

Senator urges China to let UN evaluate N.Koreans.

By John Ruwitch

386 words

18 December 2002

16:49

Reuters News

English

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BEIJING, Dec 18 (Reuters) - A U.S. senator pressed China on Wednesday to let the United Nations decide if thousands of North Koreans fleeing their homeland across the Chinese border are to be considered refugees deserving asylum.

Beijing, North Korea's closest friend, insists escapees from the hunger-plagued North are illegal economic migrants, and sources say it tightened border controls amid a wave of asylum attempts at foreign diplomatic compounds this year.

U.S. Senator Sam Brownback, just returned from a trip near the border, said China was obliged to allow U.N. High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) access to the area so it could evaluate the status of North Koreans hiding in China. Human rights groups estimate there are up to 300,000 such people.

"When they joined the agreement associated with the U.N. High Commission on Refugees...they agreed to allowing access into areas where there are questions," the Kansas Republican said.

"China cannot turn a blind eye to the suffering, persecution and execution of the citizens of its neighbour. China can influence North Korea more than any other country in the world and has a clear moral obligation to do so," he told reporters.

The situation in isolated North Korea was a "holocaust for the Korean people", he said. He added that if China and the UNHCR disagreed on North Koreans' status, the dispute should go to binding arbitration.

Beijing, one of North Korea's few friends, holds that the North Koreans entering China are not refugees, but merely looking to improve their economic situation.

Brownback's trip to China comes as tensions between the United States and North Korea have increased since Pyongyang admitted to operating a secret nuclear weapons programme.

China has an agreement with its staunchly Communist neighbour to repatriate those who enter illegally, but in the past year it has allowed more than 130 to leave for South Korea via third countries after they sneaked into foreign diplomatic missions.

On Tuesday, two North Koreans entered a German school in Beijing seeking asylum.

Brownback said he was not allowed to meet North Koreans on the Chinese side and non-governmental aid groups operating in the area declined to meet him for fear of reprisals from China.