

Refugee Activists Urge More Underground Economy for North Korea

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Justin Wheeler, vice president of LiNK, said, "If we can get people to think about North Korea as a country that needs help and that there are people suffering, then I believe people will get involved."

Representatives from Liberty in North Korea (LiNK) spoke at the Lovin' Life Learning Center on April 26, 2012 at follow-up luncheon to the North Korean refugee-crisis event that took place on April 24, 2012. President and CEO of LiNK Hannah Song and Vice President of LiNK Justin Wheeler attended the luncheon, which was organized by Lovin' Life- Care Team members. The "brown bag" event drew over 70 people, including about 10 guests and 60 participants of the Generation Peace Academy (GPA).

Doug Burton, public affairs director of the Unification Church in the United States opened the event with welcoming remarks and background information on Rev. Sun Myung Moon's advocacy on the unification of North- and South Korea.

Wheeler, 27, who has been a part of LiNK since 2008, said: "What people can do right now is to help LiNK redefine the issue concerning North Korea. Most people are aware of North Korea on a more political level and they're not sympathetic towards the North Korean people. If we can get people to think about North Korea as a country that needs help and that there are people who are suffering as a result of the regime, then I believe people will get involved. Many aren't because they think it's a purely political issue.

"If you want to get involved with LiNK, first become aware of North Korea's humanitarian crisis. Then we encourage you to act on that awareness. Start a LiNK chapter in your community or school. Through the chapters, help LiNK spread the word about the issue and raise funds to rescue refugees. That's a huge part of what our student demographic is doing. You can also intern and be a nomad, that is, travel the country and speak on behalf of the organization. There are a lot of opportunities to get involved and there's also full time employment as well."

According to Song, liberation in North Korea will come from the North Korean people themselves, who are beginning to think twice about their government. She pointed to the growing underground economy as the key to empowerment of citizens in the north. As more refugees slip across the border into China and start earning wages, they smuggle payments back to their hard-pressed relatives, who use the money to enter into market activities and to bribe government officials. Eventually, the trickle of illegal cash can become a river that destabilizes the power of local officials and the military. In fact, because too many

citizens were acquiring stacks of cash, the North Korean government devalued the currency in 2009, but there was a widespread backlash.



Hannah Song, president of LiNK, said that "Change in North Korea is inevitable."

“It’s so interesting when looking at the change in the psyche of the North Korean people,” she said. “In the past, it was very committed to the ideology of the North Korean government. After the devaluation of currency [in 2009], a lot of refugees are talking about an awakening. [The devaluation] makes people upset because in their minds, it’s getting in their way of being able to survive. So, what the state used to be has now been replaced by the markets. The people don’t know what capitalism is, but they’re starting to apply the ideas and concepts of capitalists.”

A video presentation was shown to inform the audience about the present North Korean humanitarian crisis and the methods used by LiNK to guide refugees to safety into southern Asia.

The event ended with a Q&A session that sparked discussion on the economy and progress of North Korea. According to Song, more people are bribing the officials to cross the river and sending money back to families through underground connections.

“Change in North Korea is inevitable,” said Song.