

Rights Group Uncovers North Korean Forced Labor Network in Russia

By [Reuters](#)

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Wang Zhao / AFP

A Russian network of brokers has trafficked North Korean laborers into Russia under exploitative conditions and placed some at factories supplying the war effort against Ukraine, the Hague-based group Global Rights Compliance said in a new report.

According to the report, North Korea reaps funds from the operation, taking much of the wages earned by its workers who are sent to Russia and made to stay under threat of retribution.

Global Rights Compliance documented the network run by a Russian businessman using open-source intelligence, facial recognition technology to identify North Korean officials and undercover operatives posing as prospective employers.

Legal adviser Elise Lauriot Prevost called the findings evidence of a dangerous alignment

between Pyongyang's use of forced labor to fund its weapons programs and Moscow's demand for workers to power its war economy.

Neither the Russian Foreign Ministry nor the North Korean Embassy in Moscow responded to requests for comment.

The rights group said it contacted two Russians identified as key figures in the network. Only one replied and denied the accusations. Global Rights Compliance did not say if the other responded.

Russia and North Korea have boosted military and political ties since pledging renewed cooperation at a 2023 summit between leaders Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un, while a mutual defense pact serves as a cornerstone of a partnership treaty signed the following year.

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To circumvent UN sanctions prohibiting member states from employing North Korean workers, laborers enter Russia on student visas under the pretense of university enrollment, Global Rights Compliance said.

Middlemen then contract the workers out to Russian employers, collecting commissions as high as 150,000 rubles (\$1,860) per worker.

Posing as potential employers, investigators from the rights group documented North Koreans working at production facilities, including a military rations factory.

Employers force the workers to stay on the job through coercion and threats of retribution against them and their families.

One job listing assured prospective employers that workers would not "run away," the Global Rights Compliance report said. Workers are forced to undergo 12-hour shifts with just two days off per month, it added, citing the listings.

After North Korea's sixth and last nuclear test in 2017, a UN Security Council resolution banned the country's citizens from being able to work overseas.

While Russia and China, both permanent members of the Security Council, voted for that ban, Western and South Korean officials accuse them of ignoring enforcement.

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