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China urged to avoid forced repatriation of North Korean defectors

A group of 21 North Koreans must not be forcibly repatriated by the Chinese government, Amnesty International said amid reports they are being held in the north-eastern Chinese city of Changchun for being in the country illegally en route to South Korea.

The group has reportedly been told the Chinese authorities will expel them back to North Korea by 20 February.

If returned they are at risk of detention, torture and even execution as illegal border-crossers.

The North Koreans were picked up by Chinese police on 8 February in separate locations in the city of Shenyang. Some of them are believed to have had contact with members of a South Korean organization who were trying to help them complete their journey to South Korea.

The plight of the detained is even more precarious in the wake of a January announcement by the North Korean authorities condemning border-crossers and threatening them with harsh punishments. The country is undergoing a leadership transition after the death of Kim Jong-il and the succession of his son Kim Jong-un in December 2011.

“The Chinese authorities must enable these 21 North Koreans to seek asylum in China and other countries, and provide them with access to the UN refugee agency or other relevant refugee channels,” said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific Director.

North Korean nationals known to have had contact with South Koreans or caught attempting to travel to South Korea often risk harsher punishment if caught and returned home. In some instances, those convicted of illegal border-crossing may be executed.

North Koreans are banned from travelling to another country without state permission.

China considers all undocumented North Koreans as economic migrants, rather than as asylum-seekers.

Although China is a state party to the UN Refugee Convention, it has prevented the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) from access to North Koreans in China.

International law prohibits the forcible repatriation either directly or indirectly of any individuals to a country where they are at risk of facing persecution, torture or death.