

Seoul Urges China to Not Return North Korean Refugees

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SEOUL, South Korea — President Lee Myung-bak of South Korea urged China on Wednesday to follow “international norms” in its treatment of North Korean refugees, as his government shifted to a more aggressive diplomatic effort to press China not to arrest and repatriate North Koreans who have fled there.

Human rights activists, South Korean lawmakers and teenage North Korean defectors have held a series of rallies in front of the Chinese Embassy here since last week, calling on Beijing to free 30 refugees they said were recently arrested in China and were about to be sent back to North Korea.

Park Sun-young, a South Korean lawmaker who has long spoken out for the rights of North Korean refugees, started a hunger strike on Tuesday to highlight their plight.

“As long as they are not criminals, I think the Chinese government should treat them according to international norms,” Mr. Lee said during a nationally televised news conference marking the beginning of the last year of his five-year term.

His comments came a day after South Korea’s Foreign Ministry said it would seek global support at a United Nations Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva next week for its efforts to rescue North Korean refugees under Chinese detention.

More than 20,000 North Koreans have defected to South Korea since a famine hit their homeland in the mid-1990s. Almost all of them traveled through China, with the help of Christian missionaries, human rights activists or smugglers. But Beijing considers them illegal migrants and Chinese police often round them up for repatriation.

Those who are sent back are treated as “traitors” and are incarcerated in re-education camps, where corporal punishment, forced labor and other human rights abuses remain rampant, according to North Koreans who have survived the camps and defected to South Korea.

Mindful of Beijing’s close ties with the government in Pyongyang, South Korea has seldom confronted China over the issue of refugees. But in recent days, it has expressed frustration after low-key bilateral talks with Beijing failed to free the North Koreans.

By Tuesday, the Foreign Ministry in Seoul said that it would take the matter to the United Nations Human Rights Council meeting next week. There, South Korean diplomats are expected to call for the safety and humane treatment of North Korean refugees living in hiding in China.

Activists say that North Korea has toughened punishment for fugitives as the regime of the new leader, Kim Jong-un, has sought to assert his control. Mr. Kim took over after his father, the long-time North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, died in December.

In Beijing on Tuesday, the Chinese Foreign Ministry reiterated that North Korean fugitives in China were not refugees because they crossed the Chinese border illegally and for economic reasons.

Looking back on his four years in office, Mr. Lee said he felt “speechless” about corruption scandals involving his associates. On Wednesday, a Seoul court sentenced a former spokesman for Mr. Lee to 18 months in prison for taking bribes from a businessman.

Mr. Lee also vigorously defended some of his key policy decisions, like a free trade agreement with the United States and the building of a naval base on the southern island of Jeju.

After years of delay, the American Congress and South Korea’s National Assembly approved the free trade deal last year. Both governments agreed on Tuesday that the deal will take effect on March 15. South Korea’s main opposition party insists that the deal be renegotiated to better protect the country’s interests, or it will withdraw from the agreement if it takes power through elections later this year.

Mr. Lee said the base was needed to protect busy sea lanes off the southern coast of South Korea. But critics say it has harmed the environment and raise tensions with China by allowing the United States thrust its naval power toward the country.

“Most of those who oppose them now are those who supported them aggressively and positively,” Mr. Lee said, targeting the top opposition leaders who served in the previous government, negotiated the free trade deal and decided to build the naval base.

Mr. Lee said he was ready to talk with North Korea “with an open heart” if the North shows a “sincere attitude.” The North has repeatedly vowed not to talk with his government.