have been studies done in clinical settings in South Korea with smaller groups that record very high rates of post-traumatic stress syndrome among these refugees. One of our coauthors, Yun Ok [ph] Chang, actually has a background in psychology, and part of the survey consist of a battery of psychological tests, and it's probable that in a clinical setting, more than half of our respondents would be diagnosed as suffering from PTSD. That has effects on their ability to earn money in China, which is critical because China will not recognize these individuals as refugees and will not allow them to be interviewed by UNHCR (The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) to assess asylum claims. They have to travel long distances to a third country to make an asylum claim. So they either have to go to Mongolia or travel all the way down to Indochina. So making a living and earning money in China in order to fund that on-migration is very important, and obviously their psychological difficulties impede this.

One of the things that's unique about our studies, we actually ask the refugees where do they want to permanently resettle. And most of them want to go to South Korea. However, among the younger, more educated respondents, there's a preference for the United States, which is the second most frequently cited preference for permanent resettlement. Now, it should also be said, however, that many of the refugees say that if the Chinese would regularize their status, they would be happy remaining in China among the ethnic Korean population that resides legally there. But under current rules where they face repatriation back to North Korea, most would like to go to either South Korea or the United States.

Sherman Katz: Again, I commend to our listeners to your paper, *Migration Experiences of North Korean Refugees: Survey Evidence from China*, an important situation that you've done an excellent job of investigating. Let me finally turn to a different subject. You've kept close tabs on six-party talks with North Korea on nuclear disarmament. On July 12<sup>th</sup>, negotiators on the talks say they agreed to a blueprint for verifying North Korea's nuclear disarmament.

What's your evaluation of the progress that blueprint represents, the gaps that it still contains, and the additional steps needed to make it effective?

Marcus Noland:

We basically have three concerns about the North Korean nuclear program. First is the plutonium-based program from which they have extracted fissile material and constructed at least one clear device which they tested. The second is proliferation concerns that the North Koreans will either sell expertise, equipment, or, even in the extreme case, fissile material, to some third party. And the greatest concerns center around Syria and alleged cooperation there. The third is an alleged second nuclear program based on highly enriched uranium.

The agreement that was reached in July really focuses on the first issue and lets the other two issues go. As such, it makes progress in achieving the closure of that program that we know is actively producing fissile material. My expectation is that this is just that the early stages of what will be a very long, protracted, and probably unsatisfying process of negotiation with the North Koreans in which every step along the way they will ask us for concessions every step along the way. My guess is that this will run into the next presidency, and, at the end, we will reach a point in which we have pretty good confidence that we have terminated the plutonium-based program; we will have a little less confidence that we will have ended the proliferation activities and the HEU program, and that at the end of the day, we will still have some lingering uncertainty about whether we have gotten all of their existing fissile material and nuclear weapons, and that any prudent military planner will have to assume that the North Koreans have retained a small number (one to three) of nuclear devices.

Sherman Katz:

Will the economic benefits they're getting from cooperating with the United States have an impact do you think on the famine situation?

Marcus Noland:

In the short run, how they get through the famine will really be determined more by weather, whether they're able to get fertilizer from South Korea, and the provision of aid. In the longer run, the solution to the famine problem is a revitalization of their industrial economy. The North Koreans should not be trying to grow all their own food. They should be doing the same thing that their neighbors South Korea and China and their near neighbor Japan do, which is to say, produce exports and services for it, and produce manufacturers and services for export, and import bulk grains from countries that can produce them more efficiently. So, in the longer-run, normalization of relations with the United States and other countries that could encourage a more successful process of globalization will be the real and ultimate solution to North Korea's chronic food problems.

Sherman Katz: Thank you very much, Marcus Noland. That concludes our “Peterson Perspectives” today.

Marcus Noland: Thank you.