PRESS RELEASE

Urgent Appeal for Protection of North Korean Refugees in China

Seoul, January 19, 2003 – On January 18, 48 North Koreans, including families with children, who were about to leave China by sea and seek asylum either in South Korea or Japan, were arrested by the Chinese security services in Yantai City, Shandong Province. Three aid workers who assisted them were arrested as well. The detained North Koreans, as do thousands of their compatriots, face the risk of being severely interrogated by Chinese security services and forcibly repatriated to North Korea where a grim fate awaits them.

As for the three aid workers, they may be subject to long-term imprisonment in China. The case of this group of 48 North Koreans is most revealing: it unveils the distress of the North Korean refugee population in China and the urgent necessity to provide them assistance. It graphically illustrates a human tragedy that will not be solved through repression. The international medical humanitarian organization Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) can only condemn the arrest of these asylum seekers and denounce the recurring non-observance of the right to flee of asylum seekers and the persecutions they are subject to.

Within the past three years, China has arrested and forcibly repatriated thousands of North Koreans in flight from their own country in search of asylum and assistance. Since early December 2002, as a way to definitively eliminate the embarrassing question of North Korean refugees, China has launched a new manhunt in collusion with North Korean security services. As of mid-January 2003, 3200 North Korean civilians in China have already been repatriated as a result of this so-called “100 day campaign”. 1300 others are awaiting their repatriation in the detention centers of Tumen and Longjing. The systematic and organized dragnet taking place in China leaves North Korean refugees no other alternative than a desperate flight to a third country, at the risk of their very lives.

The humanitarian aid workers who attempt to rescue North Korean refugees also face the brutal determination of the Chinese authorities, who deem the assistance of North Korean refugees as a criminal offense. In addition to facing jail terms, deportation and fines for assistance, Yanbian residents who are suspected of being humanitarian aid workers are now forced to take a written oath to the effect that they will not provide assistance to North Korean refugees. Bounties for the identification of either humanitarian aid workers or North Koreans remain commonplace. Predictably, in this context, support for North Korean refugees in distress is diminishing and assisting them has become a challenge that increasingly few aid organizations, crushed by this sanction policy, are able to undertake.

As international attention is now turned to Pyongyang’s regime for a separate crisis, the fate of North Korean refugees remains resolutely ignored. Neither China’s repeated violation of international conventions nor desperate attempts by hundreds of North Koreans to seek asylum in foreign representations have resulted in measurable progress on the question of the protection of North Korean refugees in search of asylum. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Beijing, approached repeatedly on this matter, has simply been unable to ensure their protection.

MSF earnestly urges the UNHCR to demand from the Chinese authorities access to the North Koreans under arrest and to examine their asylum requests. MSF asks that in accordance with international law, the North Korean detainees not be repatriated and that they be protected. MSF asks that the humanitarian volunteers be freed.
MSF vigorously condemns the repression and the forced repatriation of North Koreans in China. It denounces the Chinese measures aimed at criminalizing the humanitarian assistance directed to the North Koreans.