CHINA’S FORCIBLE REPATRIATION OF NORTH KOREAN DEFECTORS CAPTURED IN FEBRUARY 2012:

Effects of Internet Activism and a High Degree of Press Attention

on the South Korean Government’s Response in a Period of Uncertainty

Bachelor Thesis in Korean Studies
Spring 2012
Sofia Hult

Advisor: Tom Hart
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor Tom Hart. I am very grateful for the good advice, conversations and encouragement. I would also like to thank Yasmine Boudali for her advice and support, and Gabriel Jonsson who has supported me throughout my studies with enthusiasm, knowledge and help.

..............................................
Sofia Hult, 2012.07.29
# Table of Contents

**CHAPTER 1. **INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................................... 1  
1.1 AIM OF THE PAPER ........................................................................................................................................... 3  
1.2 EARLIER RESEARCH .......................................................................................................................................... 3  
1.3 THEORY AND METHOD ..................................................................................................................................... 4  
1.4 MATERIALS AND DATA ..................................................................................................................................... 5  
1.5 FOCUS OF ANALYSIS AND DELIMITATIONS ................................................................................................. 5  

**CHAPTER 2. **BACKGROUND INFORMATION ................................................................................................. 6  
2.1 CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATION IN NORTH KOREA ..................................................................................... 6  
2.2 CHINA’S NORTH KOREAN DEFECTOR POLICIES ........................................................................................... 8  
2.3 TREATIES IN FOCUS .......................................................................................................................................... 9  

**CHAPTER 3. **THE INCIDENT AS REPORTED AND SUBSEQUENT EVENTS .......................................................... 10  

**CHAPTER 4. **ANALYSIS ........................................................................................................................................ 23  
4.1 THE INTERNET CAMPAIGN .............................................................................................................................. 23  
4.2 INTERNATIONAL REPERCUSSIONS .................................................................................................................. 24  
4.3 THE SOUTH KOREAN GOVERNMENT ............................................................................................................... 24  
4.4 THE SOUTH KOREAN PRESS .......................................................................................................................... 26  
4.5 OTHER POSSIBLE FACTORS ........................................................................................................................... 28  

**CHAPTER 5. **CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................................... 30  
5.1 THOUGHTS OF THE AUTHOR .......................................................................................................................... 32  

BIBLIOGRAPHY ...................................................................................................................................................... 33
Chapter 1. Introduction

On 20 February 2012 the Facebook page “Save my Friend” was created. The description on page one reads: “In the last few days, 30 North Korean refugees are currently facing repatriation from China. They will be executed if sent back. Please join along with 29,000 other who have already signed! This is Urgent!” And in Korean: “이런 작별이 어딨어?” “What kind of goodbye is this?” On the page is a link to change.org where anyone can start a petition for a cause (Change.org, 2012).

A great many people engaged themselves in the cause to save the North Korean refugees signed this petition, “Save the North Korean Refugees#Save My Friend”. In the end the petition managed to raise 180,520 signatures for the cause. In the description on the petition page North Korea’s new leader Kim Jong Un’s statement about killing refugees and their families can be seen.

The founders of the Facebook page used so-called SNS (Social Network Services) such as Facebook and Twitter to reach out to the world. Fighters for the cause in South Korea managed to engage the national newspapers to report on the case of the captured defectors, and they tried to put pressure on the South Korean government to take a stand for the North Korean refugees. The cause also engaged several human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International, National Human Rights Commission of Korea, The Group for North Korean Human Rights etc. (Kim E. J., 2012).
Korean newspapers reported these events, placing heavy responsibility on China and criticizing them for sending back refugees to a certain death (Song, 2012). The public’s engagement on the Internet led to an increased attention in the South Korean press. The newspapers put pressure on the South Korean government to step in and rescue the captured defectors, something that led to a more aggressive approach than usual from the South Korean government’s side. The South Korean government brought up the issue of the defectors in the international community in an attempt to put pressure on China not to repatriate the defectors. South Korea brought up the question in the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) for the first time, in an attempt to remind China of its previous engagements of signed treaties. As a result the U.S. and the EU got engaged in the case.

Despite efforts from the South Korean and the international public, the South Korean press, the South Korean government and in the end the international community to save the captured North Korean defectors they were repatriated. The details surrounding the repatriation are still unknown, and so is the fate of the defectors. Though the punishment they received on their return remains unknown it was no doubt severe.

The repatriation of North Korean defectors had an interesting impact on the South Korean government’s political stance. First of all, the international public’s engagement over the Internet managed to rally people from 100 different countries to sign the petition against repatriation (Ahn, 2012), which in turn led to an increased interest by the South Korean press. Secondly, the press pressure on the South Korean government to take action presumably led to a bolder South Korean political stance in the issue. Lastly, this case of the North Korean defectors was the first big repatriation case after North Korea’s new leader’s proclamation of harsher punishment for those who try to flee the country. This also means that it was the first major test of whether the Chinese would continue their previous policy when dealing with North Korean defectors, and the first test of how the South Korean government would react to the new situation, since the relationship between North and South Korea had been tense since South Korea’s current president Lee Myung Bak was appointed.
1.1 Aim of the Paper

This paper aims to describe these events to the extent detailed information is available in open sources with the aim of discovering what may have been new or unconventional in the way matters were handled on all sides under the new circumstances.

The broad question under examination in this paper is how and to what extent the South Korean newspapers report of the case of the captured defectors affected government policies and the political situation in general.

There are many aspects of this question, to name a few: did it affect the fate of the defectors, was there a change in China’s behavior, what effect did it have on the relationship between South and North Korea and in what way did it affect the South Korean government policies and political situation? This paper cannot treat all these questions, but focuses on the South Korean political aspect. How did the South Korean government act in the case of the North Korean defectors caught in February 201, did their actions bring about changes in policies and was the course of events significantly influenced by press and internet activism? More specifically, the aim is to illustrate how the South Korean press coverage of this North Korean defector case may have been affected by the Internet and social network pages, how it may have served to further influence public opinion, and whether it may have put pressure on the South Korean government.

1.2 Earlier Research

There have been a few studies on China’s stance in the North Korean defector issue. Dong-ho Han has speculated in China’s interests and responsibilities towards North Korean defectors (Han, 2011). He discusses the historical political relationship China and North Korea and the treaties between them. How China’s complicated political and economical relationship with North Korea put China in a difficult spot since the international community has pointed to unjust human treatment in North Korea and thus the human rights issue when it comes to North Korean defectors. However, China has domestic concerns with allowing refugees to enter China, leading to prioritize politics above humanitarian concerns.

Han writes about China’s intentions to keep regional stability and he discusses the difficulties that China might face if they were to classify the North Korean defectors as refugees, which, in that case, would mean that China officially accepts North Korea’s dictatorship, which in turn might create a difficult political situation for China and also send out the message that North Korea is about to collapse. Han also touches the difficulties for South Korea and the international community’s ability to affect China in the matter of North Korean refugees. Due to military cooperation and other aspects, China and North Korea are tightly linked together, thus Han argues that China’s decisions in the North Korean refugee matter and the Chinese North Korean relationship will affect “the entire regional security landscape” (ibid.)
Jaeho Hwang has also written about the North Korean defector issue, focusing on the effects in the regional countries around North Korea. He discusses who those fleeing North Korea are and why. He also discusses the way in which China deals with the defectors. Despite the fact that China’s Constitution states that China should give protection to foreigners who enter China for political reasons they repatriate the North Koreans. The roles played by various NGO’s, the UN, the U.S. and neighboring countries’ roles in the matter are discussed and in the end how the North Korean escapees have become an international political issue (Hwang, 2004).

Another study on the South Korean perspective on the future relationship between China and North Korea is that of Hwang, Kim, Jun, and Cho. However, their focus lies in the relationship between North Korea and China and South Korean policies toward China. Speculations regarding the future relationship between China and North Korea, to some extent, touch Chinese North Korean defector policies. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) also publishes annual global trends reports on refugees where North Korea is listed (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2010). However, the accuracy of the numbers is debatable, as well as the question whether North Korean defectors are in fact refugees, since the North Korean defectors, according to previous studies, have yet to be officially classified as refugees by the international community although they should be (Kim M. M., 2010).

There are a great many other studies on North Korea, the refugee situation, famine and other issues regarding North Korea. Studies dealing with North Korean defectors residing in other countries are also plentiful. However no paper so far seems to focus on the event at issue here and its effects. Other discussions of this case are primarily found in newspapers and other media sources.

1.3 Theory and Method

This paper is a case study (See Ekström & Larsson, 2000). Theoretically this paper is similar to a previous Swedish case study from 1992-1993 in which three ships with refugees arrived at the island Gotland, which dealt with how the government handled that specific case and how the media reported on the event. In that paper the theoretical perspective was on the government’s crisis management regarding different ways of dealing with uncertainty, and complexity as well as the media’s crisis communication and the media’s take on refugees and immigrants.

The focus on material in this paper is mainly from South Korea’s three biggest daily newspapers, JoongAng Ilbo with a conservative political view, Chosun Ilbo also a conservative paper and Dong-a Ilbo, a leftist paper. The newspapers will be examined in terms of qualitative analysis (Gillespie & Toynbee, 2006). The aim of this paper is not to make press comparisons within the South Korean press, but as stated in 1.1 illustrate the public’s influence on the press coverage and the influence of the press on the government.
1.4 Materials and Data

The main source of information is the South Korean daily press, primarily the three biggest newspapers. As stated above they have expressed different political views, and a large amount of readers take part of their articles on a daily basis. The newspapers serve as means to retell what happened rather than analyzing finer details in the articles. Other newspapers in South Korea may also have reported on the issue, however, including them in the research would have made the work more extensive without substantial contribution to the analysis.

South Koreans or overseas Koreans wrote most materials used for this paper which means that most authors might have had specific interests, in some cases personal interest, in the matter. The focus is the South Korean government and newspapers, the overall variety of other nations’ people’s material can mainly be seen in the information regarding the Internet social network parts of the North Korean defector case.

1.5 Focus of Analysis and Delimitations

The North Korean defector issue is of course not a new one. The problem with North Korean defectors, their status and those crossing borders stretches back to when the Korean peninsula was divided. This paper focuses on one event during February 2012. Further information given before or after that month is for clarifying reasons and to strengthen the understanding of the situation.
Chapter 2. **Background Information**

2.1 **Current Political Situation in North Korea**

JoongAng Ilbo wrote on 5 January 2012 that North Korea’s new leader Kim Jong-un had tightened the border control. In line with Kim Jong-Il’s death Kim Jong Un announced that no one was allowed to leave the country. He gave the security squad of the Korean People’s Army permission to shoot defectors on sight. The newspaper further reported that a U.S.-based radio channel reported that defectors had been killed trying to escape on 31 December 2011 (Moon, 5 January 2012).

The matter of defection has been publicly discussed in North Korea to scare people from making attempts to leave the country. The North Korean government’s previous attitude was to silence the matter of defection, not to encourage people to flee. However, the change in tactics is due to the fact that the defection has not decreased. Kim Jong Un has turned up the stakes by stating that three generations of the family to anyone who tries to escape will be executed. A policy that is tougher than any of former leader Kim Jong II’s *(ibid.)*.

The regime did not collapse after Kim Jong II’s death in December 2011. Around 19 December 2011 Kim Jong Un declared that three generations of the family of escapees would be killed, regardless of whether the defector got caught or not *(ibid.)*.

The new leader Kim Jong Un is the youngest son of the former leader Kim Jong Il’s third wife. The exact age of the new leader is still unknown, some claim he was born in 1983, others
that he was born in 1984. However controvert his date of birth might be most agree that he probably is in his late twenties. The fact that the world knows very little about Kim Jong Un worries many (Choe & Fackler, 2009). Kim Jong Un did not receive any official training that the world knows of before 2010 (The New York Times, 2012). His father on the other hand was seen from a very early age by his father Kim Il Sung’s side. Kim Jong Il was trained in official positions for at least 20 years before he took over the country (Choe & Fackler, 2009). In Kim Jong Un’s case the information regarding who would take over after Kim Jong Il was a mystery until 2010 and uncertain until the day Kim Jong Un officially took over the leadership of North Korea (The New York Times, 2012).

The actual authority of Kim Jong Un has also been debated. Since the previous low profile leading up to his present leadership, there have been speculations of him merely being a marionette in the hands of stronger and more experienced men in the North Korean regime. It is speculated that he has been educated in Switzerland; however there is no proof of such education. It is said that he was homeschooled while enrolled at Kim Il Sung Military University (ibid.). The new leader is also said to have been Kim Jong Il’s favorite son since he resembled his father the most of the children. Kim Jong Un is believed to be about 179cm tall and weigh about 90kg. Furthermore, he has diabetes and suffers from high blood pressure (Choe & Fackler, 2009).

Kim Jong Un officially was introduced as the successor he became a four-star general and the vice chairman of the Central Military Commission of the Worker’s Party. Kim Jong Un was declared the new leader of North Korea upon Kim Jong Il’s death on 17 December 2011. After various formalities and ceremonies Kim Jong Un was finally instated as the leader on 29 December with the North Korean population vowing to follow him (The New York Times, 2012).

In February 2012 shortly after coming to power, Kim Jong Un took a step towards suspending nuclear weapons and allowing international inspectors access. This as a result of dialogues with the U.S., where they promised to give aid in the form of food supplies to North Korea in exchange for a more open nuclear weapon policy. However, this deal was broken when North Korea launched missiles in April 2012, an act condemned by the United Nations Security Council as well as the U.S. The same month Kim Jong Un was promoted First secretary, a post North Koreans call “supreme leader”. The promotion has been regarded as a proof of insecurity from the new leader. By attaining the highest titles in the regime Kim Jong Un is trying to prove his right to be there. In contrast with his father, Kim Jong II, he did not have complete control over the party and the military when officially becoming the leader. This makes Kim Jong Un dependent on titles and people around him. However, former loyal leaders to Kim Jong Il are being retired and replaced by Kim Jong Un loyal party members, something that can be seen as an attempt from Kim Jong Un’s side to seize full control over the country (ibid.).

Kim Jong Un has declared that the relationship with South Korea will be kept the same as it was the time before Kim Jong Il’s death. This means that the North Korean regime still despises South Korea’s president Lee Myung Bak, leaving the relationship hostile. However, this
situation seems to have an ulterior motive. Having a tense relationship with the outside world gives the new North Korean leader an excuse to unite his subjects against a common enemy, a move that will strengthen his grip of the country (ibid.).

The succession in North Korea has always given room for speculations and in the case of Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un many wonder if Kim Jong Un will be able to keep a third generation of the Kim family in the leader position in North Korea. Speculations also go to a future unification of North and South Korea, and if the transition between Kim Jong Il’s reign and Kim Jong Un will be as smooth as the one between the two former leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il (Joo, 2012).

2.2 China’s North Korean defector Policies

North Korean laws make criminals of people who flee North Korea. Due to criminalizing of the defectors from the North Korean side alongside a bilateral agreement on border business between North Korea and China from 1986 (Chosun Ilbo, 21 February 2012), China considers North Korean border crossers as economic migrants, with the result that they are repatriated (International Crisis Group, 2006).

China is constantly on the lookout for border crossers in hiding. China increased the border control in October 2006 by putting up fences and intensifying the look for escapees to arrest. Despite the strong barriers North Koreans keep crossing the Chinese border (ibid.).

The hunt for defectors has resulted in China offering bounties to those who turn them in. China does not grant South Korea or the international community such as UNHCR access to North Koreans in China (ibid.).

Chosun ilbo has said that according to the North Korea Refugees Human Rights Association China repatriates 4,000-5,000 North Koreans every year (Chosun Ilbo, 21 February 2012), and according to JoongAng Ilbo, the number is over 5,000 (Park, 2012). North Korean children are being left orphans when their parents are repatriated without them (ibid.). North Koreans who marry Chinese citizens are not granted citizenship, nor are their children. (International Crisis Group, 2006).

China’s way of dealing with defectors’ arrests depends on how they got caught. Accidental arrested defectors end up in detention facilities and go through a basic interrogation. Those who are chased down are as Dong-a ilbo stated: “sent to a public security bureau that originally requested the arrest”, and interrogated. The purpose of the interrogations is to find out everything from their taken route to what kind of relationship they had with their helpers and brokers. After that they wait to be repatriated in detention facilities near the border until the right amount of defectors is gathered. Some places have shorter waiting periods than others ( Joo, S.H., 15 February 2012).

Earlier research on China’s policies in these matter mentions China’s role in the region and its responsibilities. Due to military cooperation between China and North Korea, the defector issue becomes a matter of national security. Despite international pressure on human rights issues related to North Korean defectors China keeps insisting that the defectors are not refugees
When China has been pressured in the defector issue they have remained silent until the focus moves on to other issues (ibid.).

In the majority of cases China repatriates the defectors. One example is from October 2011 when China repatriated 30 North Korean refugees. At that time the South Korean government did not put pressure on China. (Korea JoongAng Daily, 20 February 2012). However, in some cases China hand over a few defectors to South Korea. The negotiations in those cases are mostly outside the official political arena (Kim H.-j., One-time defectors say repatriation could be fatal, 24 February 2012). In some cases, China receives defectors from Vietnam, Burma or Laos etc. in which those defectors also are repatriated. (International Crisis Group, 2006). The fact is that China has a habit of repatriating North Korean border crossers.

2.3 Treaties in Focus

China signed 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and 1987 Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment treaties, which reads as follows:

The 1951 convention article 33 states:
“Article 33. - Prohibition of expulsion or return ("refoulement")

1. No Contracting State shall expel or return ("refouler") a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.
2. The benefit of the present provision may not, however, be claimed by a refugee whom there are reasonable grounds for regarding as a danger to the security of the country in which he is, or who, having been convicted by a final judgment of a particularly serious crime, constitutes a danger to the community of that country.” (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1954)

The 1987 convention states:
"Article 3
1. No State Party shall expel, return ("refouler") or extradite a person to another State where there are substantial grounds for believing that he would be in danger of being subjected to torture.” (ibid.).
Chapter 3. **The Incident as Reported and Subsequent Events**

The events during the incident of the captured defectors are listed chronologically sorted by date. When the newspapers report conflicting or dubious data the information are listed after the newspaper articles’ dates.

**8 February 2012:** *According to different sources*, North Korean defectors were captured trying to escape to a third country from China. According to Dong-a Ilbo, two of the defectors posing as a brother and sister were Chinese spies (Joo, S.H., 14 February 2012). The South Korean newspapers reported that a number between 29 to 33 defectors had been caught. The group consisting of men, women and teenagers were said to face repatriation no later than 20 February (Chosun Ilbo, 14 February 2012). The defectors fled during the 100 day mourning period for North Korea’s former leader Kim Jong Il, though the new leader Kim Jong Un had proclaimed that three generations of the families to those who flee will be killed (Joo, S.H., 14 February 2012). Due to that proclamation members of the defectors’ families who already managed to escape to South Korea contacted activist groups who in turn sought help from the National Human Rights Commission in South Korea (Chosun Ilbo, 14 February 2012).

**12 February:** *China* made two more arrests of five people on each occasion (*ibid.*).
13 February: *Dong-a Ilbo* reported that 5 more defectors were caught (Joo, S.H., 14 February 2012).

15 February: *Dong-a Ilbo* wrote that Amnesty International had become involved in the defector case. The organization urged China to protect the defectors by pointing out that Kim Jong Un’s statement made the situation more dangerous than usual for defectors. Amnesty International asked China to allow the defectors to seek asylum in China or a third country and give them access to a United Nations (UN) refugee agency (Joo, S.H., 15 February 2012).

The same article also mentioned that Chinese people had started blogging about the defector case. Some of them wrote: “Isn’t killing three generations of a refugee’s family too cruel?”, “Can’t North Korea have humanity?” and “Under the current human rights situation in North Korea, repatriating the refugees is the same as murdering them”. Others urged China to let the defectors go to South Korea *(ibid.)*.

*The Chinese government* remained silent in the matter. The South Korean Foreign Affairs and Trade Ministry also urged China to stop the repatriation. China’s silence could be interpreted as an attempt to avoid media attention so as to decrease interest in the matter, a successful tactic China’s had on previous occasions *(ibid.)*.

China did not reveal the location of the defector and the original repatriation deadline was pushed forward due to the attention the issue had received. The North Korean defectors were to go through the standard Chinese procedures for arrested defectors and then await repatriation in detention facilities near the border *(ibid.)*.

16 February: A petition to save the defectors from repatriation called “Save the North Korean Refugees#Save My Friend” was created. The petition webpage encouraged people to sign and send letters to politicians and human rights organizations (Change.org, 2012).

17 February: In an editorial *JoongAng Ilbo* wrote that “South Korea must exercise its right of diplomatic protection immediately in order to save the lives of hundreds of thousands of North Korean refugees in China”. The newspaper urged the South Korean government to stop the repatriation. Further, the newspaper wrote that according to international law North Koreans fleeing their country are to be classified as refugees since the North Korean government is criminalizing and punishing those leaving North Korea (Park, 2012).

The newspaper used words like “savage” when describing the punishment given by the North Korean government. Those who are caught fleeing or are repatriated end up in concentration camp and suffer “inhumane torture”, others are executed *(ibid.)*.

According to *JoongAng Ilbo*, the Chinese government has ignored the UN Refugee Convention and the UN Convention against Torture. China has also denied the UN High Commissioner for Refugees access to arrested North Korean defectors in the past and repatriated
defectors and continuously hunted down escapees on Chinese territory. The newspaper reported that over 5,000 North Koreans refugees are repatriated by China every year (ibid.).

Due to these facts, JoongAng Ilbo reminded South Korean government of the Constitution of South Korea according to which North Koreans are seen as citizens and thus are the government’s responsibility. The newspaper wrote that Chinese government has to accept that the captured defectors have dual citizenship which requires China to open up a discussion with South Korea regarding the repatriation. The newspaper speculated that China most likely would open up a dialogue about the defectors in order to keep good trading relations with South Korea. At the end of the article the newspaper urged the political left and right to unite to bring home their citizens (ibid.).

18 February: South Korean celebrities rallied outside the Chinese Embassy in Seoul to protest the repatriation of the defectors. The spokesman for the celebrities was the actor Cha In-pyo, known in South Korea for his acts of goodwill, like adopting orphaned children. His interest in the North Korean defectors’ wellbeing was founded when he made a film about the North Koreans’ plight (Chosun Ilbo, Actor Cha In-pyo Campaigns for N.Korean Defectors, 24 February 2012).

20 February: The Facebook page “Save my Friend” was created, a page that was directed mainly to the South Koreans since many of the posts were written in Korean. The page urged people all over the world to sign the “Save the North Korean Refugees#Save My Friend” petition (Kim & Park, 2012). At the same time a student in the U.S. created a friend Facebook page for the international forum called “Save a girl” and urged people of all nationalities to sign the petition and write letters to various forums appealing the North Korean defectors’ case. The reason the student engaged himself in the matter was because a friend’s sister was one of the captured defectors. The student said that the Facebook pages were the means of reaching out to more people than those already engaged in the cause. Unfortunately the Facebook page “Save a girl” has been cancelled and can no longer be viewed (Kim E. J., 2012).

Amnesty International delivered an open letter and sms petition not to repatriate the defectors to the Chinese Embassy. According to Amnesty International, the sms petition gathered 5,521 signatures and 9,163 petitioning emails were sent to the Chinese president Hu Jintao. The Chinese Foreign Ministry responded that they would deal with the North Koreans “based on international and domestic laws and humanitarian principles”. When a reporter pointed out that repatriation goes against such laws as well as the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees the Foreign Ministry replied that “We cannot accept such rhetoric” (Chosun Ilbo, 21 February 2012).

JoongAng Ilbo discussed a case from October 2011, when China repatriated some 30 North Korean refugees. At that time the South Korean government did not put pressure on China. This time JoongAng Ilbo wanted the South Korean government to make China change its attitude in the defectorissue (Moon, 20 February 2012).
At this point the issue had, among others, managed to engage: Amnesty International, the South Korean National Human Rights Commission, the North Korea Refugees Human Rights Association, and the South Korean ruling Saenuri Party’s Emergency Council. The latter expressed its demand to China not to send back the North Korean refugees (ibid.).

JoongAng Ilbo reported that China remained silent even though South Korea officially demanded that China not to go through with the repatriation. An anonymous South Korean official said that the most important point so far when it came to China’s involvement had been the humanitarian aspect of the case. Due to that aspect South Korea urged China to abide by the obligations of international treaties it had signed (See 2.3 Treaties in Focus). The treaties would be one of the points that South Korea planned to discuss with China’s Foreign Minister, Yang Jiechi at an upcoming meeting in South Korea in March 2012. The newspaper also reported that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had expressed “concerns over the safety of the North Korean defectors in China” (ibid.).

21 February: Dong-a Ilbo reported that South Korea’s ambassador in China Lee Kyu-hyung had raged over China withholding information about the defectors’ repatriation. China’s refusal to confirm or deny information regarding the defectors led the ambassador to criticize China for not giving “accurate information”. Ambassadors rarely express straightforward criticism toward the country they are currently stationed in. Dong-a Ilbo believed it to be a reflection of the tense situation between South Korea and China due to the defector issue (Jeo, 21 February 2012).

China’s response was to refuse to provide information whether the defectors had been repatriated or not. China refused to see the defectors as refugees rather than illegal border crossers. Therefore, despite the fact that China had signed international treaties regarding refugees China managed to classify the defectors in a way that automatically excluded them from the refugee definition in the treaties. China also said that they wanted South Korea to control NGO’s so that they not create more North Korean refugees. Due to China’s response South Korea’s Ambassador in China Lee Kyu-hyung thought that urging China to abide by the treaties would be in vain (ibid.).

Chosun Ilbo wrote that the Chinese Foreign Ministry claimed that the defectors crossed the border for economic reasons (Chosun Ilbo, 23 February 2012).

The lack of communication resulted in South Korea sending a mission to take up the situation in the UN and Kim Sook, the head of the mission said that they would try to ensure that the defectors could come to South Korea (Jeo, 21 February 2012).

Dong-a Ilbo reported that a defector residing in South Korea heard that his cousin had managed to escape to China but then lost track of what happened to her. Hearing about the North Koreans awaiting repatriation he understood his cousin was one of them. Due to Kim Jong Un’s statement on defecting punishment he did not dare go to work anymore. He was afraid that his cousin would suffer if he went to work. However, he had heard about Save my friend and that they had already managed to gather 20,000 signs in 3 days and he believed it could stop the repatriation. He wrote letters in hope that his cousin eventually would read them. He told the
newspaper that his cousin wanted to be a teacher and that he never got to say that he loved her and that everything was fine. He urged people to take part in the internet campaign to save the defectors (Park, S.H., 2012).

*The protests* in front of the Chinese embassy in Seoul continued. The actor Cha In-pyo, accompanied by thirty other celebrities and thirty students from a school for North Korean defectors residing in Seoul held speeches protesting the repatriation and stressed the fact that the defectors most likely would be executed. The actor declared that the celebrities were there as representatives for North Korean defectors who feel that a public appearance would risk the safety of their family members in North Korea. He also said that he was protesting to support the students (Moon, 22 February 2012).

A legislator from the Liberty Forward Party, Park Sun-young, started a hunger strike in front of the Chinese embassy. She demanded that China put a stop to the repatriations, a cause she had been committed to for a long time (ibid.).

**22 February**: *South Korea’s president* Lee Myung-bak asked China to consider a more lenient approach in North Korean defector matters. The president acknowledged the difference between criminals and refugees and he said that the South Korean government’s cooperation with the Chinese government would go on. China continued to claim the defectors to be illegal immigrants (Moon, 23 February 2012).

*JoonAng Ilbo* wrote that China proposed to exchange 11 North Korean defectors captured three years ago and then held in Beijing and Shenyang for Chinese fishermen who got arrested by South Korea in December 2010. The reason they thought that South Korea would agree to the swap was that five of the defectors held by China were South Korean Army family members captured by North Korea during the Korean War. The issue regarding those defectors had been discussed in January 2011 when China agreed to send them to South Korea. However, China withdrew their decision and kept the defectors (Korea JoongAng Daily, Awaiting Beijing’s drastic decision, 22 February 2012).

The UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (CRSR) thought that a swap of the 11 North Korean defectors and the Chinese fishermen could put China in a bad situation with the international community. The Chinese fishermen killed a coast guard which makes them criminals. The North Koreans fled due to economic hardship and political persecution, which automatically made them fall under the category refugees. China as a member of United Nations CRSR had a humanitarian obligation to protect the defectors. This also means that China had to let the North Korean defectors move to a third country if they want. China’s refusal to do so only further damaged China’s image and a swap would conflict with international law as well domestic ones (ibid.).

*The defector students in Seoul* continued protesting supported by celebrities and shouted “save our friends”. Chosun Ilbo wrote that the fear of having their identities exposed makes most defectors residing in South Korea afraid to show themselves in public. The reason they do not want to be exposed is because they fear that it would jeopardize their families back in North
Korea and send them off to prison camps or worse (Chosun Ilbo, 23 February 2012). However, the influential power the defectors residing in South Korea have can be debated. They are the only indication of what a possible reunion of the two Koreas could be like, however the North Korean defectors in South Korea could be said to have next to no influential power in the South Korean society. Historically North Korean defectors have had troubles blending in after defecting, and they have met suspicion from the South Koreans. The North Korean defectors’ situation in South Korea has been studied, and that includes the fact that they feel as they are in the lower levels of the social latter. Senior lecturer Gabriel Jonson at the Korean department at Stockholm University has written about such issues (Jonsson, 2006).

Nevertheless, in the case of the captured defectors in February 100 North Korean defectors showed up for the protests and one young North Korean defector said he came there even though he knew he would probably be risking his life by doing so. The reason the young students stepped up this time was because of the new situation after Kim Jong Un’s statement. The actor Cha In-pyo said at a press conference: “Rescuing North Korean defectors has nothing to do with politics or diplomacy, but it is a matter of conscience” (Chosun Ilbo, 23 February 2012).

Previous exposure of North Korean defectors back in 2007 resulted in five defectors not knowing what has happened to 26 of their family members in North Korea. The defectors in South Korea sued the South Korean government and 2011 the Seoul High Court’s verdict was that the South Korean government had to pay each defector 120 million won in compensation (ibid.).

_Dong-a Ilbo_ wrote that high ranking South Korean officials had asked Chinese leaders to stop the forceful repatriation. The Chinese government said that they could not tolerate South Korea’s talk of “forceful repatriation”. At this point South Korea decided to turn to the international community and take the issue to the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva on 27 February 2012. The reason was China’s unwillingness to cooperate on the matter (Lee & Jeu, 2012).

_Dong-a Ilbo_ wrote: “The South Korean government has raised the defector human rights issue from a general perspective at the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council.” However, this would be the first time South Korea raise a specific issue of the sort in UNHRC. Taking up the issue internationally raised questions to how China would respond to this new and public attack on the matter. Whether China will be mentioned by name at UNHRC or not had not been decided (ibid.).

Some South Korean officials feared this tactic would cause further tension and thus not help the defectors. One South Korean diplomat said that the best way to handle the situation would be to discuss the matter with China behind the scenes. But since the issue has been brought into the open China has to consider its relationship with North Korea and as a result China could refuse to send the defectors to a third country, which they have done before. (ibid.).

_JoongAng Ilbo_ also reported the South Korean decision to bring the matter up at the UNHRC meeting. The newspaper wrote that South Korea hoped that would make China act in
accordance with the signed treaties. However, China’s Foreign Minister stated that China did not understand South Korea’s point of view since China was following international and domestic law as well as humanitarian considerations in the defector case (Moon, 22 February 2012).

The reaction from South Korea differed this time from previous more quiet methods of dealing with similar situations. However, according to JoongAng Ilbo China and North Korea continued to conduct raids along the border despite the tense political situation (ibid.).

23 February: Chosun Ilbo reported that China thought a discussion of the matter at the UNHRC meeting was unnecessary since the defectors were not refugees (Chosun Ilbo, 23 February 2012). Dong-a Ilbo wrote that UN Special Rapporteur Marzuki Darusman on human rights in North Korea had urged China not to repatriate the defectors. He also urged neighboring states around the Korean peninsula to act according to the UN CRSR and not repatriate any more defectors. Darusman also stressed the fact that North Korea tortures defectors and put them in concentration camps (Lee, 2012).

Dong-a Ilbo also wrote that The Foreign Affairs and Trade Ministry in Seoul were still debating whether to name China specifically at the UNHRC or not. China would most likely protest if so were to be the case and that could create diplomatic friction with China. It could also stop all cooperation on future defector matters. One official said: “We are agonizing over our relations with China and our national interest,” and “We are in a situation in which we must keep rewriting the statement on our position before we enter the venue of the meeting.” (ibid.).

JoongAng Ilbo wrote that Seoul’s Ministry of Unification stated that during the past decades 23,100 North Korean defectors had come to South Korea and the majority during the past 10 years. Still there are supposedly 10,000 North Korean defectors in China who wants to go to South Korea and the Seoul Ministry of Unification said that they were trying to help them. This time South Korea put old quiet policies aside and decided to use international pressure to stop China’s forced repatriations of North Korean defectors (Moon, 23 February 2012).

Due to public demand for release of the defectors the ruling party in South Korea, Saenuri Party, considered creating something called a “South Korean identity certificate”. This was an attempt to give the captured defectors South Korean citizen status in order to stop China from repatriating them. However, there were no such identity certificates in South Korea (Kim H.-j. , Gov’t considers ‘identity certificates’ for refugees, 24 February 2012).

Government officials in Seoul held a meeting with the purpose of stopping the repatriation. Lee Ju-young, chief policy maker of the Saenuri Party said at a press conference: “Lawmakers promoted the plan to issue such a certificate, and the government responded that it would review the idea.” Saenuri Party’s floor leader Hwang said, “The legal problem of North Korean defectors is not just a matter of several countries, but a matter of the world and humanity. The Chinese government should follow international rule and procedures transparently.” An anonymous Saenuri Party official said: “Rather than discussing whether the certificate would indeed work to rescue the defectors, we expect holding a meeting between the ruling party and the government would put some pressure on the Chinese government” (ibid.).
Liberty Forward Party legislator Park Sun-young urged all legislators to convince the legislature to pass a resolution to prevent repatriation of North Korean defectors. As a result the government and the Saenuri Party said that they would pass the resolution at the National Assembly of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Unification Committee. South Korea also stated that help had been requested from the Red Cross Society of China (ibid.).

24 February: Chosun Ilbo reported that South Korea would not name China at the UNHRC. The South Korean government had on previous occasions stated that they take the human rights issue in North Korea very seriously and the defector situation would be a important point at the UNHRC. South Korea planned to urge all of North Korea’s neighbors not to repatriate North Korean defectors. The reason for the decision not to mention China by name was that the South Korean government feared that this would have the wrong effect. However, some government officials in South Korea were afraid that this decision would give China the impression that South Korea is too careful in the defector issue (Chosun Ilbo, Seoul Won't Mention China by Name in UN Defectors Complaint, 24 February 2012).

Dong-a Ilbo reported that Suzanne Scholte head of the Defense Forum Foundation in Washington said that a letter campaign had started. According to Scholte, letters went out to “Chinese embassies and consulates across the world” urging them not to repatriate the North Korean defectors. She wanted South Korea to take a more aggressive stance in the matter. She believed that this was the time for the world to make China change their attitude in the North Korean defector matter (Jung, 24 February 2012).

Scholte said: while China refuses UN to “survey North Korean defectors in the border regions, it allows North Korean agents to enter the regions and help them kill North Korean defectors and the Chinese activists who help them” (ibid.).

She thought that dealing with this issue behind the scenes would be wrong, and that South Korea should drag it out in the open and force China to see the severity of the situation. Also she criticized South Korea for not passing a bill on North Korean human rights earlier (ibid.).

25 February: JoongAng Ilbo wrote: “The National Assembly’s Foreign Affairs, Trade and Unification Committee unanimously passed a resolution demanding China not repatriate North Korean defectors.” (Korea JoongAng Daily, 25 February 2012). The newspaper wanted South Korea to find sustainable policies to deal with defector issues and was positive to the idea of identity certificates although they might be less effective than expected. The newspaper wrote that South Korea’s main concern should be the safety of the defectors, not diplomatic relations with China (ibid.).

JoongAng Ilbo reported that the defectors had been repatriated. How many and when was still unclear. At least 24 were repatriated although some say it was over 80. Some sources said that nine defectors were repatriated on 18 and 19 February. North Korean Intellectuals Solidarity, a civic group reported that three of the 34 defectors were repatriated on February 20th.
China has refused to comment on what happened to the North Korean defectors and continued claiming that they stayed true to the international and domestic laws in this case (Ser, 2012). China sends defectors back to North…). 

_North Korea_ said that the North Korean government’s acts were “a legitimate act by a sovereign state” (Jang & Kim, 2012). North Korea also accused South Korea of causing insane chaos in the defector matter (Ser, 2012).

**After 25 February** the course of events becomes unclear. Judging the situation of the repatriated defectors becomes difficult due to JoongAng Ilbo’s report that they had been repatriated while other newspapers continue reporting as though they were still in China. From this point on events are sorted according to the various newspaper articles’ publication dates.

**27 February:** _Dong-a Ilbo_ reported that North Korean officials had entered China and asked that they deport the defectors as soon as possible. North Korea also promised that the defectors would not be treated as criminals. Dong-a Ilbo also said that legislator Park Sun-young on her sixth day of hunger strike said that the North Korean officials had tried to speak with the defectors in custody. She also said that the captured defectors who have parents in South Korea were South Korean citizens by law and thus the North Korean government had no right to interview them (Jang & Kim, 2012).

Dong-a Ilbo also wrote that 40 foreign refugee members of an international activist group called “Refuge Phnan” joined the protests in Seoul. They held up signs saying: “Save our Friends”. Among the activists were refugees from Congo and Bangladesh who also mentioned the CRSR (ibid.).

_North Korea_ said that this was South Korea’s way of defaming North Korea. They called it smearing and referred to South Korea’s protests as “a disgusting and ugly act”. North Korea said: “The North Korean defector issue is not one of refugees but the outcome of efforts by hostile forces to isolate us from the international community and to lure and abduct our people” (ibid.).

_Defectors residing in South Korea_ shared their stories and views with the South Korean press. Some of them had escaped concentration camps in North Korea more than once. The interviewed defectors all agreed that the international attention and the media attention given the captured defectors in China did very little for their safety. Their view was that the chances of China not handing them over to North Korea were very small. They all agreed that the defectors most likely would face harsher punishments than before. In their opinion, this incident would only cause the border control to tighten even more. They did not think that the publicity was good for the defectors. Some family members even stated that they wanted to kill their family members in China themselves rather than letting them be repatriated (Kim H.-j. , One-time defectors say repatriation could be fatal, 24 February 2012).

The defectors believed that South Korea’s previous tactics of a quiet back-door solution with China would be the best way to handle North Korean refugee situations. The ideal situation
would be that China gave all North Korean defectors refugee status; however the North Korean defectors thought the chances of this were slim. They said that a statement from the South Korean president asking for release of the North Korean refugees was the last thing they hoped for (ibid.).

28 February: Dong-a Ilbo reported that China had asked South Korea not to make an international issue of the defector incident. Dong-a Ilbo wrote that the reason most likely was to refrain South Korea from raising the issue in the UNHRC. A South Korean official responded by saying that it proved China was feeling the pressure, however due to the negative response from China South Korea would adjust its countermeasures (Lee & Choe, 2012).

The newspaper also reported that the Obama administration had unofficially started to remind China of the international treaties and that they are violating human rights by repatriating defectors. China had not given an answer to the U.S. and the Obama administration had not made their demands public. The Obama administration was working with the South Korean government on how to handle this case of defector repatriation. The State Department in Washington urged China not to repatriate the defectors (ibid.).

29 February: Chosun Ilbo reported that South Korea appealed its case in the UNHRC on 27 February. The EU and U.S. representatives in UNHRC said that they would support South Korea in this matter by urging China to consider the North Korean defectors as refugees. Furthermore they wanted the UNHRC to be harder in the matters of North Korean human rights and repatriation of defectors (Chosun Ilbo, 29 February 2012).

The newspaper also wrote: “U.S. Congress decided to hold a public hearing on North Korean defectors amid widespread criticism in the U.S. of the Chinese government”. The U.S. House Committee on Foreign Relations’ human rights subcommittee stated that it planned to hold a public hearing on this matter on 1 March. There were also public protests in the U.S. Korean Americans were protesting in Los Angeles outside the Chinese Consulate General (ibid.).

Dong-a Ilbo also reported on the U.S. statements and wrote that a chairman of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China in the U.S. had said that due to Kim Jong Un’s recent statement China knew what will happen to the escapees and therefore was, as he called it “an indisputable violation of international law”. He also said that they will have North Korean defectors tell about how they got tortured and abused in North Korea and the leaders of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea and human rights group Defense Forum Foundation said that they will attend the hearing as witnesses (Jung, 29 February 2012).

The newspaper also reported that U.S. Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton was likely to express the U.S. stance on China’s repatriation of defectors before the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs on 7 March. Head of the Defense Forum Foundation Scholte said that Clinton was likely to clarify Washington’s position on the matter (ibid.).

Chosun Ilbo reported that the petition Save the North Korean Refugees#Save My Friend managed to gather signatures from 100 countries like the U.S., Japan, Taiwan, Russia and even
The newspaper complained over the silence of politicians and human rights activist groups and wrote that if they would only hear the 23,000 North Korean defectors living in South Korea they would not sit idle and do nothing (Ahn, 2012).

The newspaper also reported that a defector called Lee Ae-ran on her fifth day of hunger strike in Seoul said that she found her own people (the South Koreans) to be cold toward defectors since they did not protest the repatriation. She compared the situation with the protests against U.S. beef imports in 2008 when hoards of people protested in the streets of Seoul. She pointed out that this time only foreigners and refugees gathered in front of the Chinese Embassy (ibid.).

Lee Ho-taek, the head of a shelter for international refugees said that he had people telling him to step down from this matter so that he would not to upset North Korea. He refused and said that the matter regarding North Korean defectors was one of the most important human rights issues despite what he saw as little attention from the public (ibid.).

2 March: Dong-a Ilbo reported that NGO’s such as, Defense Forum Foundation and the North Korea Freedom Coalition had around 30 members protesting the North Korean defector repatriation. They put on a show in English, Chinese and Korean where China killed defectors. The protesters got attention from passers-by and the press. The president of the Defense Forum Foundation Scholte said that protests would be held in front of Chinese consulates in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago and Houston (Jung, 2 March 2012).

Chosun Ilbo reported that North Korean security agents had arrived in China on 28 February. According to Liberty Forward Party legislator Park Sun-young, five interpreters arrived with the security agents and demanded that China hand over the defectors. The North Koreans were denied access to the defectors which led to them threatening Chinese officials. Park also claimed that yet another four defectors had been captured by China (Chosun Ilbo, N.Korean Officials in China to Take Charge of Defectors, 2 March 2012).

The newspaper also reported that South Korea’s President Lee Myung-bak said that when he meets the Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi he would touch the treatment of North Korean defectors and stress the fact that it is not in line with the international humanitarian principles. However, the newspaper wrote that the Chinese minister’s agenda was to continue on China’s stance that defectors crossing Chinese boarders were not refugees but illegal immigrants (Chosun Ilbo, Lee to Plead with Chinese FM over N.Korean Defectors, 2 March 2012).

7 March: Chosun Ilbo reported that the UN’s special rapporteur on North Korean Human Rights Marzuki Darusman on 12 March would lead a debate on North Korean defectors in Geneva with North Korea, South Korea and China. This would be the first time the three countries discuss the issue at an international forum and UNHRC would have 47 members present. The newspaper wrote that South Korea would stress the forced repatriation issue and the international community’s responsibility to step in and stop it, while North Korea and China would claim that there are no refugees only illegal border-crossing for economic reasons. However, the UNHRC
stated plans to adopt a resolution on human rights in North Korea 22 or 23 April in order to stop torture and other abuses of repatriated defectors (Chosun Ilbo, 7 March 2012).

8 March: Dong-a Ilbo reported on South Korea’s extensive efforts to change China’s policies regarding North Korean defectors. South Korea’s Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan went to the U.S. on 2 March to first meet U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and then meet U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and ask for their support (Jeo & Lee, 2012).

The newspaper also touches on Russian defectors policies. Prior to the year 2000 Russia deported North Korean defectors either to North Korea or to China. However, Russia changed its policies due to heavy criticism from South Korea’s side and South Korea’s expelling the Russian ambassador. Thus, defectors who enter Russia are guaranteed passage to South Korea. Russia hands over the defectors to a third country where South Korea takes over. According to South Korean officials Russia was concerned about its relations with North Korea as well as domestic concerns such as a rush of illegal border crossers and possible effects on ethnic minorities (ibid.).

24 April: Joongang Ilbo wrote about Ha Tae-keung, who was a pro-North Korean activist during the 1980’s pro-democracy movement in South Korea. However, after he learned about the true state of North Korea from defectors he changed his views and got elected to sit in the National Assembly as a representative for the Saenuri Party. When installed, he will be the first activist ever to sit in the National Assembly (Kim, H.-j., 24 April 2012).

Ha Tae-keung said that he wants to raise awareness of the North Korean refugee situation, both when it comes to North Korea’s violation of human rights and China’s repatriation of North Koreans. Ha Tae-keung criticized the South Korean liberals when it comes to the North Korean refugee issue. He wants to put more pressure on the Chinese government and says that the Chinese government is split in this issue where some want to abandon historical North Korean sympathies while others want to keep them. Furthermore he thought that China might be afraid that the North Korean refugee issue would turn the world against China which would make China reconsider repatriations of defectors (ibid.).

Ha stressed the importance of making North Koreans aware of the current situation and the fact that their government is the reason for their food shortages. If they knew the situation might change. Furthermore, he saw Kim Jong Un’s leadership as more communicative than his father’s. Kim Jong Un holds meetings while his father just decided what to be done. Also the fact that Kim Jong Un admitted failure when it came to the long-range rocket launch on April 13 shows that the new leader seeks the approval of the world. However, Ha said that the future behavior of the new North Korean leader would be set now, which makes it very important for the rest of the world to encourage correct behavior and punish wrong behavior. Ha said that the solution would be to solve the problems with the regime from the outside (ibid.).

In the end, Joongang Ilbo wrote that Ha found it important to have international discussions on a diplomatic level about the North Korean human rights issue. He said that the
U.S. government needs to change the focus from North Korea’s military to its human right abuses (*ibid.*).

**27 April:** *JoongAng Ibo* reported that China’s Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress passed a bill on 24 April, which will result in harsher punishment for illegal immigrants in China. The Vice Minister of Public Security in China Mr Yang Huanning declared that China will increase its boarder control, build repatriation centers and continuing on repatriating illegal immigrants (Moon, 27 April 2012).

The newspaper wrote that the bill raised concerns among South Korean activists since the large portion of North Korean defectors in China will be affected. Even a South Korean official at the South Korean Embassy in China stated that this bill would affect the North Korean refugees; the question of how still remains. South Korean civic groups have estimated that more than 100,000 North Korean refugees are residing in China. The bill stands in contrast to the fact that China decided to put the repatriation of North Koreans on hold a few days before passing the bill due to the North Korean long-range rocket launch on 13 April (*ibid.*).

The halt in repatriations was to punish the North Korean government for not informing China of the rocket launch beforehand. However, the statement regarding suspended repatriation has been claimed to be false by Kim Hee-tae the secretary of a civic group called the “Assembly to Improve the Human Rights Condition in North Korea” in Seoul. Kim Hee-tae said that their information clearly stated that a North Korean family caught in the end of March was repatriated on 3 April (*ibid.*).
Chapter 4.  Analysis

4.1  The Internet Campaign

The social network services such as Facebook and Twitter played an important role in initiating the campaign to save the refugees. The Internet campaign started the online petition “Save the North Korean Refugees#Save My Friend” and contacted human rights organizations and helped collect signatures for the cause. The Internet campaign started from the South Koreans’ Facebook page Save my friend and spread to the world through the American student’s Facebook page Save a Girl.

The activity on the Internet affected the press coverage of the case and led to increased interest and awareness internationally. Human rights organizations such as Amnesty International were also influenced by the Internet campaign and collected signatures for a sms petition. However, the importance of the Internet campaign declined after the press took over the cause to save the captured defectors.

In the beginning the Internet was very important for spreading awareness of the defector case in February. However, in the end of the case the Internet campaign seemed to cease to exist since very little was said about it in the press.
4.2 International Repercussions

The incident of the captured defectors in February brought about a new intensity to the international North Korean refugee debate. The Internet campaign to save the captured defectors managed to increase the media attention and the attention of other international organizations such as UNHCR and Amnesty International. UNHCR asked China to let the defectors move on to a third country and that the defectors should be seen as refugees.

After the UNHRC meeting on 27 February international sympathy for the defectors grew. The U.S. and the EU openly supported South Korea in the defector issue. The increased international attention following the UNHRC meeting resulted in a renewed interest in North Korean human rights issues. The U.S. Congress held a public hearing on the defector issue and China’s role in the matter on 1 March. The U.S. and South Korea started discussing how to solve the North Korean defector issue.

China did not respond to international pressure, and went ahead and repatriated the defectors. Despite international efforts to make China recognize North Korean defectors as refugees China maintained that they were illegal immigrants who crossed the border for economic reasons. China made it clear that it would continue its previous policies when China’s Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress passed the bill for harsher punishment for illegal immigrants.

North Korea made a few statements during the repatriation process and most of them were directed at South Korea. North Korea did not show any tendencies of changing its stance in the defector issue and were offended by the criticism directed at them. North Korea accused South Korea of defaming it and never showed any indications of letting the captured defectors go. So far North Korea has shown no signs of changing its defector policies any time soon.

In the end, even though the international community wanted the captured defectors to be seen as refugees no laws were changed to emphasize the importance of human rights in North Korean defector cases.

4.3 The South Korean Government

After the defectors were arrested in the beginning of February the South Korean government found itself under pressure from the public to act on it. A number of South Korean officials took a personal interest or assumed responsibility in persuading China not to repatriate the defectors, actions which most likely pushed the South Korean government to do something further about the situation.

South Korea’s ambassador in China Lee Kyu-hyung officially criticized China’s way of dealing with the defectors. Liberty Forward Party legislator Park Sun-young started the hunger strike and urged the South Korean government to use the South Korea law and constitution to persuade China to get access to the defectors. The outspokenness of South Korean officials’ seemed to have been effective. South Korea’s president Lee Myung Bak also officially asked China to consider a more lenient approach in this case of the defectors.
The steps taken by the South Korean government regarding the issue of the captured defectors were clear enough. They began diplomatically by asking China not to repatriate the defectors, but when there was no response South Korea considered other ways of swaying China. The government then decided to seek help from the international community to pressure China by bringing up the issue of the defectors in the UNHRC. After due consideration South Korea decided not to mention China by name. Although this act was an attempt to sway China some South Korean officials of the South Korean Foreign Ministry as well as defectors residing in South Korea criticized the way matters were handled. One South Korean diplomat pointed out that by putting official pressure on China, China had to consider its relationship with North Korea, something which could be avoided if matters were handled more discretely.

China asked South Korea not to make an international issue of the defector incident. However, South Korea ignored China’s request and urged North Korea’s neighboring countries to abide by UNHCR treaties with the result that the international community such as the U.S. and the EU supported South Korea in the matter. When China did not respond positively to the UNHRC South Korea considered a different tactic.

By South Korean law defectors are technically South Korean citizens. The government intended to use this fact to access the defectors not as defectors but as South Korean citizens. By doing so the nature of the negotiations with China would change. The ruling party in South Korea considered making a South Korean identity certificate for the captured defectors to grant them official citizenship. However, the idea was never executed and China’s stance in the matter stayed the same.

Domestically the National Assembly’s Foreign Affairs, Trade and Unification Committee took measures to further emphasize the South Korean stance on the defector issue and unanimously passed a resolution demanding China not to repatriate the defectors. The resolution added to the South Korean aggressive approach.

The South Korean government’s actions brought some changes to their position on North Korean defector issues. The South Korean government had never raised the issue in the UNHRC before, which was a new take on how to approach China in the matter.

The South Korean government was, seemingly, not trying to complicate diplomatic relations with China; however the importance not allowing the defectors to be repatriated led the South Korean government to act more boldly than before. The official criticism was definitely a more aggressive stance than South Korea used to have in defector issues. Traditionally defector issues with China were dealt with behind the scenes and in some cases resulted in China handing over defectors to South Korea.

The political activity domestically as well as internationally was South Korea’s attempt to show that they no longer accept the inhumane treatment of North Korean defectors, and their forceful repatriation. The attempt to get China to listen failed in this case with the defectors captured in February. There were various opinions to whether this new aggressive approach was helping North Korean defectors or if it complicated their situation. However, the South Korean government decided not to silently sit by and watch defectors being repatriated.
4.4 The South Korean Press

The South Korean press has sometimes given conflicting reports on the defectors case, and the focus of the newspapers has varied. Joong-Ang Ilbo put a lot of focus on the international treaties China is a signatory to, as well as openly demanding that the South Korean government intervene in the North Korean defector matter. Joong-Ang Ilbo also published articles written by human rights activists who contributed a very subjective touch to the reporting. That was consistent in the majority of the articles, leading readers to understand that the paper was not keeping to an objective stance in the matter but rather obviously and quite aggressively urging the South Korean government and the world to put a stop to the repatriations. Joong-Ang Ilbo also reported on North Korean defectors residing in South Korea, something that can be seen as an attempt to appeal to the readers and the politicians’ hearts. Despite the subjective stand point of Joong-Ang Ilbo the paper reported on most aspects of the case, from the human side to the more practical political side.

However, in the end of February Joong Ang Ilbo failed to deliver further information on the defectors’ case, leaving the subject hanging and the end of the matter in the state of wanting. It seems as though the paper lost interest in following up the case after it reported that the defectors had been repatriated on 25 February, leading readers to question the sincerity and devotion to the case which the paper showed in previous articles and one might argue that the paper was simply seeking to write what it thought the public wanted. Another fact which could support this notion is that the paper mentioned the Internet campaign and the engagement from people online, which can be seen as the general public’s opinion. The paper’s aggressive approach in its articles might have been a way to please their readers rather than being the paper’s own agenda. This is an indication that the Internet campaign did have an effect on the press.

In contrast with Joong-Ang Ilbo’s attempts to strengthen its cause by writing about the general public’s opinions and human rights activists’ opinions, Dong-a Ilbo focused more on politicians’ statements rather than the general public’s opinions. The paper only had a few articles where it reported real life stories from North Korean defectors residing in South Korea. When the paper does mention defectors in South Korea or the general public’s reactions it is in combination with higher politicians’ actions or opinions, or when the internet campaign Save my friend is mentioned.

Dong-a Ilbo focused mainly on the political course of events, domestic as well as international. The paper reports on specific official’s statements given in connection to the North Korean defectors case. The paper also briefly touches the North Korean side’s reactions. The paper analyses the political situation and what effect certain decisions might have in the future, such as the future relationship between countries. The paper focuses a lot more on the UN’s and the U.S.’s reactions as well as the actions taken by both in the defector case.

Dong-a Ilbo, in contrast with Joong-Ang Ilbo, did not openly pressure the South Korean government. There are no direct statements or demands from the paper to the South Korean government. The paper’s selective choice of news rather reports on what is being done to save
the North Korean defectors. However, by choosing to select only negative statements said about how the case is being handled or how the Chinese public is criticizing its own government, one can read between the lines that Dong-a Ilbo dislikes the situation and wants the South Korean government to act. The paper does mention the Internet campaign; however the importance of that for the newspaper’s reactions is not as obvious as for Joong-Ang Ilbo.

Lastly, Chosun Ilbo focuses a lot on the human side of the case, writing a lot about North Korean defectors’ opinions in South Korea as well as criticizing the South Korean public for lack of interest. This critique is perplexing, as the same paper did extensive reports on reactions from both celebrities and the South Korean public. However, when commenting on the Save the North Korean Refugees#Save My Friend petition the newspaper criticizes the government and human rights activists for passively watching the injustice the defectors faced. The paper’s critique becomes even clearer when it puts South Korea’s passiveness in contrast with the international public’s engagement in the case.

Chosun Ilbo reported celebrities’ and defectors in South Korea’s opinions and pleads to the South Korean government to help the captured defectors in China quite one-sidedly. By showing that the public wanted the government to step in the paper also declared its stance in the case of the defectors.

The three papers all push the South Korean government to take responsibility for the captured North Korean defectors. Although all of the papers use different approaches the message to the South Korean government seems clear; do something about it. Besides South Korea all three papers put a lot of responsibility on China.

China was heavily criticized in all of the papers. China was hung out as the evil part in the case, a country without any respect for human rights or previously signed treaties or obligations. The newspapers reported briefly on China’s responses and reactions to the situation, however little was said about the North Korean stance as the situation progressed. The newspapers reported a very one-sided story where few opposing opinions were heard. Since only the voices of those who were against the repatriation were in focus it provided a very biased story.

Before the Facebook page was established on 20 February the newspapers reported that the North Korean defectors were caught. However, the Internet social networks’ campaign was the ones who contacted Amnesty International alongside other human rights organizations for support in their cause. When Amnesty International got involved and started the SMS petition the interest from the media seemed to increase and in the end led to pressure on a political level especially in South Korea.

The press might have influenced the public further with its articles, however the parts of the public that were interested in the defector cases seemed to have found the way to the Facebook and other social network pages on their own. It is difficult to see a clear result of the media further influenced the public. It is more likely that the Internet brought awareness to the people and people such as celebrities brought on the attention of the press, making it up to the press to sway the government to the public’s cause to save the North Korean refugees.
In the end, as previously stated, the Internet gave the general public information about the North Korean defectors’ arrest and then the public started protesting, petitioning and opening up the eyes of internationally acknowledged human rights organizations. In the end that managed to increase the media attention surrounding the case. The South Korean press forwarded the public’s message and reminded the government that the South Korean constitution states North Koreans as legal citizens which put a legal responsibility on the South Korean government.

4.5 Other Possible Factors

One cannot say that the South Korean press was the single factor that influenced the South Korean government’s actions. There has always been an interest in North Korean defectors from the South Korean side. The history and possible reunion of the two Koreas makes the defector issue sentimental as well as political. The South Korean constitution makes the interest for the government legal and when newspapers point that fact out they technically have a responsibility to respond. However, there are other possible South Korean political interests in rescuing North Korean defectors.

The succession in North Korea created a new political situation in the region. Though the regime collapse or chaos that some feared has not occurred the new leadership means changes in North Korea, and possible in the relationship between the two Koreas.

North Korea’s young leader initially tried to demonstrate his resolve by proclaiming harsher punishments for defectors. One could say that he is positioning himself to prove his worth to North Koreans as well as sending a message to surrounding countries that North Korea intends to stay isolated. Further statements and actions made in relation to North Korea’s nuclear weapon program can also be seen as a statement made for the international community, proving that North Korea should not be overlooked but is willing to cooperate.

Considering these factors one can regard the South Korean government’s policy change as a way to send a message to the new leadership in Pyongyang. Since the capture of defectors in February was the first big instance of this practice since the change of leader in North Korea the media and Internet campaign could have been an excuse for South Korea to show that they no longer intend to passively watch North Korea’s treatment of defectors.

If the above had an impact on the South Korean government’s decisions to act and change policies in the case of the defectors is hard to know. It must at least have been a contributing factor to the ability of the South Korean press to put pressure on its government, but one cannot dismiss other influences besides that of the South Korean press.

North Korea’s nuclear weapons program could also have been one such factor though that seems less likely. South Korea could have used the defectors as a way to criticize North Korea in other questions indirectly or show discontent with the political situation. However that theory is a bit farfetched, but nonetheless worth mentioning.

Although there are other contributing factors or other possible major factors which could explain the South Korean government’s actions this paper’s focus is on the role of the South Korean press. In the end the South Korean press did put pressure on the government. If that is the
only explanation for the change in policies is impossible to say though it surely was a contributing factor.
Chapter 5. Conclusion


There have been many different sides and opinions to this case of the captured North Korean defectors. The North Korean side was little heard or seen during the whole process of the repatriation. The few statements made by North Korean officials were hardly commented upon and the South Korean press mostly ignored their side. There seemed to be little discussion about the political situation in North Korea, which in reality, set off the reactions of the Internet users.

The Internet campaign to save the defectors was initiated through Facebook and Twitter and managed to raise awareness of the incident around the world. The Internet activity managed to catch the attention of the press and influenced newsmen to take up the defectors’ cause. The Internet campaign started off strong but in the end lost influential power and disappeared entirely from the press coverage and the political activities.

China was made the villain by their refusal to consider the humanitarian side of the North Korean defector case. However, China had its own reasons for trying not to get caught in a difficult political situation. Even after the international community became interested in the case of the captured North Korean defectors China was not willing to discuss the repatriation of the
defectors more than stating that they could not be classified as refugees. Despite international pressure, China did not in the end change its previous stance in the defector issue.

The Chinese public’s opinions were merely reported by the South Korean newspapers. Carefully chosen ones were quoted; those statements criticized or questioned the Chinese government. However, only one paper reported on their opinions and it seemed more used as propaganda to further influence the South Korean public and the South Korean government, rather than reporting some form of truth or general opinion in China.

North Korean defectors’ stories seem to have affected people after the newspapers reported them. By having celebrities fight alongside the North Korean defectors in South Korea people were affected, however to what extent is difficult to know.

This case made it easy for celebrities to score points with the South Korean public for their goodwill in emotional situations which makes one wonder if this was only a public relation stunt for the celebrities to gain popularity. On the other hand, the presence of celebrities can be effective in mobilizing the masses to get more media attention and in the end the politicians’ attention.

In the end, the South Korean government tried various tactics in attempts to try and save the captured defectors. In the process the government ended up changing its previous stance in North Korean defector matter. By bringing up the issue at the UNHRC, the South Korean government tried a new open way to persuade China not to repatriate the defectors. The government’s previous stance was to deal with the defector matter behind closed doors, however this time the government decided on an open approach and even passed a solution in order to prevent further repatriations of North Korean defectors. South Korea’s president officially asked China not to repatriate the defectors. To make the defector’s South Korean citizenship legal by creating South Korean identity cards was never executed; however the attempt was made.

Although the government was trying to be diplomatic they adopted a more aggressive approach which led to criticism domestically as well as from China and North Korea. The main worry in South Korea was that a more upfront approach would harm the captured defectors more than it would help them. On the other hand some agreed with the new approach and emphasized the importance of a firm stance toward China from the South Korean government in this type of issues. The diplomatic consequences between South Korea and North Korea were never discussed, only the negative responses from North Korea’s side were reported.

The South Korean press was influenced by the Internet campaign Save my friend, and in turn the South Korean press managed to get the South Korean government to speak up in the matter and change its previous low key policies. Whether enhanced press coverage of the case was the single factor that influenced the South Korean government or not cannot be determined. One cannot exclude the possibility that other factors also played an important role in the changed governmental policies.

This case of the captured defector shows in any case that the Internet through social network sites is fast when mobilizing people from all over the world. The public’s ability to affect the media and in the long run the politicians was effective in the case of the captured
defectors. The South Korean politicians showed that they are sensitive to the public’s opinions and sometimes act to uphold the ideas of a strong and law-abiding government. By attempting to save the defectors in a more aggressive fashion the South Korean government showed that it fights for the citizens’ rights.

This case received little attention in the world press. Despite efforts of thousands of people, the North Korean refugees’ fate was not altered and the issue of what status a North Korean refugee has remained undecided. Are they to be regarded as political refugees, as economic refugees or as the North Korean government has stated, as criminals? Do they cross the border solely for economic reasons as China claims? The North Korean punishment for defecting is severe. Is this kind of punishment for crossing the border a violation of human rights, and thus an international concern? Or is this a primarily an issue between the Chinese and the North Korean government? Does it legitimately concern both South Korea and the international community?

5.1 Thoughts of the Author

The captured North Korean defectors in February 2012 should have been seen as political refugees because North Korea states that anyone who leaves the country is a political criminal and the punishment for defecting is torture, lifetime imprisonment or execution. After Kim Jong Un’s last statement the defectors families will also be punished by death. Because of North Korea’s stance in the defector issue the 1951 and 1987 convention articles (see 2.3) clearly define the North Korean defectors as political refugees. However, China chose to maintain its policies to repatriate defectors and continues to define the defectors as illegal economic immigrants.

The debate of whether the North Korean defectors are refugees or not is unnecessary for obvious reasons stated above. The incident in February could have been the springboard for a thorough examination of the North Korean defector and human rights issue which in the end could have resulted in a much needed final acknowledgement of North Korean refugees.
Bibliography


