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**Perilous Passages: North Korea, Human Trafficking, and the Underground Railroad**

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***Moderated by Nikita Desai, Director of Policy & Corporate Programs, The Korea Society***

**NIKITA DESAI: (Moderator)**

Welcome to the Korea Society, and welcome to *Studio Korea*.

Along with missile and nuclear concerns, North Korean human rights has leapt to the top of issues on the international agenda, especially with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay's call for an international inquiry; a call gaining steam. It is my pleasure to have here, today, our guests, Melanie Kirkpatrick and Steven Kim to address North Korea, human trafficking and the Underground Railroad.

Melanie is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. She has written for the *Wall Street Journal* and is the author of *Escape from North Korea: The Untold Story of Asia's Underground Railroad*. Steven Kim is a human rights advocate and the founder of 318 Partners, an organization that is dedicated to rescuing trafficked North Korean women in China. Thank you both for being here today.

I'd like to start off with the passage that you've included in your book, Melanie, and it's a passage from the actual *Underground Railroad Record* of 1854:

"Anthony had fully made up his mind that when the last day of December ended, his bondage should end also, even if he should have to accept death as a substitute. He then began to think of the Underground Rail Road and of Canada; but who the agents were, or how to find the depot, was a serious puzzle to him."

Melanie. Could you please tell us more about the intricate network of Asia's current Underground Railroad? How does it operate?

**MELANIE KIRKPATRICK:**

Thank you so much. It's really lovely to be here, especially with one of my great heroes, Steven Kim. It's a pleasure to be here tonight with all of you.

The Underground Railroad, across China, is very similar to the Underground Railroad that existed in our country leading up to the Civil War. It's a series of safe houses and secret transit routes that carry people from place to place. There is a network of people who help them, much like the Underground Railroad of our country 150 years ago. Many of them are Christians or inspired by the Christian faith.

There are also brokers, or human traffickers. One thing I've heard from so many people (both officials in various governments and workers on the Underground Railroad) is that brokers are a necessary evil. These people work hand in hand, and I would like to give you one quick example of how it works. Let me tell you the story of Joseph Kim.

Joseph is a young man. He was thirteen years old when he was living on the streets in North Korea. His father had died of starvation. His mother and his older sister had disappeared, and he thought that, at least, his sister had been sold as a bride in China. One day he finally decided that he would go to China and see if he could find some food.

It was the eve of Kim Jong-il's birthday, February 16. He decided to make a run for it (literally a run for it) across the frozen Tumen River. He ran to the Chinese village on the other side of the river, and started going door-to-door asking people for food. Doors kept being slammed in his face, until he reached one man. He opened his door wide, welcomed him in, gave him a meal, and then gave him directions and sent him on his way. As Joseph was leaving, the man told Joseph he was a Christian.

Now, Joseph didn't think anything of this. Eventually he got to the town that the man had directed him to, and found an old lady who spoke Korean. She said to him: "You're North Korean. Church people help North Koreans," and she advised Joseph, "Look for a church."

And Joseph said, "What's a church?"

And she said to him: "Look for a building with a cross on it."

That was the beginning of Joseph's good fortune, and his exit on the Underground Railroad. The church sheltered him. With the help of another church for a couple of years, eventually he hooked up with an American organization called Liberty in North Korea that helped him get out of China on the Underground Railroad.

I'll just, in closing, point out (in case people are wondering) why a person has to hide in China. The answer is that China's policy is to track down, arrest, and repatriate North Koreans. This is in contravention of its obligations under international treaties it has signed, and it's also immoral.

**NIKITA DESAI:**

Thank you very much, Melanie. Steven, your personal experience as an operator on this Underground Railroad is very interesting. Could you please tell us how you got involved, how you sheltered escapees, and the circumstances of your arrest in China?

**STEVEN KIM:**

I was a Christian businessman in China. I went to China around 1987, and stayed there for twelve years. It was at that time that I learned about North Korean refugee issues. One day, North Korean refugees came all the way down to Shenzhen in Guangdong Province, which is more than a thousand miles away. They showed up in my church, and I didn't know who they were.

So, when I approached them and talked to them, I thought they were very strange; but later I found out that they were North Korean refugees. I wanted the church to help them. The Korean congregation was afraid to help them, because they knew if they the refugees were caught, the church would be closed down. I was the only American citizen, so I felt if they [Chinese Authorities] caught me, then what could they do to me as an American?

So, I began to help them. I brought them into my place, and I kept them. But, they were not the only ones. The next Sunday and another Sunday, the refugees kept coming. I had to rent a house, an apartment to keep them, and I provided all the cooking wares. These people kept asking me to send them to South Korea. But, as a businessman, I didn't know how to send them.

So, I told them I couldn't. The only thing I could do is find a job for them. So, I gave some of them jobs, and let them work and make money, so they could go back to their country. They came because they were hungry. So, I was helping them; but the majority couldn't stay with me, because they were looking for a way out.

One day, my church pastor told me that North Korean refugees went to South Korea through Vietnam. I immediately realized that if I go to Vietnam, I could find the refugees a way out. So, I flew into Vietnam, and was helped by a Korean church member in Ho Chi Minh City. I teamed up with him and his employees, who were local Vietnamese.

So, I told him that I will send the refugees to the border. He will take them into Ho Chi Minh City. From Ho Chi Minh City, one of the church members will bring them into Cambodia. At Phnom Penh, then the Korean government will give them a temporary pass. So, with that, then they could go through Bangkok and fly from Bangkok to South Korea. As soon as I did this, many people began to call this the "Underground Railroad." It cost me six hundred dollars per person, but at the time, I was a businessman, so money was no problem. And this is how I began to help them.

I did it for about four years. Then in the year 2003, I was waiting for a group of four refugees from Guangxi. The Chinese police followed them, and they caught me. That cost me a five-year sentence, and I spent four years in prison.

**NIKITA DESAI:**

Along with missionaries and activists who help North Koreans escape, there are also predators that traffic in women. Could you tell us about the human trafficking of North Korean women?

**STEVEN KIM:**

Yes. In the three years from 1995 until 1997, 3 million North Koreans died because of starvation and they didn't know what to do. Until that time, they had been fed by the government [North Korean], and they were broke. They had no money to feed them. So, the people were just sitting, and then they died. The ones who died first were the teachers. Farmers knew how to dig the ground, but teachers didn't know what to do.

These people realized that if they stayed there, they would die. They heard that China had food, so they crossed the river and went into China. Chinese people began to help them. Then, while they were helping them, and looking for jobs for them, they began to receive commissions. Then some people realized that introductions would make them money. They began to introduce more and more, and then traffickers became involved. They knew, now, they could make some money out of this. So, this is how it began.

After the year 2000, North Korean people realized that they knew how to survive. The way to survive was through business—to become merchants. So, they began to buy and sell, but they were novices. They didn't know how to do business. So, more than 90 percent of people lost their money. So, to make some money back, they realized that they needed to go across the river to China and make money back easily. So many people began to cross the river again, and more than 70 percent of the escapees were women.

As soon as they crossed the river, there were traffickers who took them. At that time, most of the women were sexually exploited and sold at bars or sold to farmers. So, this is the way they were sold. Now however, most of the traffickers go into North Korea and visit the villages, where the young ladies are living with a grandmother or only one parent. They approach them and persuade them to go to China for “a better life.” So, many of these young ladies followed the traffickers. So, once they crossed the river, they did not sell to the men nearby, but sent them far away, like to Shandong Province, Kunming and areas like that.

About two months ago, I got a call from my team that there was an eighteen-year-old girl in the Kunming area. He bought her from a trafficker, kept her, and was looking to resell...

**NIKITA DESAI:**

He was the middleman. He was trying to resell her.

**STEVEN KIM:**

Yes, he was a middleman. He was trying to resell her. She was too young, and he couldn't find the right buyer. And then he had his family and his wife, and he was desperate. So he contacted my field manager and then called me, because he wanted us to buy the girl back. So immediately, we went in and paid around three thousand dollars. We bought her back, and then we sent her to Thailand. So, right now, she's in Thailand and waiting to go to South Korea.

**NIKITA DESAI:**

And what typically happens when escapees or women are able to make it to Thailand? What happens there? Do they then surrender themselves to the Thai authorities?

**STEVEN KIM:**

Yeah. We had a rescue team in the very beginning, when I built the Underground Railroad through Vietnam and Cambodia. But since my release from prison, I have become a little smarter and I have developed another way, which is through Laos.

Before this time, the best way was from China, through Myanmar, and over the Mekong River to Thailand. That was the most popular, because once North Korean refugees landed in Thailand, they just surrendered: "I'm North Korean. I come from North Korea. I want to go to South Korea." The Thai police would arrest them, put them into the detention center and call the Korean Embassy. Then the Korean Consul would immediately go to interview them. Once they knew that they were North Korean refugees, then immediately they announced that they belong to South Korea.

The best way is through Laos. I went to Laos, and met the Korean Embassy people there. I interviewed them, and they told me whoever comes into Laos should then declare: "I come from North Korea. I want to go to South Korea." Then immediately, they take them, and within two or less than three months, they get to South Korea. So, Laos is the fastest way right now.

**NIKITA DESAI:**

Melanie, you talk a great deal about North Korean brides and bride trafficking in China. Could you talk to us, a little bit more, and tell us about that?

**MELANIE KIRKPATRICK:**

Steve has described very well the desperation that a lot of young, North Korean women have, and how many of them are tricked into going to China. There are also some people who deliberately sell themselves, some women, because they're so desperate.

I'd like to say two things about it. One is that there is a market for young North Korean women in China. The reason there's a market is because of China's one-child policy, which has been in effect since 1979. There is a severe shortage of young, marriageable-age women in China. In the area in Northeast China that borders North Korea, in some areas the ratio of young men to young women is fourteen to one. The thing that a lot of young Chinese men want most, in life, is a bride; and they're willing to buy one from North Korea.

If Joseph, the boy I spoke about, had been a girl rather than a boy; when she crossed the river into China, it's likely that a Chinese person would have welcomed her into the house, given her food and a place to stay, and then made a phone call. There probably would have been somebody in that village who was in the employ of brokers. And, then, somebody would have come to say, "I'll find you a job. I'll help you," and then sold her to a Chinese man.

The second thing I want to point out is that a North Korean woman who's sold as a bride in China has no recourse. If she asks for help from Chinese authorities, she will be arrested and sent back to North Korea, and that is a fate worse than being abused by a Chinese husband. China's policy is immoral, but North Korea's treatment of these women who are repatriated is appalling.

If they are pregnant, the assumption is that the father of the unborn child is Chinese. North Koreans are extremely racist, and they talk about "Chinese seed," and how they have to wipe it out. And so, any pregnant woman is forced to undergo an abortion. If a child is born, then the child is killed, because they don't want North Korea tainted by these half-Chinese children. So, a North Korean woman in China, as I say, is desperate. Often staying with her Chinese husband is a preferable choice.

I also should point out that some of these marriages are happy. The woman, sometimes, is protected by her Chinese husband and his friends in the neighborhood. They'll either bribe the police to look the other way and not send her back to China, or they'll hide her from the police.

**NIKITA DESAI:**

Is there a situation of bride trafficking in terms of a bride being sold multiple times?

**MELANIE KIRKPATRICK:**

Oh, yes, absolutely, and the story Steve Kim just told about the eighteen-year-old woman in Kunming is not uncommon. There was one woman I interviewed who compared herself to a pig—saying she was sold like a pig. I will also say that every North Korean bride (or former bride) I interviewed remembered the price for which she was sold.

**NIKITA DESAI:**

You spoke about the children. What about the children of Chinese men and North Korean women, and the orphanages that you talked a little bit about?

**MELANIE KIRKPATRICK:**

Yes. I call these children half-and-half children. I write about them in my book. I write a lot about the brides. I also write about the children. China, too, is not particularly welcoming of these kids. In China, when a child is born, you're required to register the child with the authorities. And if you don't and if the child does not have official registration papers, then the child, effectively, just doesn't exist as far as the government is concerned. So, the child can't go to school, can't get medical care, and is really a nonperson. So, especially if the North Korean women leave China (if they are either repatriated or they decide to go to South Korea) they leave children behind. The husbands often can't afford to take care of the children, or they don't want to take care of them. The mother is gone. They don't want the kid.

So, a growth industry has developed among missionaries and humanitarian workers in China that helps these children. I had the powerful experience of visiting a house orphanage in China along with my husband, who's sitting over here, a house orphanage in China. These children were living with Chinese foster parents, who, I might say, risk a great deal to take care of these kids. They are part of a string of house orphanages that are managed by a humanitarian Christian organization here in the United States. When we were there, we met a retired, American couple who had decided to devote their lives to managing these orphanages, and they helped many, many such children around China.

**NIKITA DESAI:**

Well, I'd like to thank you both for coming here today for this important program. We welcome you back on February 28th for a policy discussion with contributors from Washington, New York, and Seoul on *South Korea's Presidential Inaugural and Next-Steps in Korea-U.S. Relations*.

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