

## Fear turns to fury for new breed of North Korean defectors

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North Korean-born Kang Myeong-wook and his granddaughter bow towards the border at the Demilitarized Zone at Imjingak, Paju, in South Korea last Friday. Many South Korean families visit the DMZ during the Lunar New Year holiday to send symbolic offerings

Former residents of the gulag state share their stories of murder, famine and loved ones left behind

Clara Park makes her living introducing her homeland to tourists from around the world. But instead of trumpeting its attractions like an ambassador, the wife of a former North Korean party cadre shares what it is like to live on food waste and work for no pay in the reclusive state.

The 48-year-old is one of four defectors now working for Panmunjom Travel Centre, the

only agency that offers tourists a meeting with a North Korean defector on a visit to the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ). The Q&A session takes place at Odusan Unification Observatory, which overlooks Imjingang, the river that flows along the tense border. Tourists are seated on child-sized furniture in a mock classroom adorned with portraits of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, as a defector fields questions from the curious.

This job earns defectors like Park an average of US\$2,000 (about Bt65,500) a month - a good supplement to the generous benefits they already receive from the South Korean government.

But money is not their only motivation.

"Our defector staff have a sense of mission ... They want to help bring about positive changes to their homeland," says Kim Bong-ki, the agency's owner. "That's why they are sharing the reality in North Korea despite facing a certain level of danger."

Park and her colleagues are part of a growing community of defectors who are increasingly vocal about the hunger and torture they experienced in North Korea. Kang Chul-hwan and Shin Dong-hyuk also brought to light their brutal suffering in North Korea's prison camps in their respective books: "The Aquarium of Pyongyang" and "Escape from Camp 14". Shin, who last year addressed the European Parliament, is so far the only escapee known to have been born in the North's notorious jail for political dissidents.

Growing up on a diet of corn porridge, soup and rats, Shin was so hungry that whenever given a choice between hunger and a beating as punishment, he would always opt for the beating.

As a child, he was so jealous to find his mother cooking rice - an extremely rare treat - for his brother one night that he turned both of them in for conspiring to escape, leading to their executions right before his eyes. Other civilian defectors have stepped into the limelight in other ways.

Kim Ha-na, for instance, shared her odyssey while competing on the reality show

"Masterchef Korea". Lee Hyeon-seo made a mark at the global TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) conference last year, sharing her struggle with identity issues. "I see tourists as my messengers. I hope they will walk away with a better understanding of my pain, and tell the world on my behalf about the necessity of reunification," Park says. "I strongly believe reunification is the only way to stop the North Korean tragedy."

The cool-headed Park escaped from the North in 2011, after plotting her route for more than two years without her husband's knowledge. "I could not bring this up with him ... We think very differently," Park said in response to a tourist's question on why she had left without her husband. He has since been forced into early retirement, according to Park's friends from the North.

Park decided to leave after Pyongyang's currency revaluation exercise in 2009, when North Koreans were made to swap their old banknotes - up to just 100,000 North Korean won (about Bt1,400 in the black market) - for new ones.

The move, widely seen as a bid by the government to wipe out the "new rich", rendered the bulk of Park's savings - three million won in cash - worthless.

It spurred her to set off on a gruelling five-month journey to South Korea via China and Thailand, taking with her only her teenage daughter and rat poison - in case they got caught. Their courage paid off. After surviving three months of grilling by South Korea's intelligence officers - a procedure to weed out potential spies - they were inducted into their new capitalist home, and have been coping well. But Park is still struggling to overcome some hard-wired instincts. "I am still apprehensive about saying anything negative about the Kim family. I get worried even when talking to a close friend."

More than 26,000 North Koreans have resettled in the South since the armistice in the 1950-'53 Korean War, latest figures from Seoul's unification ministry show.

Dr Song Jiyong, a political science professor at the Singapore Management University, says the vast majority of defectors need not be overly anxious about their safety, although "the infiltration of North Korean spies through mass defection to the South has happened in

recent years". The North Korean government tried to assassinate the late Hwang Jang-yup, a former teacher and advisor of Kim Jong-il, but did not succeed.

To Dr Song, the real problem is whether northerners can integrate into the highly competitive South Korean world.

Gina Lee, a tour guide with Panmunjom Travel, shares the same concern. "Even I found it difficult to fit in," says Lee, a South Korean who had lived in the United States for 20 years before returning to Seoul. "Over here, it's always hurry, hurry, hurry ... People also tend to be more cliquish. It's not easy for outsiders to feel at home."

The growing number of arrivals from the North might also be a source of brewing unhappiness among South Koreans, who might see red over the costly affirmative action programme for defectors.

The issue of housing is likely to be particularly contentious. While defectors are given decent apartments of about 70sqm, Seoul's expensive properties remain out of reach for many natives despite a lifetime of hard work, Lee explains.

But Park is optimistic about her stay in South Korea. "My daughter is studying hard and doing well, so I see a bright future for my family."

She now has just two wishes. One, a happy marriage for her daughter. The other might never come true, but she lives in hope of seeing her husband and living with him again.