

US senator feels let down by China in mission on NKorean refugees

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BEIJING, Dec 18 (AFP) - A US senator visiting China to look into the plight of North Korean refugees said Wednesday he felt let down by the Chinese authorities' uncooperative attitude. Sam Brownback, a Kansas Republican, spent three days in northeast China near the border with North Korea, but was allowed minimal access to people knowledgeable about the extent of the refugee problem.

"I'm discouraged," he said at a briefing in Beijing. "I'm discouraged for the North Korean people."

During his trip to the area around Yanji, at the eastern end of the border between China and North Korea, Brownback met few people other than local officials.

"I was denied the ability to interview any North Korean refugees in the area or to talk to anyone who has worked with the refugee community," he said.

"Every (non-governmental organization) that we contacted prior to or during this trip to discuss the status of North Korean refugees in the area felt too fearful of reprisal to discuss the situation directly with me," he said.

Tens of thousands of North Koreans have slipped across the border into China in recent years, many in search of odd jobs or help from relatives.

What they have also been fleeing is a system of "incredible persecution, executions and government-manipulated starvation," Brownback said.

He cited reports of a baby born in a prison camp and immediately being suffocated with a wet towel, and of villagers being shot three times in the face for possessing a Bible.

"Interestingly, the closer I got to the North Korean border, the more the local officials could believe that the atrocities I was describing were possible," he said.

Despite "a clear moral obligation" to help bring about change in North Korea, stability is China's top priority in its dealings with its secretive neighbor, Brownback said.

"I guess ... they see North Korea somewhat stable now and they want it to stay that way, regardless of what's happening to the citizens of North Korea," he said.

In accordance with agreements with Pyongyang, Beijing has refused to treat North Koreans escaping across the border as refugees.

Instead Beijing views them as illegal economic migrants and often returns them to an uncertain fate in North Korea.

Brownback urged the Chinese government to allow the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to operate in the area near the North Korean border to assess the situation. He also called for a regularized process involving the UNHCR to allow those deemed to be refugees safe passage to third countries.

Even without the UNHCR, an increasing number of North Koreans are already transiting through China for freedom overseas.

Over the past year, more than 120 North Koreans have been allowed to leave China for South Korea after they succeeded in gaining entry into foreign diplomatic missions in China where they had sought asylum.