

For Immediate Release

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### KASM's Position on North Korean Refugee Issue

#### Background

Unless managed very carefully, well-intentioned efforts to help North Korean refugees in China will do far more harm than good. China has long tolerated the presence in its border areas of American, South Korean, and other NGO and church-based groups working to help North Korean migrants and asylum seekers. The resident Korean-Chinese border communities depend heavily on these agencies for financial and other support. Sensation seeking efforts to raise the profile in the media their important work almost certainly will lead to stricter border controls and even the return of North Koreans who had settled along the border. In other words, these people could be hurt and hurt badly by those who would help them.

On May 22<sup>nd</sup>, the Chinese government allowed the five people who had entered the Japanese consulate in Shenyang to travel to South Korea. By doing so, China again demonstrated its willingness to resolve asylum-seeking issues in a discrete and sensitive manner. Less than 50 people have so far participated in these attempts, a tiny number in comparison to other situations of crisis for refugees. China can be expected to continue its relatively benign policies as long as the problem is not transformed into political theater. Clearly, however, it is no more likely to allow independent UNHCR intervention than any other sovereign country.

#### First, Do No Harm

Where should people who share concerns about North Korean migrants focus their efforts? First, they should not use their energy where it is all but certain to do more harm than good. Tens of thousands of people, almost all of them now living more or less invisibly in Chinese border areas, should not be used as pawns in a political game aimed at the government of North Korea. Their livelihoods and perhaps their very lives are at stake. We at KASM strongly believe that nobody gave us the right to take those sorts of risks with the lives of others.

#### Help People Who Are in Harm's Way

Groups concerned about these people can do three practical things, none of which involve any delay: (a) support the long ongoing NGO and church-based refugee assistance programs, (b) increase the effectiveness of those efforts by financing programs to create employment for the existing migrant population, and (c) work with Chinese and DPRK authorities to improve living conditions in North Korean border areas, while also seeking the expansion of well-monitored WFP and UNICEF feeding and child care programs into those regions.

#### Get at the Root Causes of North Korea's Misery

None of this will be even remotely enough. North Korean poverty can only be dealt with by helping the country to develop its economy and its society. Almost every interested country in the world has been trying to get this process underway by allowing the IMF and World Bank to at least begin preliminary technical and training work in Pyongyang. Only the United States remains opposed to even the beginning of discussions between North Korea and the Bank and the IMF. As soon as the United States ends its objections, we can really begin the job of helping North Korea end the poverty that is causing North Koreans to enter China in search of food.

