HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

SDIR • NUMBER 036 • 2nd SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Thursday, October 2, 2014

Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

Thursday, October 2, 2014

● (1300)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): Fellow members, welcome to the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today is October 2, 2014, marking the committee's 36th meeting.

[*English*]

Today we are engaged in studying the challenges faced by North Korean refugees.

Strictly speaking, I guess the term “refugees” would be a misnomer if we're looking at United Nations conventions. The term “escapee” has been used and probably is more accurate. As you'll hear, they face many of the challenges faced by formal refugees, but enjoy fewer of the international protections than anybody else in a similar situation.

We have with us today two witnesses. Sungju Lee is appearing in his capacity as a HanVoice pioneer. He'll tell you more about his own situation. We also have with us Randall Baran-Chong, the executive director of HanVoice.

As well, at my request, Barry Devolin, who is our colleague and a Deputy Speaker of the House, is sitting in. Mr. Devolin's purpose in being here is to provide a bit of context that might otherwise not come to the subcommittee's attention. I found it very useful to consult with him as I learned more about this subject, and it seemed advisable to me to have him here, although he will not be making a presentation.

Mr. Lee, if you would be able to start, we'll listen to your presentation and then to Mr. Baran-Chong's presentation, and then we'll go to questions. Thank you very much.

Mr. Sungju Lee (2014 HanVoice Pioneer, HanVoice): Good afternoon, respectable Chair, members of the human rights subcommittee, and distinguished guests.

Before speaking about my story and explaining the situation of North Korean refugees, I would like to express my profound gratitude to the subcommittee for inviting me to your honourable meeting.

My name is Sungju Lee. I used to be a North Korean refugee, but now I'm a South Korean citizen. It's been almost three months that I have stayed in Canada as a pioneer of the HanVoice Pioneers Project this year. Now I'm privileged to have an internship with Mr. Devolin's office this fall in this beautiful building.

One day in February 1998, my father left for China to seek food. Four months later, my mom also left home, for the same reason. When I was 12 years old, I lost everything. I wasn't able to go to school after that. I had to learn how to survive rather than study at school and was on the streets for four years. During the day, my friends and I usually went to the open-air market to get some food. At night, we went to the train station to sleep. During four years, I lost two friends of mine on the street, in the winter of 1999 and in the summer of 2001.

When I was 17 years old I escaped from North Korea to China with a broker sent by my father, who had resettled in South Korea first. The broker and I went to the city of Hoeryong, where there is a border city between North Korea and China. He and I crossed the Tumen River, which is the border. After that, I met another broker in China near the border. The first broker went back to North Korea after he got some money from the second one. The broker made a fake South Korean passport and gave it to me, and I finally got to South Korea with the passport.

My case is very unusual compared to that of North Korean refugees normally coming to South Korea, because my father paid out a lot of money to a broker in order to bring me to South Korea. I met father in South Korea, and the first thing he told me was not to tell my family background to anybody in detail, since all my relatives live in North Korea.

I think North Korean refugees have different situations compared to those of other refugees. First of all, North Korean refugees in South Korea continuously are threatened and chased by the North Korean government, while other refugees are relatively secure once they get to the place where they want to live. Especially since the Kim Jong-un regime, the North Korean government has frequently threatened North Koreans resettling in South Korea through TV announcements. Under the Kim Jong-un dictatorship, the direct family members of a friend of mine, because of his escape, were executed in front of people as an example of high treason. Also, because of his defection, his relatives were detained in a restricted area, because defecting from North Korea is viewed as high treason.

Secondly, North Korean refugees in South Korea hardly trust other North Korean refugees in South Korea, because most of them have a strong fear of North Korean spies in South Korea. Many North Korean refugees in South Korea change their names and social security numbers to disappear. I also changed my social security number once, and I'm not using the official name that I used in North Korea. Most North Koreans in South Korea are living quietly, hiding their backgrounds, except for some North Korean human rights activists. Even though they are living in a free country, they cannot enjoy the freedom, unlike other refugees in free countries such as Canada.

Thirdly, in North Korea there is [*Witness speaks in Korean*], which means a three-generation punishment system. If somebody commits high treason, his or her relatives for up to three generations will be punished, especially so for the family of a North Korean refugee living in South Korea. The family that is still in North Korea might be executed horribly or at least sent to prison camp or labour camp for their lifetime.

● (1305)

Going to the sworn enemy countries of North Korea, the U.S.A. and South Korea, is high treason. When I was 10 years old in North Korea, I saw public executions. One of the biggest crimes was high treason. Because of this reason, many North Korean refugees are not willing to go to either South Korea or the U.S.A.

I think that North Korean refugees, having such a unique situation, need help from international communities. However, in my understanding, there are only two countries, South Korea and the United States, that bring North Korean refugees to their country directly from Thailand. Therefore, North Korean refugees in Thailand do not have a choice in choosing a country for their safety. They have to go to either South Korea or the United States even though those countries are not safe enough for themselves or for their families and relatives in North Korea.

Respectable Chair and members of Parliament, please understand this unique situation of North Korean refugees. I beg all of you who cherish human rights to give hope to North Korean refugees by offering an opportunity for them to resettle in Canada.

Thank you so much.

● (1310)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lee.

Mr. Baran-Chong, please begin.

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong (Executive Director, HanVoice): Thank you.

So the question is, who is going to answer this call from the North Korean refugees? As you've heard from Sungju, his story describes all of these challenges they endure throughout their lives, living in fear. It's a testament to the situation within North Korea that they're willing to risk their own lives in pursuit of that freedom and that chance to live without fear.

What he's described is that there are still circumstances where freedom is not necessarily there once they arrive in a new country, namely, what he's referring to in South Korea: that there need to be other countries that answer this call. It's our firm belief, on behalf of HanVoice, that Canada can and should play a leadership role on North Korean refugee issues.

I'd like to express my gratitude to this committee for allowing us to have the time today to describe why we believe this is so. What this is entirely based upon is our proposal for a private sponsorship program of North Korean refugees.

My name is Randall Baran-Chong, and I'm the executive director of HanVoice. For at least the last four years, we've been working throughout the community halls of Canada, in church congregations, and with rallies of concerned Canadians across this country to talk about this issue.

We're often asked why Canada should aspire to become a leader on North Korean refugee issues, and here are the reasons and beliefs we've formed through speaking with the community and in speaking with North Koreans themselves. I think that as a fundamental point it's quite obvious to say that it would reaffirm Canada's global leadership in human rights and refugees. In this circumstance, you're taking on one of the world's most prolonged human rights and refugee crises.

Whereas others of the world have voiced concerns and have voiced their deep compassion for North Korean refugees, very few have actually taken that to action and to heart. Namely, there are only two other countries that can claim they've taken action.

One of the other concerns that's been described is whether or not South Korea is an option. There are several reasons why South Korea might not be the optimal option. First off, there are concerns with capacity and the capabilities within South Korea. They have limited infrastructure at the moment in terms of processing North Koreans. With their resettlement programs, despite these being some of the most generous in the entire world, North Koreans still face challenges. We've heard many reports of issues with discrimination and alleged claims of indifference from South Korean society.

Also, Canada has an incredibly vibrant Korean Canadian community. It's one that we've worked with closely and that has an appreciation for what Canada has come to offer to them as immigrants, many of them coming here in the 1970s. There is an appreciation of the success they've been able to yield and they're wanting to share that with their North Korean brothers and sisters. It's through our community consultations that this message is clear: they are willing to privately undertake this responsibility as sponsors, as supporters, and to welcome them into their community.

How can Canada take on this role? How can Canada become this leader? Well, over these years we've developed this program, refined it, and iterated it through working on a private sponsorship program that would allow the community to take an approach enabling them to privately sponsor these North Koreans.

To take a step back, we need to look at how the North Korean journey works. The vast majority of them first cross the Tumen River, which borders China. They're often led by brokers through China, Laos, and Vietnam to Thailand. That is a perilous journey through China, Laos, and Vietnam, with significant risk of capture and repatriation to North Korea. There have been many cases where North Koreans have been sent back to imprisonment or execution.

● (1315)

There have been increased punishments if they have had interactions with pastors, South Koreans, or Americans. These intensified punishments usually amount to life sentences in labour camps or execution.

It's not until they arrive in Thailand that they are detained and then told to choose one of two options currently available to them: South Korea or the United States. Under the South Korean constitution, they recognize not “North Korean citizens” but all citizens of the Korean Peninsula as citizens of the Republic of Korea. Also, the reason why the United States is an option is in their own legislation, the North Korean Human Rights Act, which was introduced in the U.S. in 2004 and re-enacted in 2008 and 2012. This is a law specially designed to allow North Koreans to come to the United States.

The reason why we need a special program for Canada is that without that UNHCR referral in Thailand, there are significant challenges for any North Korean to make a claim abroad for Canada. This is why we are using a mechanism within the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, section 25.2, which gives the minister the discretion to grant permanent resident status to someone who may not otherwise meet the requirements of the act or is inadmissible.

Simply put, this allows the minister to specially designate these kinds of groups. What we are proposing is building a private sponsorship program on top of that. This program that we've developed was with the support of the local Korean Canadian community, as well as the support of organizations who do work within Thailand with other refugee groups. Essentially what we would do is look at the Bangkok detention facility, which is where 90% of the North Korean refugees who end up in South Korea come from. A significant proportion of North Korean refugees are concentrated there when they're looking for asylum elsewhere. We're looking at approaching them using HanVoice's own efforts to refer these candidates to the government and arrange for them private sponsors in Canada.

One of the key aspects of this program is that it's private citizens who are undertaking this effort, so it doesn't demean or take away from Canada's efforts in helping other refugees. This is about allowing a community that wants to help North Koreans, a community that is willing to bear the risk financially in ensuring their success, to do so, so that they can express their compassion through a designation by this minister.

What we're really doing here is presenting options. What we want to do is present options for North Koreans to resettle in Canada. We want to present options for Canadians to allow them to share the same success that they've had here in Canada and to allow North Koreans to prosper and settle here.

It's stunning to think about the journey that North Koreans take to arrive at the life that all humans should be entitled to. When you think about Sungju and his journey and how far he's come to arrive here today, I think it's very compelling to believe that we need more effort and we need more chances for us to give the millions of other North Koreans this opportunity.

Thank you.

● (1320)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to our questions now. We'll have time for six-minute rounds of questions and answers.

We'll begin with Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I just wanted to ask this quickly first, Mr. Baran-Chong. Are you presently a holder of a sponsorship agreement with the Government of Canada?

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: No.

Mr. David Sweet: No. But you have investigated that possibility?

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: Yes. With HanVoice, we would act as the referrer of these refugees for consideration in the private sponsorship program. It doesn't require us to be a sponsorship agreement holder. For example, in what was done with the Project Tibet Society, a lot of those conditions are outlined within the MOU that exists between CIC and the Project Tibet Society. We'd try to go under a model similar to the PTS model.

Mr. David Sweet: Okay.

In Mr. Lee's testimony, he was talking about North Korean agents in South Korea. Are we aware of North Korean agents in any country other than South Korea that the North Korean refugees would need to fear?

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: I'm not personally aware of any. However, you can understand that a lot of the threats North Koreans feel when resettling in South Korea result from the proximity to North Korea and how North Korean agents might be able to more easily infiltrate in a country like South Korea, given the cultural and language similarities. What a lot of the North Koreans feel is just that anxiety of being identified. It's just as much a risk in terms of spies as it is for them in being identified on the street anywhere.

Mr. David Sweet: There has to be a cultural concern, too, with the fact that they obviously share the similarities of being historically the same peoples. But with a country like North Korea being, for lack of a better word, as backward as it is, compared to coming into a first-world South Korean economy, etc., there has to be a cultural shock for the North Korean refugee.

Is there also a stigma in terms of a kind of cultural prejudice towards them?

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: I'm going to allow Sungju to speak to this in a second, but first I want to say that the South Korean government has a special program called “Hanawon”. Hanawon is usually a three-month program for North Koreans immediately when they get to South Korea after some processing and interviews that typically occur in Thailand.

It's almost like a reintegration. It's almost like re-plugging them into the matrix, if you will, and it teaches them everything in South Korean society, from how to use an ATM and how to shop for groceries to things like health and hygiene issues, and education and employment.

Sungju, do you want to speak to some of your experience in terms of resettling in South Korea?

Mr. Sungju Lee: There is actually a resettlement system. First when we get to South Korea there is a two-month investigation to see if we are a real defector or a refugee. After that, we have three months of resettlement education, which is Hanawon. We stay there and we learn what capitalism is and how South Korea works, and what the difference is between South Korea and North Korea.

Actually, that education is not enough, because after I got out of the foundation I faced so much difficulty in South Korea. First of all, there are biased thoughts about North Korea that come from South Koreans. They think that North Koreans are not smart, that they're stupid, and they think that North Koreans are really passive because they used to live in a socialist country. They think that North Koreans are not responsible because they are passive, but these are only biased thoughts.

When I was 19, I started studying English, and now I'm 27. For me, actually, that is really wrong. That prejudice makes North Korean refugees have difficulty in South Korea. That's a really huge discrimination for me.

Mr. David Sweet: But what is South Korea doing? How does their law and order system work when they find a North Korean agent? They must have arrested some of these guys by now. What happens?

● (1325)

Mr. Sungju Lee: Well, what I'm saying is that there is an agency.... Actually, when I was in North Korea we were brainwashed. There are so many North Korean people in South Korea because we want to make a unification in a North Korean way. We learned that and then we brought that thought to South Korea.

Also, some of the North Korean defectors return to North Korea and appear on TV criticizing South Korea, and some of them share information on other North Korean refugees in South Korea. Also, many North Korean refugees in South Korea who have relationships with people who return to North Korea change their names. They change their social security numbers. They move to another city and they even leave the country. That happens right now in South Korea.

Mr. David Sweet: I think you may have misunderstood my question.

In regard to North Korean agents, have some been arrested? What are South Korean authorities doing about that?

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: Yes, they have been arrested and there have been instances in the last few years. Mainly, some agents have gone after high-profile defectors. For example, Hwang Jang-yop, who was essentially the number two within North Korea, defected, and there were instances where agents were found pursuing him. The average North Korean defector is often not the target of these agents. It's these high-profile defectors who end up getting caught. The national intelligence service of South Korea actively pursues them and monitors them. Especially for the North Koreans who are applying in Thailand, for example, who are seeking to come to South Korea, there's a very intensive interview process during which they cross-check and triangulate against a database of essentially 26,000 other defector stories, and against other intelligence they have within North Korea.

Mr. David Sweet: You make sure that someone is not one of these agents who are sneaking into the country, right?

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: Sorry?

Mr. David Sweet: That's to make sure that someone like Mr. Lee is not actually an agent who is posing as a refugee.

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: Absolutely.

The Chair: Mr. Marston, go ahead, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Thank you, Chair.

I want to welcome Barry.

It's good to have you here. I know your concerns with Korea. You've expressed them over the years since I've been here. It's been about nine years.

We have worked with Mr. Kyung B. Lee of the North Korean Human Rights Council out of Toronto through my office, as have the chair and Mr. Sweet and Mr. Cotler. We've heard the horrific stories about the gulags and what happens to people. Since the change of leader in North Korea, have you seen any evidence of any softening at all on the human rights front?

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: The immediate reaction was that the borders really tightened. Prior to Kim Jong-un's taking over, there were about 2,000 to 2,500 defectors who arrived in South Korea every year. Following that, we heard of fences that had gone up along the border, increased patrols, motion detectors, and things like that. As a result, we've seen the number of defectors drop to about 1,500 per year in the last two years. That was an immediate kind of change. To focus more around the refugee issue, that certainly impacted not only the number of those who can escape, but also the punishments for those attempting to escape. Punishments have been more severe. It was a much more porous border because many of them had to go to China, for example, just in search of food because the public distribution system had collapsed.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Mr. Lee brought a young lady to my office. She was a refugee who came to Canada, and she was later deported by Canada back to South Korea. What would happen at that point in time? Do you think South Korea would keep her? I've been concerned about her ever since.

● (1330)

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: We don't know of any instances in which South Korea has actively deported North Koreans back to North Korea.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Under this program you're proposing, if the doors were opened and the situation were similar to that with the Vietnamese boat people in Canada in the 1970s, how many people do you think your organization would have the capacity to deal with?

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: Our proposal caps the number at 100 over five years. To put that into perspective, as part of its MOU, the Project Tibet Society has 1,000 over five years. We're looking at a tenth of the volume and we're looking at the support of the immediate Korean Canadian community, which is forty times the size of the local Tibetan community.

Mr. Wayne Marston: In your remarks, you talked about 2,500 a year going to South Korea. Yours is a very, very modest number compared to that. I was expecting a much larger number, to be frank. Maybe—I don't know—there's a way of broadening this. That's just starting to scratch the surface really.

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: I think that's what we want to do actually. If you think about it, it would launch Canada into a leadership position in resettling North Korean refugees. We developed that number through consultations with the community. We looked at what, for example, was manageable for the church community, which is a vibrant and highly supportive part of the Korean Canadian community. It gives us time to develop the programming and resettlement supports that are necessary. Speaking with community organizations as well, which would be integral to seeing this program through, we agreed that this was an appropriate number.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I've had a bit of experience with the Korean church community in Hamilton. I went to one of their services and they in fact thanked us for the work of this committee. When you go to many churches today, the number of parishioners is declining, but this church was completely full, so I am very optimistic.

How is my time, Mr. Chair? I have a minute and a half.

Obviously one of the things I would expect from your program would be a success rate. Do you do any kind of screening at all with regard to education or background to ensure that the person has the best chance in Canada?

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: Unfortunately, because of the schedule, we didn't have time to translate this memo we have about the entire program. It includes criteria that we discuss. We'll try to distribute this after the meeting at least to get it translated and distributed to the committee. You are correct that we design factors and criteria that are going to ensure the best chances of success for these North Korean refugees. We're looking at people between the ages of 18 and 45 and at their past employment and record of education. There are certain factors we might consider neutral or perhaps negative, including some of their activities in North Korea or any other assessed risks. Certainly we would want to choose criteria that are going to ensure not only their success but also community support and a network that can ensure that they succeed.

Mr. Wayne Marston: We're not too aware of the goings-on within North Korea and the level of education they have available to them.

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: It's true that much of the primary education is highly centred around political ideology. There are still many skilled North Koreans who go on to become doctors. There are some in the assembly. Many of them go on to have successful careers. If you look at someone like Sungju and how hard-working he is, there are very few North Koreans who can speak English this fluently and this confidently, and he's done it in very few years. I would never underestimate the determination and the success that North Koreans can achieve with the right chance.

Mr. Wayne Marston: I would think so. I was posing questions like a devil's advocate actually.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I suppose by definition anybody who has gone through that particular process of getting oneself out of North Korea through China, Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos to get here is by definition a person who has persistence.

We turn now to Ms. Grewal.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you both for your willingness to be in front of our committee today. I admire your passion for the well-being of refugees.

Mr. Baran-Chong, I understand that roughly 1,500 North Korean refugees flee to South Korea every year. Do you know what kind of services these refugees have access to in order to integrate into the south? Is there a role that Canada could play in helping them resettle over there by helping them with funding for education, job training, or something else?

● (1335)

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: There is a variety of supports that the Ministry of Unification as well as Hanawon provide. Some of this support is financial, everything from stipends to help them on a monthly basis to one-time payments that allow them to get housing depending on the size of their family. Other more social supports in integration include things like Hana Centers, which are kind of drop-in centres for them to check into and to ensure they're doing well. There are grants for public education so they can attend public university for free. There's a whole swath of support provided by the South Korean government.

In terms of the role that Canada can play in that, Canada has played a role in that. For example, we have worked with members of the government in the embassy in Seoul to develop a program through which we leverage Canadian teachers who are teaching English in Seoul to build an English-language training program for North Korean students out of the embassy. We also work with many partners in South Korea as well as with the Ministry of Unification and with Hanawon. We have met with them several times when they have visited here. So Canada is playing an active role in resettlement, and we're helping shape it from experiences that we have in refugee resettlement and in everything from mental health programs to social supports and things like that.

Sungju, I don't know if you want to add anything about the kind of support you have received.

Mr. Sungju Lee: Fortunately, I had the experience when I was in South Korea in 2011 that the Canadian embassy opened an English school, and I was a student of the Canadian embassy. I could improve my English there.

Thank you.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: How much humanitarian and relief work has taken place in North Korea in the last decade? What are the limitations on international organizations like the UN or different NGOs that want to come into the country? Does South Korea have the potential ability to provide North Korea aid and relief?

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: There are several different ways in which the world is influencing and touching North Korea on the ground.

From a governmental perspective, the South Korean government is trying to engage through things like trade. There was the Kaesong industrial complex, whereby South Korean companies set up businesses that would employ North Korean labour, thereby hopefully trickling down some of these wages to North Koreans. But one of the challenges with the governmental issue is that it's also very political, so Kaesong closed down. Many of these South Korean businessmen essentially were held hostage by the government because of political tensions between the two countries.

In Canada it's also challenging, because we have the toughest sanctions in the world on North Korea, tougher than South Korea, the United States, or anyone, but Canada has also allowed exceptions for things like humanitarian aid.

There's also a lot of private involvement on the ground in North Korea, with everything from churches that are helping set up universities like the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology to other organizations that provide things like soybeans and soy milk to children in North Korea.

North Korea's changing from within, I believe, through these exposures to the outside world.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Your organization's mission is to empower and amplify the most effective voices of North Korean human rights in the refugee movement, or in other words, the refugees themselves. How can the Government of Canada seek to empower and serve these North Korean refugees in this way?

● (1340)

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: Since around 2010, Canada officially has had a controlled engagement policy. In a way, those sanctions don't necessarily have a huge punch, because the real economic impact was small. Only a few hundred thousand dollars' worth of trade was going into North Korea from Canada. What we can do, though, is enable things, such as allowing humanitarian aid or organizations like ours to get more access into North Korea, thus allowing more exceptions for things like education, or for people who want to do things like bringing information into North Korea that helps change minds and expose North Koreans to information they might not normally have access to.

There are also opportunities through educational exchanges. At UBC there's a professor who brings six North Korean professors here every year so they can learn about pedagogy here in Canada. They go back and share that with their students.

So Canada is in a way making that impact, but in terms of the refugee issue, though, this is our primary focus right now, because there is a need to help these North Koreans. We need this consent essentially to allow North Koreans to have this option to come to Canada and to allow Canadians to help enable that.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Do I have more time, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: No. I'm afraid we're over by 30 seconds.

Professor Cotler, please.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Mr. Chairman, my question has been prompted by something you said and that was suggested by Barry. It just follows that up.

Why would be assisting North Koreans in Thailand, let's say—and you made reference to the UNHCR—versus assisting them in China, Laos, or Vietnam?

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: The quick answer is that they will be repatriated to North Korea. To leave North Korea without permission.... They don't have the same mobility rights that we do. They will be punished by imprisonment, torture, or execution. Depending on what circumstances they escaped through, whether that be a pastor, or a South Korean, or an American—and oftentimes these brokers could be two of those three things—they are more severely punished.

China, Laos, and Vietnam all will repatriate them. Thailand is the country that will deport them to one of the two countries: the United States or South Korea.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: How do we vet the North Korean refugees who would be sponsored?

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: We would work under a model similar to that of the South Koreans. We've had informal discussions with the South Korean government. We would interview these North Koreans who are in Thailand, and gather their biographical information that would be necessary for referral to the government and to pair them with the sponsors. We'd need to take the precaution and involve the South Korean government and the national intelligence service to essentially assess those risks because, as I mentioned earlier, there are about 26,000 North Korean refugees who have resettled in South Korea. So there are about 26,000 different data points that we can assess these peoples' stories.

We've also considered involving a North Korean defector to kind of vet their story and smell test it and ensure that these North Koreans are legitimate.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: I only have a brief amount of time, but it's a longer question. You made reference to Canada having some stronger sanctions regarding North Korea. What are some of the specific things we might do now to promote, or to sanction in regard to, the issue of human rights in North Korea?

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: One of the most interesting ways that things are changing within North Korea is in their access to information. One of the key ways that they have gotten access to information is through the markets in North Korea. Seeing DVDs from South Korea and the United States has really changed their perception, not only of the rest of the world but has also made them challenge their own reality.

There are organizations that smuggle these DVDs in or USB keys into North Korea. This allows them to get access to this information in private. Much of this content provides corrective history, telling them the truth of the famine, telling them the truth of the regime.

Sungju, I'm sure you have stories or know of friends who were influenced by the outside media they were exposed to.

● (1345)

Mr. Sungju Lee: Sure. I have many refugee friends in South Korea. They recently got out of North Korea. They have stories. They share their stories. When they were in North Korea they'd watch South Korean soap operas. The women were interested in fashion. They would look at a picture on the screen and then bring the DVD to a clothing maker and say that they wanted to have these kinds of clothes, to please make them these clothes. They create exactly the same clothes and then they sell them in the markets. That is what's going on.

Also, there are some USB keys and DVDs in the city. Many people think that in North Korea there are only poor people and rich people outside Pyongyang, but I think that was about 20 years ago. Now there is a middle class who are merchants. They are selling these DVDs and trying to make money in the markets. They deliver these DVDs and they deliver information to other cities. This is going on right now in North Korea.

Many North Korean people know about things outside their country.

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: The vast majority of North Korean defectors indicate that they were exposed in North Korea to some form of outside media, whether it be radio broadcasts, DVDs, or USB keys, etc. It plays a crucial role in their decision whether to stay or not.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: With regard to regulations, what can the international community do?

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: In terms of?

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Again, addressing and alleviating the human rights situation in North Korea.

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: I'm going to put it back into the Canadian context. Canada has a unique position here because the six-party talks nations are in a different position than Canada is. The six-party talks nations often have to put human rights as a footnote or take it off the agenda, because the primary concern is around nuclear security and denuclearization, whereas countries like Canada can remain vocal on these issues. We have seen this government being vocal on these issues.

The international communities that are not part of the six-party talks can continue to enable organizations to get exposure inside North Korea. Other countries can also help play a role in resettling North Korean refugees, just from the perspective of building capacity for North Koreans who may want to defect and if the South Korean capacity can no longer handle them, because it does take time to build this infrastructure.

The Chair: Let's move on to Mr. Schellenberger.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you, and thanks very much for being here today.

Do Laos and Vietnam treat North Koreans the same as China does?

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: In terms of repatriating them?

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: In terms of repatriation, yes.

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: Yes, they do.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: So the safest place to get to is Thailand. So you're in constant pursuit all the way from North Korea then to Thailand?

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: Absolutely.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Thank you.

How do we vet the North Korean refugees who are being sponsored?

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: Is this is similar to Mr. Cotler's question, or...?

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: I guess it is. He's more eloquent than I am.

In your opinion what are the most pressing human rights issues in Korea causing this exodus of so many people?

Sungju.

Mr. Sungju Lee: For me the most suppressing human rights issue in North Korea is [*Inaudible—Editor*], which is third- generation punishment. If I make a mistake, which is high treason, my father and my grandfather and his father have to go to jail, even though they didn't make any mistake. It was because of me. If I have a son, if I have a daughter, or if I have a grandson, they also have to go to jail or they will be executed by the government because of the mistake I made. That for me, that is the most suppressing human rights problem in North Korea. That's kind of rule of North Korea.

● (1350)

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: I know this might sound like a little different question, but it was stated earlier that the sponsors in Canada would be South Koreans who have come to Canada. They may sponsor North Korean refugees coming here. There's no animosity then between our South Korean Canadians and North Koreans?

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: I wouldn't say it would be exclusively Korean Canadians, but that's been our focus so far. It's just as it was with the Vietnamese boat people, when people from across Canada and rural towns in Ontario sponsored Vietnamese families. So our focus has been on the Korean community because we know it is the most immediate one and we know it's the one that has the heart and the wallet for it at this point.

The issue of animosity is an interesting question because ironically we have found from our experience and in conversations with people that Koreans here and Koreans in South Korea, as well as North Koreans in South Korea and North Koreans who have been here, face far less discrimination here in Canada. The Korean Canadians have far less animosity and even more of a heart and more generosity towards North Koreans, especially among South Korean youths.

There's a lot of indifference towards North Korea. In fact, many younger South Koreans, just from people we speak to, find North Korea like a dull pain because it's just constantly interrupting their lives when there are these crises that close the stock market or cause them to live in fear or things like that. The Korean Canadians have been staunch supporters of North Korean human rights and refugees, and are highly enthusiastic about this program.

The Chair: Mr. Devolin, you were going to say something.

Mr. Barry Devolin (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Yes, if I may, I would like to link two issues, one that Mr. Schellenberger raised and one that Ms. Grewal raised. It was referenced that in the past Canada has offered English lessons through the Canadian embassy. Actually, Senator Yonah Martin and I were a part of that effort in encouraging Canadian English teachers in Korea to volunteer some time.

We thought it was a great idea. It didn't work very well. One reason, we figured out subsequently, was that if you're a North Korean defector living in South Korea, the people you are the least comfortable around are actually other North Koreans because you fear that they are returning information to North Korea about your family. It's not necessarily a case of someone being a spy who comes to South Korea and it's high profile and people get sent back. They're more like moles who are gathering information, or maybe they themselves are being blackmailed for information.

If you go to a group English lesson, you tell your story and then unbeknownst to you that information is being sent back to North Korea. The link is that if you are a North Korean and you defect, which is a crime against the state, your generation, your parents' generation, and your children's generation have all committed a crime as well in the eyes of the law, and so they can be imprisoned.

To me, this is what makes a North Korean refugee so fundamentally different from refugees who come from other countries. Even after they get out, they still live in fear—not that someone is going to push them in front of a bus but that someone is listening to them, taking their information, trying to figure out which of their relatives back in North Korea are going to be punished for their crime.

If they can come to a place like Canada, that is far less likely to happen, although it's still possible. Any anxiety that they continue to live with, even when they're notionally free, never really goes away for some of those people. This is not the case for all North Koreans. For many of them, going to South Korea is the right option, but for a small minority, as HanVoice is talking about, it's not really an acceptable option. That's why we're talking about such a relatively small number of people.

The Chair: We used a bunch of your time for something that really wasn't the question you asked, so please do so.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Okay, and I appreciate that.

When North Koreans leave North Korea and would like to come to Canada, do they want to set up a Korean community or would they like to become Canadians?

● (1355)

Mr. Sungju Lee: For me, it actually doesn't matter. I can live in a Korean community; I can live in a Canadian community. It doesn't matter. It's been three months that I've been here. One thing is that I feel really safe. I don't know why. Compared to South Korea I feel really safe.

Also, Mr. Devolin mentioned that there is an English program. I went to school for only a month. The first day we had to share our name and the hometown we left in North Korea. That's really risky information, but they are all North Korean friends. I thought, “This is not a good idea”, so that's why I quit the school.

Also, the school program didn't go well, actually.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Do I still have one minute?

The Chair: Please be very brief.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: When the Vietnamese boat people came a number of years ago to Canada, we employed a young Vietnamese lad. This is a follow-up to my previous question. He was sponsored by a church group in our area, and he was a tremendous young fellow. However, all of a sudden, he left and went to Toronto to be in the Vietnamese community. I had hoped he would become part of the fabric of our community.

That's what I hope, when people want to come to Canada they want to come to Canada to be Canadians, to enjoy our quality of life, and not to try to import what they left into Canada. It's just a statement.

The Chair: I think that was meant more as a statement than a question.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Yes. It's more of a statement than a question.

Welcome. I hope you stay here.

The Chair: All right.

I have a question before we go to our last member of Parliament, Mr. Benskin. I found the three-generations policy confusing. I haven't done a very exhaustive search in my device, was trying to find a Wikipedia article on it. This appears to be the one subject in the entire universe on which there is not a Wikipedia article, at least not one that I could find.

Just so we understand it clearly, because this is clearly the human rights issue, the punishment of innocent family members back in North Korea and the pursuit of evidence that can lead to this.... I thought it was your generation, as in brothers and sisters, your parents' generation, your children's generation—one, two, three—but I gather that I am misunderstanding it.

What exactly is it? Is it effectively a lottery where they pick among those cohorts and punish some and not others, or do they pick up everybody they can find? What are the parameters of this policy?

Mr. Sungju Lee: I'm in the centre, and then it goes up two or three generations and down three generations. So it could be my father, my grandfather, and my great-grandfather, and then my son, my grandson, and his son. That's three whole generations, so in total it's six generations actually. So they clean their family.

Then they have every record. If I want to be a military officer or public officer or public servant, they check my record. If there is any problem in my record in up to the six or seven generations, if my great-grandparents or parents have made a mistake for the country, then I cannot be a public servant or military officer. Even if I did a really great job for me and for my life and I didn't make any mistakes for the country or any political errors for the country, I cannot be a public servant. That's a huge thing. So they cannot do a job. That's a huge thing.

I'm really happy here because I can choose my dream; I can choose my job; I can choose the place where I want to go. That's freedom, I think.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: The one thing I'll add is that actually there's a magnitude element as well, depending on how high-ranking you are. For example, following the defection by Mr. Hwang, who I mentioned who was very high up in the North Korean regime, allegedly 800 people were executed as a result. So it was not only family members but also people who were within his inner circle and those who, it was believed, should have known about or suspected or might have been informed about his decision to defect. So it's really about eliminating what the regime would view as almost a tainted circle around someone. It really depends on who the person is as well.

● (1400)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Benskin, I apologize for taking a bit of your time, but you'll have it now.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Thank you. You also took part of my question too, but that's okay.

I understood your explanation and what you were saying, but just as you were clarifying it my palms started to sweat. This three-generation punishment is probably one of the most insidious weapons I have ever heard of. The fact that we couldn't even find something, or our chair couldn't even find anything in Wikipedia, which has information on almost everything, shows how insidious this is. Really so little is known about the goings-on in North Korea.

I first want to congratulate you and applaud you for your courage at such a young age in finding your way out and in coming here to share your testimony.

I put this out to both of you. You're looking at this in a Canadian context, and I understand that. As far as the international community is concerned, what are other countries doing? Are other countries, such as the U.K. or Australia, moving forward in any way? Are they being approached in any way to help with the situation in resettling North Korean escapees?

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: As I mentioned, 90% of the North Korean defectors who go to South Korea—that is, the vast majority of North Koreans who end up defecting—end up in Thailand. The only two countries that have policies related to resettling North Korean refugees from Thailand are the United States and South Korea. The other countries may deal with them on an inland claim basis, but they don't have any explicit policy for resettlement in Thailand.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: Okay.

As far as settling North Koreans here in Canada goes—and I guess this echoes one of the questions my colleagues asked—Mr. Lee, you were talking about the situation or relationship between South Koreans and North Koreans. The more I hear the more I begin to understand the dynamics of that. What makes the Canadian Korean community different, for lack of a better way of putting it, from the South Korean community, in terms of their openness and willingness to sponsor North Koreans into Canada?

Mr. Sungju Lee: For South Koreans, North Korea is next door. Now, unfortunately, the generation in their twenties in South Korea thinks of North Korean people as people from other countries, as members of a foreign country, but the older generations have the feeling that they are our family, our brothers and sisters.

For me, after I came to Canada, I met so many Korean Canadians and their parents. Their parents said that both South Koreans and North Koreans are their brothers. They don't have this feeling that South Koreans have towards North Korea.

Also, I met Korean Canadians who were born here. There were educated by their family. They think that South Koreans and North Koreans are the same, are friends, but this story is going to be different in South Korea. South Koreans think like this: “Sometimes the North Koreans attack us, they shoot missiles, and they test nuclear weapons, so why do we have to help them? Why do we have to help prepare unification?” That's their regular thinking, actually.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: You mentioned this before. This is following up the question of my colleague Professor Cotler on the ways in which we in Canada or outside of South Korea can help undermine, for lack of a better way of putting it, the propaganda of North Korea.

You were mentioning the fact that DVDs are smuggled in or that information is brought in on thumb drives and so forth. I come from the world of the arts, so for me it's great to hear that the arts are helping to change people's minds in a place like North Korea. How is this getting in? This is a fairly new thing. How is that access to information happening and how can that be supported and increased?

● (1405)

Mr. Randall Baran-Chong: The way that it typically enters the country is either through a kind of illegal cross-border trade or through organizations that have relationships with suppliers in China who have access to North Korea. They're infiltrated with shipments that come from China, and through that they're distributed through their own networks across North Korea.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: To follow up on that, is there any resistance from the Chinese government in terms of letting that information cross their borders into North Korea?

Mr. Sungju Lee: There is smuggling in North Korea between North Korea and South Korea and between North Korea and China. That's a huge market. When I was in North Korea and of course here now.... China's government cannot control the smuggling. Also, both Korean governments cannot control it. That's really underground.

Also, North Koreans are demanding information from the world outside North Korea. People require the information, especially merchants, who want to know the trends. They want to know about the outside world. They try to make money with that information, so they are growing right now. My answer is that the Chinese government and the North Korean government cannot control this smuggling.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin: I would assume that there are penalties. For example, there was story you gave about the woman who saw the video of a soap opera, I think it was, and wanted a dress made. When that kind of thing happens and somebody gets caught, are there penalties for that?

Mr. Sungju Lee: That's really dangerous. Usually, North Koreans are of two minds. Officially they pretend to respect the government. They pretend to be good. But they try to make their interests.... The policemen and the police state of course try to keep finding those people who are watching soap operas, but ironically, the policemen are watching the soap operas, because it's really fun. It's really interesting. It's really nice. They love to watch.

Usually North Korean defectors who live in South Korea try to send money to North Korea to support their families. They sometimes make phone calls to their families. Their families are using Chinese cellphones near the border. They can make phone calls and ask what's going on these days. The families say, “We are watching South Korean movies.” That's really quite shocking, actually. North Korea's really changing right now. It's really changing.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Benskin. I let you go over the time by a considerable amount.

I have one last thing to say before we excuse our witnesses. In discussions with Mr. Devolin before this meeting, he mentioned something to me that would not have occurred to me. I had assumed incorrectly, based on a lack of knowledge, that Korea was a very culturally homogenous place, where everybody is, to some degree, interchangeable. He pointed out that there exist, among other things, regional accents, meaning that people from the north who go to the south can be immediately distinguished just by the way they talk. Is that a correct assumption?

Mr. Sungju Lee: Usually North Korean refugees in South Korea are found out by their accent and appearance.

● (1410)

The Chair: Does that have any impact on their acceptance, their ability to fit into South Korean society?

Mr. Sungju Lee: Of course. As soon as South Koreans know that this guy is a North Korean refugee, they think he's not smart, that he's passive, that he's not responsible. I mentioned the prejudice. These things affect their ability to get a job.

Actually, I have experience of this. When I got to South Korea, I wanted to work at a gas station. Of course, at that time I had a North Korean accent. I had an interview, and he asked me my name. I gave him my name and then he didn't ask me any questions, because he knew that I was a North Korean refugee because of my strong North Korean accent.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Devolin, I thought you were going to say something.

Mr. Barry Devolin: This is the way it was described to me by someone in Korea. Imagine someone with a Scottish brogue arriving in London. It's not a slightly different accent. It's a very evident accent from North Korea, which people have a difficult time covering up, even if they tried to.

The Chair: Thank you all for coming here today. Thank you for staying as long as you have and for being flexible about our very short notice. We appreciate all of that.

Colleagues, I appreciate your generosity in way I allocated the time. Thank you.

We're adjourned.