

North Korean Workers in Russia Face 'Slave-Like' Conditions – BBC

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North Korean workers. **Yevgeny Agoshkov / TASS**

North Korean laborers in Russia endure “slave-like” conditions of grueling hours, meager pay and squalid housing, the BBC [reported](#) on Tuesday, citing testimonies from six escapees, researchers and South Korean intelligence sources.

The workers are kept under close watch by North Korean state security agents to prevent defections, surveillance that experts say has intensified in anticipation of more North Koreans arriving to work in Russia.

An estimated 15,000 North Koreans are [employed](#) in Russia, mostly in the construction sector. That number could rise to 50,000 by year’s end despite a United Nations ban on hiring North Korean workers over concerns that Pyongyang seizes their wages.

Nearly 8,000 of the 13,000 North Koreans who went to Russia in 2024 reportedly did so on student visas to skirt the ban.

Related article: [Russia Launches First Commercial Flight to North Korea in Decades](#)

Escapees told the BBC they were forced to wake at 6 a.m. and work until 2 a.m. the following day, with just two days off per year. “It was truly like we were dying,” one said.

Though promised higher wages than in North Korea, they said they were compelled to pay “loyalty fees” to the government and ultimately received just \$100 to \$200 per month, and only after returning home.

One worker said he felt “ashamed” upon learning that Central Asians working alongside him in Russia earned five times more for a fraction of the labor.

The report described bug-infested, overcrowded shipping containers as living quarters, with some workers sleeping on the floors of unfinished buildings.

North Korean authorities have also curbed rare chances for workers to leave job sites, with the number fleeing Russia for South Korea dropping from 20 in 2022 to just 10 in 2023, according to authorities in Seoul.

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