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Viewing cable 10SHENYANG21, PRC-DPRK BORDER: AMCIT CROSSERS, TRADE PUSH,

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
10SHENYANG21	2010-02-12 10:16	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Consulate Shenyang

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 SHENYANG 000021

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR CA/OCS/EAP, EAP/K, EAP/CM, INR

E.O. 12958: DECL: TEN YEARS AFTER KOREAN UNIFICATION

TAGS: CASC CH ECON ELTN ETRD KN KS PGOV PHUM PINR

PREF, PREL

SUBJECT: PRC-DPRK BORDER: AMCIT CROSSERS, TRADE PUSH,
BORDER SMUGGLING, REGIONAL GROWTH

REF: A. SHENYANG 3

¶B. 09 SHENYANG 219

¶C. 09 SHENYANG 167

Classified By: Consul General Stephen B. Wickman. Reasons 1.4(b/d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Contacts along the PRC-DPRK border profess ignorance of reports about a second American citizen in North Korea. Robert Park's crossing raised a few bureaucratic eyebrows, but there seems to be no backlash. DPRK traders and groups seem to be interacting more publicly with foreign business partners than in the past. Most sections of the PRC-DPRK border show clear evidence of continued, regular cross-border traffic. China's push to develop this dead-end corner of Northeast China is fully underway, in spite of DPRK and Russian recalcitrance. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) ConGenOff visited local contacts along the PRC-DPRK border in the Yalu River valley and the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture February 3-11. Stops included Liaoning Province's Dandong, as well as Ji'an, Linjiang, Changbai Korean Autonomous County, and the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, all in Jilin Province.

BORDER CONTACTS UNAWARE OF SECOND AMCIT IN THE DPRK

¶3. (C) None of our border contacts in Dandong, Ji'an, or Yanbian seemed to be aware of the DPRK's late January KCNA report that a second American had voluntarily (and illegally) crossed into North Korea. A contact in Dandong told us on February 3 that he was only aware of a handful of South Koreans who had illegally entered North Korea in the last few years, but no Americans. One of our Amciti NGO contacts in Tumen told us on February 11 that he had heard of a "South Korean" who had crossed into North Korea but he had heard no rumors about a second American (NOTE: Shenyang ROK Consulate officials told ConGenOffs on January 12 that news reports about a South Korean male illegally entering the DPRK on January 8 were true.)

ROBERT PARK AFTERMATH: SOME SCRUTINY, FEW EFFECTS

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¶4. (C) All of our contacts knew about the Robert Park case (Ref A), both prior to and after his February 5 release, and asked questions about the effect of the incident on U.S.-DPRK relations. A Sino-Korean Catholic priest from Helong confided that in the immediate aftermath of Park's crossing, the Yanbian Prefectural Public Security Bureau and the Religious Affairs Bureau had convened an emergency "political re-education" seminar for local religious leaders, reminding them about Chinese laws and the danger of interacting with foreigners. The priest brushed off Congenoff's concern about any backlash saying he had been through much worse in the past and that he believed that today's local Chinese authorities were merely "going through the motions." He was unaware of any other backlash. Another Catholic priest in Yanji told us he had not been "invited" to the political re-education seminar, nor was he aware of any backlash.

¶5. (C) Religious contacts in Yanbian said they were initially optimistic that Robert Park was a man of the faith who would martyr himself in North Korea. They said they were severely disappointed that he had left North Korea reportedly singing the praises of DPRK religious freedom. Our Yanji priest said that Robert Park's actions and the "extremist dialogue" in his pre-crossing media outreach was just the latest in a long line of attempts by South Korean, Japanese, and Western religious NGOs to gravitate to the PRC-DPRK border with the goal of "helping" DPRK defectors. He said that the dynamics of missionary funding and donation solicitation drove many of these groups to "manufacture conflict" with the Chinese authorities in order to tug at the heartstrings of Western- and South Korea-based donors. He cited the NGO practice of locating safe houses and orphanages in not-so-safe and very conspicuous sites overlooking the PRC-DPRK border, so that journalists and foreigners could visit and "sense the

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danger." By comparison, others in the business of moving DPRK defectors tried to locate safe houses in remote areas of Heilongjiang and Inner Mongolia to avoid attention.

DANDONG: DPRK TRADERS AND OFFICIALS POUNDING THE STREETS

¶6. (C) For all the talk about frozen trade between the DPRK and China, the Dandong Land Port on February 4 was the busiest that ConGenOff has seen in seven visits over the last year (NOTE: A Dandong trader contact attributed some of this to last-minute, pre-Lunar New Year account settlements.) The land port's staging lot was almost full, packed with Chinese and North Korean vehicles. There were many new vehicles having no license plates, including 10-12 brand-new Build Your Dreams (BYD) sedans, several European luxury vehicles, heavy machinery, and jeeps awaiting shipment to North Korea. Many of the trucks were loaded down with what appeared to be construction materials headed for North Korea. At night, North Korea's Sinuiju was alit with more light than in a previous fall visit and the normally darkened DPRK side of the PRC-DPRK Friendship Bridge was lit up with the same rainbow Lunar New Year treatment as the Chinese side (NOTE: The lights were probably in honor of Kim Jong-il's impending birthday festivities.)

¶7. (C) We encountered more North Korean delegations than ever before, on express buses, on trains, in hotels, and at restaurants, moving around Dandong and Yanbian. Our Dandong and Yanbian contacts tell us that they believe that DPRK restrictions on interactions with foreigners have been relaxed to allow North Koreans to aggressively pursue business opportunities (Ref B). Many of these North Korean groups are accompanied by Chinese, and some North Korean traders seem to be associating freely with South Korean business partners.

¶8. (C) On the bus down to Dandong, two North Koreans appeared to be business partners with a South Korean and a Sino-Korean from Yanbian - all were making separate phone calls to their offices while coordinating entertainment activities for the night. A solitary North Korean engaged in some very long phone calls with his office on the other side of the border in Sinuiju, talking about meeting with

some Chinese partners, bringing some documents from the Sinuiju office to him in Dandong, and prices of unspecified materials. Judging from the level of familiar speech, all the traders seemed to know each other very well.

¶9. (C) At the train station many different groups of North Koreans were seen waiting to take the train up to Shenyang. On board, a middle-aged North Korean female trader was reading a Sino-Korean literary journal and a Dandong business weekly. Across the aisle was an interesting group of three, with one Yanbian Sino-Korean who code-switched back and forth between Sino-Korean dialect and Pyongyang dialect on the phone with his Shenyang office, discussing documents needing to be translated and a dinner appointment in Shenyang. He seemed to be escorting two older North Koreans, who judging from their speech and the topics discussed, were mid-level government officials from a provincial party or trade bureau. They talked about the similarities between North Korean culture, Chinese culture, Sino-Korean culture, the arts, North Korean movies, classical Chinese four-character sayings, etc. Further down the cabin, a solitary North Korean furiously studied a mid-level Japanese textbook. At Fengcheng (about an hour out of Dandong toward Shenyang), one South Korean male and an older North Korean couple got on the train together. They appeared to be business associates and were talking about their day in Fengcheng, a famous hiking destination. It seemed like they had known each other for awhile.

¶10. (C) A taxi driver claimed that North Koreans living and working in Dandong had always been loose with their money and that many had used their wealth to purchase some of the new, Yalu River-side apartment high rises springing up all over Dandong. He concluded that judging from the way North Koreans spent money in Dandong, North Korea's real weakness was a crisis of an unequal distribution of wealth, not

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poverty per se.

HYESAN/CHANGBAI: SPEED SKATERS, SMUGGLERS, AND SUCCESSION

¶11. (C) All along the PRC-DPRK border, especially on the more populated stretch of the border between Linjiang and Changbai Korean Autonomous County, there were numerous footpaths going across the surface of the frozen Yalu River. DPRK soldiers, Korean and Chinese townspeople walked freely along the frozen ice and footprints could be seen clearly going all the way across.

¶12. (C) On the most populated section of the PRC-DPRK border in the one location where the North Korean side seems to be more populous than the Chinese side and the river narrows to about 30 meters, the North Korean city of Hyesan was full of activity. About five groups of 10-30 children each were seen playing with sleds, skis, snowballs, and wrestling on the frozen Yalu River. There was even a lone speed skater doing laps in a circuit on the frozen Yalu River. All along a 3-5 mile stretch of the border between Changbai and Hyesan, there were several North Korean cars, motorcycles, women washing clothes, and scenes of what appeared to be commercial activity where groups of 20-30 adults gathered to exchange items in baskets with each other. The military in Hyesan drove their Russian-made GAZ jeeps and Chinese jeeps about at high speeds along with motorcycles and the occasional sedan. Downstream in the more rural areas, farming villages and small towns were full of people and livestock. Cows could be seen hauling logs and ice to villages.

¶13. (C) Hyesan is known to be a model city in North Korea, so it was also interesting to see a large sign that clearly announced the "3-generational revolution" ("3 dae hyeokmyeong"). ConGenOff did not recall seeing this large sign in Hyesan during a June 2009 visit.

¶14. (C) The Chinese side of the border was lined with strings and ropes hanging from the stone esplanade down to the riverbank some 10-15 meters below. The bank was littered with crushed cardboard boxes. Cleared paths could be seen on the frozen river between North Korea and China. There was the occasional minivan parked at odd points along the road with people loitering along the border.

¶15. (C) As soon as the sun set on February 6, around 1730, ConGenOff went back along the river and noticed that there were several, solitary men loitering along the esplanade and talking on cell phones in Korean and Chinese, asking questions such as "when are you coming?" About 1740, a man confronted ConGenoff, asking who ConGenOff was waiting for. ConGenOff was walking away upstream towards an emptier stretch of the esplanade when two people suddenly sprinted across the frozen Yalu River from North Korea to China. They appeared to be wearing military-style fur-caps, long overcoats, and were probably men. ConGenOff left the esplanade at once, but looking back over the ledge saw that the two border-crossers had taken cover in the underbrush and were continuing to sprint along the riverbank toward the spot ConGenOff had been only minutes before.

¶16. (C) Economic progress in Changbai remained frozen at 2000 levels according to separate reports from a taxi driver, a local Changbai Sino-Korean restaurateur, and several Sino-Korean senior citizens at a neighborhood store. Senior citizens living in well-off houses said that their houses had been sponsored by foreign investors trying to create a Korean folk village tourist trap but that the venture had floundered due to a lack of visitors, even during the peak summer season. The senior citizens called their efforts to farm corn along the riverside a losing battle, since the North Koreans just crossed the river at will and stole the crop when it was ready for harvest.

¶17. (C) Our restaurateur had spent the last ten years shuttling between Tianjin and Qingdao (magnets for many of Northeast China's Sino-Korean young professionals) before coming back to open his small store in the wake of the global economic slowdown. He said that Changbai made all of

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its money from smuggling and summer tourism. He estimated that 70-80 percent of Changbai's 80,000 residents derived their living from supporting some element of PRC-DPRK smuggling. He said that in the past such commercial activity was not really considered smuggling because of the close family ties with North Korea and Changbai's geographical isolation from the rest of China. They had a long history of dealing with North Korea in what was previously known as "civilian exchanges."

¶18. (C) A local tourist agency told us that normally Chinese citizens can obtain same-day travel passes to visit Hyesan but that the land port was closed until March. Similarly, down the road in Ji'an, a hospital director contact said that with a simple letter of invitation from North Korean relatives he could obtain a short-term DPRK visitor pass and receive Chinese exit visa permission.

CHANG-JI-TU: ON COURSE AND MOVING AHEAD

¶19. (U) Regional transportation links in this once-remote corner of China (Ref C) are now becoming a reality as ConGenOff saw as he traveled from Baishan City to Yanbian via the new Dandong-Helong border railway on February 8. The filled-in rail link between Baihe and Helong means the trip now takes barely two and a half hours, gliding above valleys with sloping, modern viaducts and traversing mountains with several long tunnels. This line links China's communities on the eastern Tumen River valley of the PRC-DPRK border with the communities on the western Yalu River valley side of the PRC-DPRK border.

¶20. (SBU) On February 10, local officials unveiled the renovation of the Helong-Longjing segment of railway so people from Tonghua and Dandong will be able to go straight to Longjing. Longjing is just a few kilometers of dilapidated Japanese colonial-era track away from PRC-DPRK border town Kaishantun. It appears that Chinese authorities plan on renovating that segment in the near future to allow for freight and passenger travel to North Korea. However, local contacts did not believe that the DPRK's New Year's announcement re-elevating Rason to Directly Governed-status meant much at all for the time being.

WICKMAN