# What the News and Government Institutions Fail to Understand -- North Korea’s Migrant Workforce in China

By Hannes Bublitz

As covered by the Korea Herald, KITA (Korea International Trade Association) recently released a report that says the number of North Koreans, who go to China to find work rose by 20% annually over the last three years. In hard numbers this means, that in 2013 alone 93000 North Korean work migrants came to China.

This upward trend sheds light on the notoriously bad working conditions in North Korea and does not support the North’s self-proclaimed “right to work” and “fair working conditions”, which the DPRK blatantly stated in its official internal Human Rights report earlier last month.

The KITA report further mentions that those North Korean migrant workers are being paid much less than their Chinese coworkers. Where Chinese workers would make an approximate 440.000 Won per month, North Koreans would only make around 260.000 Won per month.

KITA officials speak of a “win-win arrangement” for the DPRK and the Chinese government, since the migrant workers would send home their earnings, thus generating steady flows of currency, while the Chinese economy would benefit from cheap labor.

Moreover, North Korean migrant workers are not allowed to get hired by South Korean companies in China. Regarding this ban the Korea Herald article covering the KITA’s report release, quotes KITA officials saying, that North Korea should lift its restrictions.

KITA’s argumentation for the need to lift those bans is of a purely economic nature and goes along the lines of: “South Korean companies could make significant inroads into Chinese domestic markets with the cheap labor of North Korean migrant workers.”

What the Korea Herald misses to point out, and what KITA seemingly fails to understand altogether is, that this story is not about economic gain or making inroads into foreign markets. This story is about an entire population being systematically stripped of their every human rights, being starved, incarcerated and abused. The first thought that comes to mind when hearing about increasing numbers of North Korean migrant workers should not be wasted on how to make economical use of their “cheap labor”. This purely capitalist mind-set is maybe one of the biggest hindrances to international aid and human rights work.

The fact that the numbers of North Korean migrants seeking work in China have been sky-rocketing over the last years is an indicator for the grim living conditions in the Hermit Kingdom. With the United Nations currently preparing to bring the North Korean Government before the International Criminal Court in The Hague for its human rights abuses and atrocities, decision makers of the economic sphere should finally overthink their capitalist priorities. Raising wages from below Chinese minimum would be a first step in helping the North Korean migrant workforce.

Supposedly, money has no smell, but, candidly, making money by exploiting an already exploited, beat, and desperate North Korean migrant workforce smells like a dog’s breath.