

# TRAPPED AT SEA

Exposing North Korean forced labour  
on China's Indian Ocean tuna fleet



Protecting People and Planet

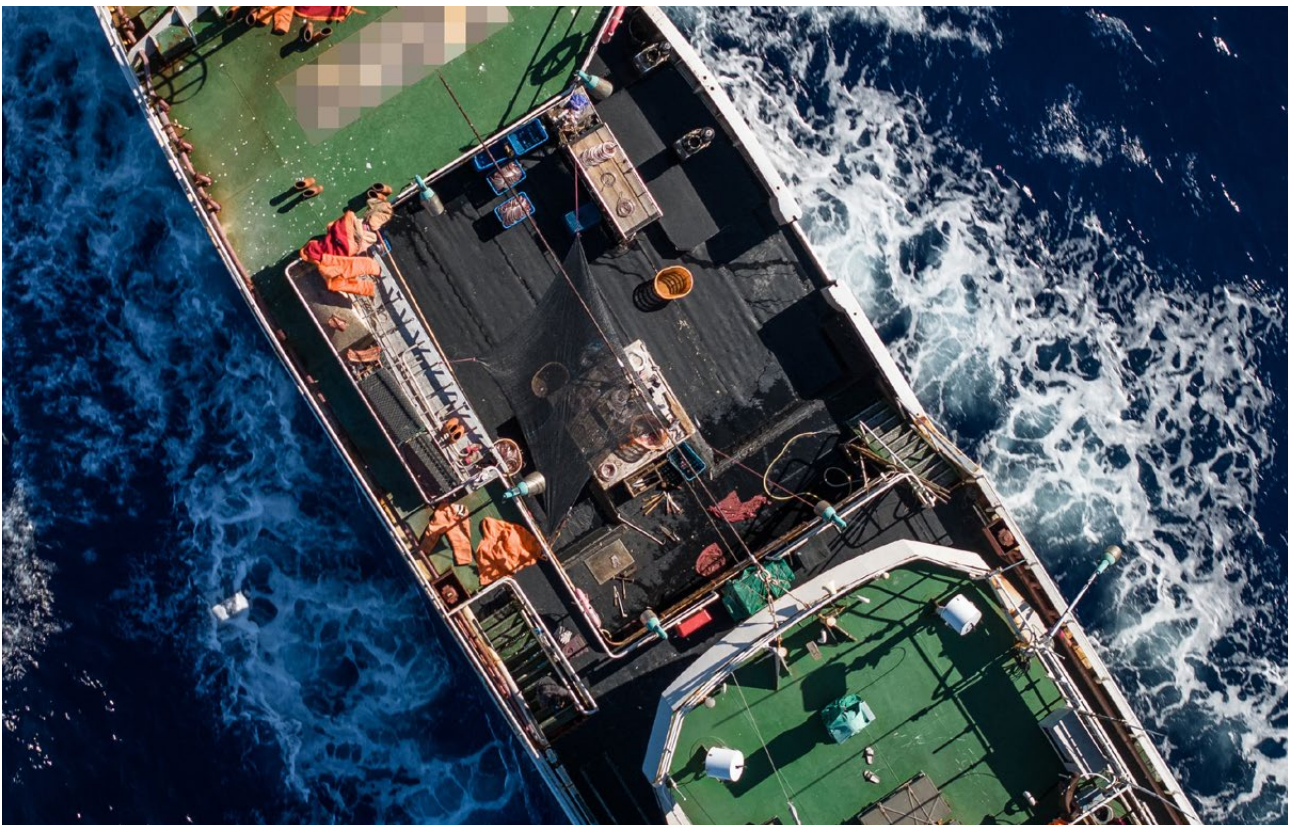
# Introduction

The North Korean regime routinely exports labour in order to generate revenue, which is suspected in part to fund its nuclear programmes.<sup>1</sup> It is accused of “systematically requir[ing] forced, uncompensated labour from much of its population to sustain its economy”.<sup>2</sup> As such, the use of North Korean labour outside of the country is outlawed by the United Nations (UN) Security Council, and international actors such as the European Union (EU) and the United States of America (USA) have also developed legal frameworks to prevent goods produced by North Koreans from entering their supply chains.

China is a key destination for North Korean labour, with the country believed to host as many as 100,000 North Korean workers.<sup>3</sup> Recent investigations have identified the use of North Koreans in Chinese seafood processing plants, from which products were then sold to the EU and the USA.<sup>4</sup> This occurs within the context of broader concerns around the activities of China’s global fishing operations, in which illegal fishing, human rights abuses and the use of forced labour are systemic.<sup>5</sup> For instance, a recent report by the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) that focused on Chinese vessels in the Southwest Indian Ocean (SWIO) - the fishing ground for the vessels detailed

in this report - identified 177 suspected or confirmed offences of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing or human rights abuses (67 of which related to IUU fishing, 18 human rights abuses and 92 both) on 71 vessels operating in the region between 2017 and 2023.<sup>6</sup>

EJF investigators conducted interviews with Indonesian and Filipino crew members who had worked on board Chinese tuna longliners in the Indian Ocean between March 2019 and June 2024. These interviews, alongside additional intelligence gained through open sources and multimedia evidence provided by crew, indicate that North Korean citizens were working on board these longliners - likely in breach of UN sanctions. Press reports<sup>7</sup> also allege that Mauritian authorities detained six North Korean workers in December 2022 when a Chinese fishing vessel docked at Port Louis, Mauritius.<sup>8</sup> This briefing presents the findings of this investigation, as well as summarising some of the key legal frameworks developed to prevent the use of North Korean labour, and any associated trade in seafood. Beyond this, it also summarises the alleged IUU fishing and human rights abuses associated with these vessels, and the broader Chinese longline fleet operating in the SWIO, before presenting suspected supply chain links to the EU, the UK and key markets in Asia.



A Chinese tuna longliner in the Indian Ocean. © EJF

# Methodology

In order to gather evidence of IUU fishing, human rights abuses and forced labour, EJF routinely conducts interviews with fishers or ex-fishers from Indonesia and the Philippines - two major labour-providing nations - who have worked on board industrial fishing vessels belonging to key distant-water fleets, including China, South Korea and Taiwan. Through these interviews, 19 crew who had worked on Chinese tuna longliners in the Indian Ocean indicated that there were North Korean citizens working on board.

In light of this intelligence, EJF investigators conducted follow-up interviews with crew who had identified North Korean labour on board, crew who

had worked on vessels belonging to the same fleet, and other crew that had worked on board Chinese tuna longliners in the Indian Ocean. In instances where it was confirmed that North Koreans were on board, in-depth interviews were conducted where crew were contactable ( $n = 12$ ). In these, additional information was sought - including how long they believed the North Koreans had been on board, their treatment by senior crew, how they knew that the individuals were from North Korea, the behaviour of the North Koreans and any cultural identifiers that might serve as supporting evidence of their nationality. The number of interviewees, and their cumulative time on board, can be seen in **Table 1**.

**Table 1 - Number of interviewees and their cumulative dates on board**

Vessel name	No. of fishers interviewed	Cumulative dates on board <sup>9</sup>	Main fishing ground of vessel when interviewee(s) on board
VESSEL A	1	08/2019 - 05/2020	Indian Ocean
VESSEL B <sup>10</sup>	0	N/A	N/A
VESSEL C	1	12/2019 - 01/2022	Indian Ocean
VESSEL D	5	12/2020 - 01/2022	Indian Ocean
VESSELS E + F	2	01/2022 - 02/2024	Indian Ocean
VESSEL G	3	08/2019 - 02/2024	Indian Ocean
VESSEL H	1	08/2019 - 01/2022	Indian Ocean
VESSEL I	1	01/2024 - 05/2024	Indian Ocean
VESSEL J	3	03/2021 - 06/2024	Indian Ocean
VESSEL K	1	12/2020 - 07/2022	Indian Ocean
VESSEL L	1	03/2019 - 08/2021	Indian Ocean

Crew members were prompted to provide any photos or videos captured during their times on board, and were asked to identify any North Korean crew that featured in them. Additionally, EJF investigators examined all photo and video evidence, transcribing any dialogue in Indonesian, Korean, Mandarin (Chinese), and Tagalog (Filipino) to identify potential indications of North Korean labour use.

Furthermore, visual evidence that linked reported North Korean individuals to a specific vessel was extracted for use in this briefing. Video and photographic evidence was also collected via desk-based research, including from the Chinese social media platform Douyin, and YouTube.

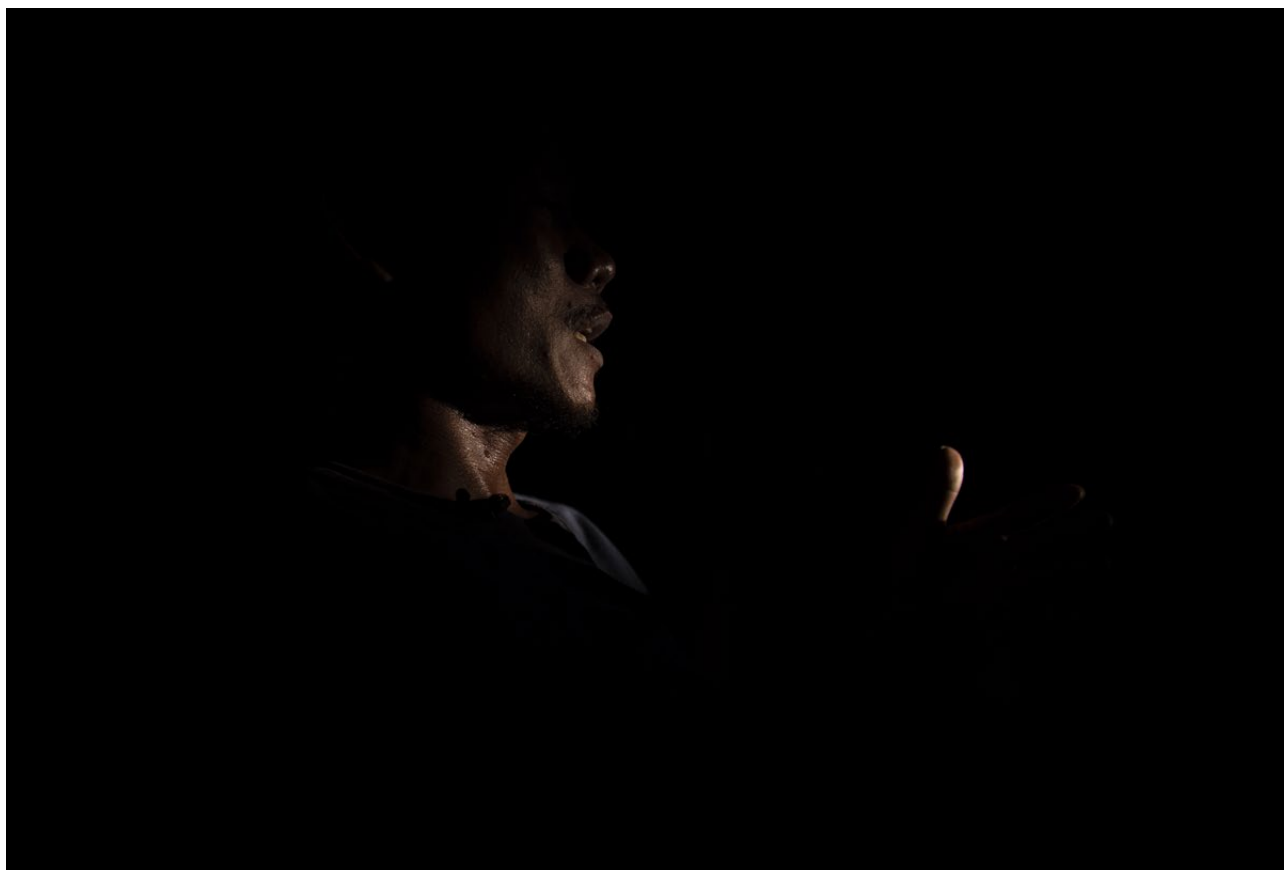
To corroborate the information received, crew were also asked to provide (where available) evidence of their time on board, including passport stamps, contracts for their employment and airline tickets. Additionally, the vessel tracking software Starboard was also used to corroborate crew testimony, as well as providing information on likely trans-shipment and port visits by vessels suspected of using North Korean labour. Doing so provided information on the potential end markets for fish originating from these vessels.

It should be acknowledged that there are limitations to the above methodology. EJF were unable to speak to any of the North Korean workers suspected to have been on these vessels, and as such, it was not possible to fully corroborate much of the testimony given by Filipino and Indonesian crew. There are inherent risks associated with first-hand testimony as a data-source, however the weight of detailed accounts gathered for this briefing lend overwhelming credibility to the described behaviours and events. In some instances, fishers had worked across a number of different vessels in a fleet, and the suspected North Korean crew as detailed below were also routinely moved between vessels. Therefore, there exists a risk that testimony relating to a particular vessel may be wrongly ascribed

to another vessel. While all efforts have been made to mitigate these risks (for example by identifying visual indicators in photos and videos that relate to a specific vessel such as IMO numbers or call signs and corroborating interviewee testimonies through multiple interviews), the risk remains present.

It should also be noted that interviewees stated that conversations reportedly took place in a combination of Chinese, Filipino, Indonesian and Korean languages, with North Korean crew reportedly often able to speak Mandarin and some Indonesian, as a result of the length of time crew had been working on the boats. The fact that some of the conversations outlined in this briefing would occur across languages, or at times in broken versions of numerous languages, increases the risk of misinterpretation of some details.

In order to safeguard potential victims of forced labour, significant amounts of information have been redacted from this briefing, including vessel names and identifiers, testimony, some vessel activities, photo and video evidence. Where photo and video evidence has been included, the faces of all crew have been blurred.



A crew member being interviewed by EJF. © EJF

## The national and international frameworks prohibiting the use of North Korean labour on fishing vessels

The UN Security Council has adopted resolutions sanctioning North Korean nationals and interests, as well as the use of North Korean labour by member states. Key seafood market states, including the EU and USA have also taken additional measures. These include both economic sanctions against North Korean interests (restrictions on trade, transport, and financial transactions) and targeted sanctions against designated individuals and entities (asset freezes, travel bans). These sanctions are in large part a means to address the proliferation of nuclear, chemical and/or biological weapons by North Korea, attempting to curtail finances for weapons programmes raised through the export of North Korean labour and goods.

A number of these sanctions may be relevant to the findings of this briefing, including:

- An obligation for UN and EU member states not to issue work permits to North Korean nationals<sup>11</sup> and to repatriate all North Korean workers within their jurisdiction;<sup>12</sup>
- The prohibition of UN member states from acquiring seafood originating from North Korea and/or its nationals;<sup>13</sup>
- A ban on the procurement of seafood from North Korea, whether or not originating in North Korean waters, by nationals of EU member states;<sup>14</sup>
- A ban on the import into the US of goods produced with forced labour,<sup>15</sup> with a presumption that goods produced wholly or in part by North Korean nationals are produced with forced labour;<sup>16</sup>
- The power of the U.S. President and Secretary of the Treasury to impose sanctions on persons or entities involved in the employment of North Korean workers;<sup>17</sup>
- The power of the U.S. President and Secretary of the Treasury to impose sanctions on designated persons or entities involved in the exportation of North Korean workers;<sup>18</sup>
- The power of the U.S. President and Secretary of the Treasury to impose sanctions on designated persons or entities involved in the direct or indirect import of seafood from North Korea;<sup>19</sup>
- The power of the U.S. President and Secretary of the Treasury to impose sanctions on designated persons or entities who facilitate human rights abuses by the North Korean government.<sup>20</sup>

### Summary of findings

The evidence gathered in this briefing suggests that at least 12 Chinese-flagged tuna longliners operating in the Indian Ocean have used North Korean labour on board, potentially in breach of the UN sanctions highlighted above. Furthermore, it appears that the captains of these vessels actively attempted to hide the fact that North Koreans were on board - either by concealing them at ports or transferring them to sister vessels while at sea. This indicates that vessel captains, and likely vessel owners, were aware that the use of this labour was prohibited. The evidence suggests that many of the North Koreans were working on board the fleet of vessels for years - in some instances potentially as long as a decade - without returning to North Korea, and in some instances without returning to land.

Allegations relating to specific vessels, whose names have been redacted, can be found in the forthcoming section. Depending on the volume of evidence for each vessel, some have been grouped with vessels belonging to the same fleet.

## VESSEL A and VESSEL B

One crew member was interviewed from VESSEL A, who was on board the vessel between August 2019 and May 2020.

When originally interviewed, the crew member stated that there were four North Koreans on board VESSEL A during his time working on the vessel. Furthermore, at a chance encounter between the interviewee and the North Koreans in 2023 at Port Louis, Mauritius (the interviewee was at this time working on a Taiwanese longliner), he said that the same North Korean crew were still working on vessels belonging to the same fleet (VESSEL B). Through this conversation with them in 2023, he realised that they had been working on vessels belonging to this fleet for at least six years.

The interviewee stated that the North Koreans had less freedom to leave the vessel when at port in Mauritius compared to the Indonesian crew:

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***“They were not as free as the Indonesian crew. They went to the store [in Mauritius] one day to buy supplies [. . .] the captain told them that they could only go that one day. Afterwards, they were not allowed to go outside”.***

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The North Korean workers were also isolated in other ways, such as not having mobile phones:

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***“They never communicated with their wives or others while at sea as they were not allowed to bring a mobile phone”.***

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The interviewee felt that North Koreans were treated better by the Chinese senior crew than the Indonesians, stating that the Indonesians were like ‘step-children’ compared to the North Koreans. He stated that they were able to eat better food than the Indonesians, as well as be more selective about the work they undertook:

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***“The Korean crew got special food. Besides, they would not be scolded when they were sitting. While the Indonesian crew got scolded for having cigarettes and sitting [. . .] all crew-members were supposed to pull up the buoys, but the Korean crew did not want to do it. The Koreans did not want to work to roll the fishing line and pull the fish either”.***

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EJF was also able to obtain footage from a social media website reportedly from VESSEL B which explicitly mentioned North Koreans being on board. Footage uploaded on the same account clearly shows the vessel’s name affixed on the vessel.

Crew testimony received from another vessel, VESSEL J, indicated that North Korean crew from a number of vessels were transferred to VESSEL A and VESSEL B in December 2023, in order to return back to North Korea.

## VESSEL C

One crew member was interviewed from VESSEL C who had worked on the vessel between December 2019 and January 2022.

The interviewee suggested that there were a total of 11 North Koreans working on the vessel, all of whom were believed to have been working with the fleet between three and ten years. It was said that they were unable to return back to North Korea because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviewee stated that there were originally eight North Korean crew on board VESSEL C, but following a dispute with Chinese senior crew they left and joined VESSEL D, and then later another vessel belonging to the same fleet. Following this, three other North Koreans joined VESSEL C, but the interviewee could not remember which ship they came from.

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***“At first, there were eight Koreans on board our vessel but they were brave, and they didn’t want one of their companions oppressed by the bosun, so they were moved again to the other sister ship, and then [VESSEL C] took in another three Koreans”.***

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The interviewee stated that there was friction between the Filipino crew and the North Koreans initially, but eventually, they got on well.

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***“At first, I was telling them what to do but they were doing it differently. So, I confronted them immediately and talked to them [ . . . ] Fortunately, it didn’t last long, we got along because we were on the same side, we didn’t want to be oppressed by the Chinese”.***

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There was reportedly tension between the Chinese and North Korean crew on board the vessel. This appeared to stem at least in part from an argument in which the Chinese bosun became angry that an unwell North Korean crew member could not work, and more broadly about the speed at which they were working:

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***“One of their companions was unable to work because he got a little sick and he was also old. Our bosun shouted at him and said, “What will he do? He’ll just eat? Eat and sleep?”. One Korean replied, the big one, saying that they would work for their colleague because he was getting weak and frail. Our bosun didn’t like it, so he yelled and got angry, which made the Koreans angry. The Chinese could not control the Koreans so they were transferred to another ship. It was the sister ship”.***

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***“They [the North Koreans] did their job properly. They worked fast when setting the line and loading catch, but it was still not enough for the captain’s eyes”.***

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## VESSEL D

Five crew members were interviewed from VESSEL D who were collectively on board the vessel between December 2020 and January 2022.

The five crew members all stated that there were North Koreans on their vessel, with four of them stating that there were six North Koreans on board, and one stating that there were seven (which may be accounted for by the interviewee misremembering).

A number of the interviewees discussed the transfer of North Koreans at sea and commented on how long they believed that the North Koreans had spent, and were due to spend, working on the vessels.

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*“The Korean crew are just moved from one ship to another in the middle of the sea; they have been on the ship for 6 years”.*

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*“The North Korean crew move from one ship to another on the open sea, they haven’t come home for three years. They even said it might take them five years before disembarking”.*

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*“Six Koreans were not allowed to go home even after they completed their four year contract. They were just moved from one ship to another. They are from North Korea [ . . . ] When we left, the Korean crew were transferred to [sister vessel of VESSEL D]”.*

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*“The Korean crew were transferred to our vessel from [sister vessel of VESSEL D]”.*

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A Chinese tuna longliner in the Indian Ocean. © EJF



## **VESSEL E and VESSEL F**

Two crew members were interviewed from VESSEL E and VESSEL F who were collectively on board the vessels between January 2022 and February 2024. The interviewees spent periods of time working on both vessels, and reported that North Koreans were present on each.

The interviewees suggested that there were five North Koreans working on vessels belonging to this fleet for between five and seven years - an extended period allegedly due to the North Korean borders being closed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. EJF investigators were told that the North Korean crew would be hidden from port authorities by transferring them at sea between VESSEL E and VESSEL F before going into port in Mauritius. It was also alleged that the North Korean crew had not been on land the entire time they were on the vessels:

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***“Usually, there would be two vessels docking [. . .] there would be one vessel in the middle of the sea which the North Koreans would board. Based on what they said to me, they didn’t dock for five or six years”.***

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***“Well, from what the vessel boss said, if they [the North Koreans] get off the vessel, the Captain would be fined [. . .]. The Koreans could not ever be seen by the police. The local police. But, then again, I could not know for certain why that was”.***

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***“Yes, so each time [VESSEL F] was going to port, our ship [VESSEL E] would stick with [VESSEL F]. Because I heard that the North Korean crew were not allowed to disembark [VESSEL F], so we had to replace them. Just a quick exchange of crew.***

*[Question from interviewer: Oh, so every time you were moved to [VESSEL F], it was only when the vessel docked, to help with the unloading?] Yes, yes, exactly. To help unload their catches, but once we finished, I would be transferred back to [VESSEL E], on the sea.*

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***“Yes. That’s how [VESSEL E and VESSEL F] worked. When two vessels docked, the North Koreans would be kept back first. After those vessels sailed again, the North Koreans were transferred to them. They would sail. Then, the other two vessels would dock.”***

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***“The North Koreans weren’t allowed to be seen in Mauritius. I don’t know why. Whenever we docked, the North Koreans would be transferred”.***

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Crew members reported that they got on well with the North Koreans and admired their hard work. It was suggested again that the North Koreans were broadly treated well by the Chinese senior crew, although at one stage they allegedly withheld their labour following a falling out with the Chinese bosun.

The Indonesian crew members expressed their sympathy for the North Korean crew:

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***“Everytime we saw them, they looked very stressed [. . .] even six months [at sea] are too long [for me], I would be stressed. I could not imagine it being for years”.***

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## VESSEL G

Three crew members were interviewed from VESSEL G who were collectively on board the vessel between August 2019 and February 2024.

All three crew members stated that there were North Koreans on board the vessel. One of the interviewees stated that there were three North Koreans on board at the same time as him, who told him that they had been working with the fleet associated with VESSEL G for seven or eight years:

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***“Give or take seven years, or eight years [the North Koreans had worked on the vessel]. They were not given permission to go home by their government”.***

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Testimony from one crew member suggests that the North Koreans were not allowed to travel to port and may have been on the vessel without going to land for as long as eight years. He stated that before going into port, the North Koreans would be transferred to other Chinese vessels. The crew member refers to the UN, potentially showing he was aware of sanctions against the use of North Korean labour.

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***“They would always be sent to the other vessels first. They were transferred. After that, the vessel could dock at the port”.***

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***“They were not there when I was first picked up and boarded the vessel. So, they were actually transferred to our boat in the middle of the sea, from another boat. That was because the Koreans could not leave work, they were not allowed to by the Americans. I heard there was a conflict concerning the UN”.***

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Interviewees reported mixed relationships between themselves and the North Koreans. While one stated that the North Koreans were nice to them, two of the crew had less favourable experiences. When asked about how they were treated by the North Koreans he stated:

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***“Well, at first, we made good friends with each other. But, over time, they started making inappropriate jokes. That made the situation uncomfortable”.***

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The same crew member also suggested that they were put under pressure to master new skills by the North Koreans:

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***“Well, they [the North Koreans] were skillful, agile. The downside was that, when they asked other crew members to do something, they forced us to do it quickly. We were told to master it in a day”.***

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The final crew member stated that he was threatened and bullied by the North Korean crew:

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***“The Koreans often did that [threatening behaviour] to me. They threatened to throw me into the ocean because I was an inexperienced crew member. They bullied me. They threatened me using a fish gaff and bottle”.***

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While he was unable to remember the exact date or the identity of the vessel, a crew member stated that the North Koreans boarded another fishing vessel to return back to North Korea in 2023, along with a large number of other North Koreans (estimated 30 in total) from other vessels, who he believes all boarded the same vessel. He remembers the North Koreans being extremely excited about the prospect of going home:

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*“When they heard the news of going home, they were very excited. Since they had never stepped foot on land for eight years. He [a North Korean] couldn’t even sleep [. . .] the morning of the next day, when a boat was there to pick them up, they were very happy”.*

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Additionally, footage provided by a crew member who briefly worked on the VESSEL G before returning to VESSEL K shows an individual, identified as North Korean, being held down and treated for a head injury by fellow crew members (including two others also identified as North Korean) (**Image 1**). The injury reportedly occurred when a fishing line snapped and struck him. The event apparently occurred at night, when he said crew members would often get injured due to fatigue. The crew member felt that the treatment the injured man received was inadequate, and that he had not recovered enough to work by the time the interviewee returned to his original vessel around a week later.

**Image 1 - Screenshot from a video reportedly taken on VESSEL K, in which it was stated a North Korean crew member was receiving treatment for a head injury**



## VESSEL H

One crew member was interviewed from VESSEL H who was on board the vessel between August 2019 and January 2022.

The interviewee stated that there were three North Koreans on board the vessel, one of whom left as he (the interviewee) arrived, reportedly due to sickness. The interviewee believed that on his arrival, the North Korean crew members had already been working on the vessel for four years. In total, it was estimated by the interviewee that 10 North Koreans were working with the fleet associated with VESSEL H at this time, spread across a number of vessels.

According to the interviewee, the North Koreans would be periodically transferred between vessels while at sea. They would sometimes come into port in Mauritius but would remain on or close to the vessel at all times while docked. He stated that he believed this was due to conflicts with Indonesian fishers.

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***“Yes, they were [transferred to other vessels at sea]. Sometimes they were sent to a collecting ship. Other times to other kind of vessel”.***

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***“No [the North Koreans would not get off the boat]. Well, if they ever got off, they stayed near the ship”.***

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***“They could not step off at the port, [I think] it was because the Indonesians and North Koreans were in conflict at the time”.***

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The crew member reported poor relationships between the Indonesians and the North Koreans while on board, stating that the North Koreans were closer to the Chinese.

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***“You see, since they showed us no respect we did not treat them well in return. They could not even respect people from another country, so why should we respect them?”.***

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***“They [the North Koreans] cursed at us and physically abused us”.***

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***“The North Koreans hit the Indonesians. They thought that we were not brave enough. In the end, a brawl happened”.***

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## VESSEL I

One crew member was interviewed from VESSEL I who was on board the vessel between January 2024 and May 2024.

The interviewee stated that there were three Koreans on board, although he was unsure whether they are from the North or the South, and they left (presumably to return to North Korea) around a week after he joined the vessel. It is extremely unlikely that a South Korean citizen would be employed on a Chinese fishing vessel, and when considered within the broader context of this briefing it is assumed that the crew referenced here are North Koreans. He had been told by an Indonesian colleague that the 'Koreans' had been working on the vessel for seven years by the time they left. The interviewee also stated that when they left VESSEL I they were picked up by a Panamanian-flagged collection vessel, although he could not remember the name.

Testimony received from a crew member on board a vessel from the fleet of VESSEL E/F suggested that while at port in Mauritius, he was invited by a friend onto VESSEL I, where he alleges that eight North Koreans were being hidden in a lower compartment of the vessel. It is not clear when this occurred.

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***“Meanwhile, on [VESSEL I], I had a friend [. . .] he invited me to visit him [. . .] when I boarded their vessel, they said that there were North Koreans in the lower part. There were eight of them. I ordered him to give them drinks. I bought drinks and went to the lower part to give it to them. They were in the lower part and weren't allowed to go out”.***

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The interviewee stated that following his desire to finish his contract early and return home, he was transferred from VESSEL I to a vessel linked by ownership to VESSEL D in May 2024, as the vessel was travelling back to China - which is reflected by the vessel's movements according to AIS data. This provides potential evidence of the links between the various fleets that are the focus of this report.



A Chinese tuna longliner in the Indian Ocean. © EJF

## VESSEL J

Three crew members were interviewed from VESSEL J who were collectively on board the vessel between March 2021 and June 2024.

All three of the interviewees stated that there were six North Korean workers on board the vessel, who they believed had worked on the fleet for six or seven years. It was believed that they could not return back to North Korea because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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*“Well, at first, of course, we didn’t know [that their crewmates were North Korean] [. . .] their faces were distinct from the Chinese crews. We assumed they were Koreans at first, but we didn’t know for sure whether they were from the North or South [. . .]. We knew as the time went by [that they were North Korean] as we talked a lot more with them”.*

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Interviewees suggested that the North Koreans would be transferred every time the vessel was going into port, having to take all of their belongings with them each time. The North Koreans reportedly took a small boat between vessels.

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*“No, they did not [go to port]. I remember the last time we entered port, they did not disembark. They were transferred to another vessel. They did not enter the port”.*

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*“Never [did the North Koreans go to port]. That’s why every time we were about to enter the port, they asked for our help to buy their necessities or groceries. They asked us to get this and that and they gave us the money”.*

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*“I did not understand the problem or obstacle that caused it. When we say that they were hidden [from the authorities], what was the justification? Why couldn’t they leave the ship? Was there any problem, or were they not accepted there? But, I also did not dare to ask anything about it. But, yeah, it seemed like they tried to hide the North Koreans”.*

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The crew reported that Indonesians and North Koreans got on well on the vessel, at times sharing food and stories and teaching each other their respective languages.

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*“At times, we [The Indonesians] were the ones asking questions. “What is this called?” like that, so we could learn [. . .] other times, they would ask us in return, “What is this called in Indonesian?” Sometimes they wanted to know. Later on, they would remember some of these Indonesian words. So, they learned. Same goes with the Indonesian crews”.*

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*“They [The North Koreans] helped us a lot. In fact, during high seasons, when the catch was huge, sometimes the foreman would only give extra food or snacks to the North Koreans. But our Korean crewmates would often share them with us. For example, they had fruits, apples, and they would cut them into small pieces and give them to us, one for each of us. They would even feed the apples to our mouths”.*

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*“I guess, in terms of work and emotional bond, it was us [the Indonesians - when asked who did the North Koreans get on better with]. They said they “love all the Indonesian crewmates” - they saw us as their brothers. So, I feel like they tried to protect us, in some ways. I felt protected [by them]”.*

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Likewise, it was reported that the Chinese and North Korean crew maintained a good relationship, with the North Koreans able to converse in Mandarin. One interviewee stated that one North Korean was able to steer the vessel, and would sometimes take over from senior Chinese crew if they were sleeping.

Crew members also suggested that North Koreans were present on a number of other vessels, some of which they had seen their colleagues transfer on to - including VESSEL K, the fleet associated with VESSEL A and VESSEL B, and the fleet associated with VESSEL D, suggesting there are links between the fleets in this report.

Video footage taken by crew from VESSEL J shows a number of individuals identified by crew as North Koreans. In the clip, the person filming pans to three suspected North Korean crew and in Mandarin says “North Koreans, seumnida” (seumnida is a Korean term used at the end of sentences to show respect). This video, taken during a trans-shipment with an unknown vessel, clearly shows the vessel’s IMO number, identifying the vessel as the VESSEL J. Another video shows a crew member believed to be North Korean wearing company branded overalls, to whom the cameraman says in Mandarin “Hey you, North Korean, seumnida” (**Image 2**). Crew have also confirmed that North Koreans can be seen in other footage submitted, including an instance in which one individual suspected of being North Korean can be seen butchering a shark (**Image 3**).

**Image 2 - Reported North Korean crew member wearing (redacted) company branded overalls on VESSEL J**



**Image 3 - Reported North Korean crew member butchering a shark on VESSEL J**



## VESSEL K

One crew member was interviewed from VESSEL K who was on board the vessel for thirteen months. His time was reportedly split between two vessels, VESSEL K and another vessel which does not feature in this report, spending approximately 19 months at sea in total from December 2020.

When asked about the nationality of his fellow crew on VESSEL K, the interviewee stated that there were five North Koreans on board. He said that he was told directly by a North Korean that he was from North Korea, speaking in a mix of Mandarin and Korean. He believed that the North Korean crew had been on the vessel for six years, but had reason to believe they had remained on board after he departed. This was based on a video call conversation with a friend who was in Mauritius as part of his work on a Taiwanese longliner who stated that the North Koreans had only returned home relatively recently at the time of the call in 2024 (which aligns with other testimony suggesting that the North Koreans returned home in late 2023).

It was reported that efforts were made to conceal the North Koreans on board, transferring them between vessels at sea, including to an unspecified vessel from the fleet to which VESSEL A and VESSEL B are part of. It was stated however that on at least one occasion the North Koreans did come on shore, suggesting that they subverted port controls by jumping a fence. It was also stated that the North Koreans were attacked by Indonesians who held grudges about their treatment on the vessel.

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*“They weren’t allowed to dock [ . . . ] they were transferred to a collecting vessel. They were ordered to be on standby on the collecting vessel [ . . . ] they were transferred to a big vessel, VESSEL A”.*

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*“When they docked, they were hit by Indonesians. For Indonesians, we would only focus on working during working hours, not doing other things. We didn’t want to fight, but when we arrived on the shore, ‘I still remember what you did’”.*

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The crew member stated that the North Koreans could be harsh towards the Indonesian crew, and that he had a fight with a North Korean which resulted in the interviewee being hit with a metal bar.

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*“They treated Indonesian crews who just arrived the way they pleased. Saying rude words, shouting.”*

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*“Their treatment [of the Indonesians] was bad in the beginning when we didn’t know how to work [ . . . ] I also fought with the North Koreans. How do I say it? They couldn’t hold it [refrain from complaining]. When Indonesians felt annoyed, we could hold it. We wouldn’t directly talk about it. We held it first. Just let it be. They were different. If they felt annoyed, they would directly talk about it. If they couldn’t talk about it, they would try to pick a fight. I fought with a North Korean. My head was bleeding. He threw an iron bar at me”.*

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Further evidence of the presence of North Koreans on board the vessel exists in the form of a video received from a crew member that appears to show a stand off between VESSEL K (identified by its IMO number which was visible in the video) and a group of Somali fishers. In the video, warning shots are fired towards the Somali vessel by someone suspected by EJF to be a hired guard (which is common on longliners operating in the Indian Ocean). In the video, at least one individual can be heard speaking in Korean, asking “is the guy carrying a gun?” (저 새끼 총 집지 않았어?) and “how many people are there?” (저기 배 사람들 얼마나 많이 있나?). In the video, two individuals identified by crew as North Korean can be seen, one of whom approaches the hired guard, and one who appears to be armed himself (**Image 4**).



**Image 4 - An armed crew member, reported to be from North Korea, on board VESSEL K**



## **VESSEL L**

One crew member was interviewed from VESSEL L, who was on board the vessel between March 2019 and August 2021.

In the initial interview, when asked about the nationalities of his fellow crew members, the interviewee responded “Indonesia, the Philippines, North Korea”. The interviewee also described links between VESSEL L’s fleet and VESSEL D and VESSEL E’s fleet, who are also suspected to have used North Korean labour.

EJF investigators also identified a video posted on a social media platform in September 2021 which showed a number of crewmates sitting around a table, eating and drinking, reportedly taken on board VESSEL L. The caption describes that it is a birthday celebration, and explicitly references the presences of North Korean crew at the table. It should be noted that the video was uploaded from an account that had also posted a video purportedly taken on board VESSEL B, another vessel suspected of using North Korean labour.



A tuna jumping in the Indian Ocean. © EJF

## IUU fishing and human rights abuses associated with Chinese tuna longliners in the Indian Ocean

The suspected use of North Korean labour on board Chinese tuna longliners in the Indian Ocean occurs within the broader context of illegality and abuses associated with the fleet. A 2024 EJF report<sup>21</sup> that documented the extent of IUU fishing and human rights abuses on board China's distant-water fleet in the region found pervasive and fleet-wide issues. All of the 44 fishers who worked on board China's tuna fleet in the SWIO reportedly experienced or witnessed some form of IUU fishing and/or human rights abuses. Of those interviewed, 80% had reported shark finning, 59% reported the deliberate capture and/or injury of vulnerable marine megafauna, 100% reported abusive working and living conditions, 96% excessive overtime and 55% physical violence. Furthermore, between 2017 and 2023, four deaths were reported by interviewees on board Chinese tuna longliners, including one suspected suicide of a crew member said to have thrown himself overboard.

A number of the vessels included in this briefing have been associated with IUU fishing or human rights abuses, either through interviews conducted with crew by EJF or via external parties, such as other NGOs. The details of these offences are listed below in **Table 2**.

Vessel	Alleged IUU fishing offences	Alleged human rights offences
VESSEL A	Shark finning Capture of marine megafauna	Deception (related to wages) Document retention Physical abuse Excessive overtime
VESSEL B	Deliberate capture and/or injury of vulnerable marine megafauna Fishing in a prohibited area	Deception (related to wages) Document retention Physical abuse Verbal abuse Excessive overtime
VESSEL C	Shark finning Deliberate capture and/or injury of vulnerable marine megafauna	Deception (related to wages) Document retention Physical abuse Verbal abuse Excessive overtime
VESSEL D	Shark finning Deliberate capture and/or injury of vulnerable marine megafauna	Deception (related to wages) Document retention Verbal abuse Excessive overtime
VESSEL K	Shark finning Fishing for prohibited species	Deception (related to wages) Document retention Physical abuse Verbal abuse Excessive overtime

**Image 5 - A dolphin with its head removed, reportedly taken on board VESSEL D**

**Image 5**, which was reportedly taken on VESSEL D, shows a dolphin with its head removed. The crew member who shared the image reported that the dolphin was deliberately targeted as it was eating bait meant for target species. Once caught, the dolphin's teeth were apparently taken to make jewellery.



## Potential supply chains of vessels linked to North Korean labour

### Potential supply chain links to the EU and the UK

Under the auspices of DG SANTE (the European Commission's Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety), the EU publishes a list of non-EU establishments that are authorised to export to the EU, which includes the names of some fishing vessels that seafood is sourced from. While this list pertains to food hygiene and a vessel's presence on the list does not suggest an active supply from that vessel, it can serve as a useful proxy to indicate that seafood from a given vessel may be entering the EU market.

Of the 12 vessels included in this briefing, four are listed on the authorised establishments list.

#### Vessels suspected of using North Korean labour which are authorised to export fish to the EU

Vessel name	Approval number
VESSEL C	REDACTED
VESSEL D	REDACTED
VESSEL E	REDACTED
VESSEL F	REDACTED

The UK's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs similarly publishes a list of "Establishments approved to export animals and animal products to Great Britain".<sup>22</sup> Again, of the 12 vessels mentioned in this report, the same four vessels appear on this list, updated as of 11 December 2024. Given that the approval numbers replicate those of the EU's list, it is likely the UK version is a replica of the EU's.

#### Vessels suspected of using North Korean labour which are authorised to export fish to the UK

Vessel name	Approval number
VESSEL C	REDACTED
VESSEL D	REDACTED
VESSEL E	REDACTED
VESSEL F	REDACTED



Port Louis, Mauritius. Credit: Lee (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

## Potential supply chain links to key Asian market states

Using the Starboard platform's 'likely trans-shipment'<sup>23</sup> detection algorithm, EJF has analysed which collection vessels (known as reefers) the catching vessels referenced in this briefing potentially encountered and transferred fish to, as well as the ports these reefers travelled to between May 2020<sup>24</sup> and September 2024. In doing so, potential supply chain links can be inferred. In total, five unique reefers were suspected of receiving fish from vessels potentially using North Korean labour. Following these interactions, the reefers travelled to key market states in Asia including Japan, Taiwan and South Korea - see below for full details.

### Details of trans-shipment and potential end-markets

Name	Market states visited by reefers after interactions <sup>25</sup>
VESSEL A	Japan; South Korea; Taiwan
VESSEL B	Japan; South Korea; Taiwan
VESSEL C	Japan; South Korea; Taiwan
VESSEL D	Japan; South Korea; Taiwan
VESSEL E	Japan; South Korea; Taiwan
VESSEL F	Japan; South Korea; Taiwan
VESSEL G	Japan; South Korea; Taiwan
VESSEL H	Japan; South Korea; Taiwan
VESSEL I	Japan; South Korea; Taiwan
VESSEL J	Japan; South Korea; Taiwan
VESSEL K	Japan; South Korea; Taiwan
VESSEL L	Japan; South Korea; Taiwan

## Conclusion

This briefing has provided evidence that indicates the use of North Korean labour on board Chinese tuna longliners operating in the Indian Ocean between 2019 and 2024, which if verified would likely indicate a breach of UN sanctions. The testimony received from Indonesian and Filipino crew members suggests that concerted efforts were made to hide the presence of North Koreans on these vessels, and that those North Koreans on board were forced to work for as many as 10 years at sea - in some instances without ever stepping foot on land. This would constitute forced labour of a magnitude that surpasses much of that witnessed in a global fishing industry already replete with abuse.

The use of North Korean labour occurs within the broader context of a Chinese distant-water fishing fleet that is blighted by IUU fishing and forced labour. Five of the vessels highlighted in this report have been accused of various infractions including shark finning, as well as other indicators of forced labour such as deception related to wages, withholding documents, and physical and verbal abuse.

The alleged forced labour detailed in this briefing was enabled by failures in fisheries management and port controls. Flag states, and Regional Fisheries Management Organisations must collectively and urgently enshrine transparency measures such as mandatory transmission of AIS signals, and better regulate or eliminate practices such as trans-shipment at sea - which allow vessels to operate for long periods of time out of sight of authorities. Furthermore, port states - as integral points at which crew can access authorities - must be well-equipped to identify and intervene in cases of forced labour, providing safe and anonymous avenues through which they can communicate with crew and ensure their wellbeing.



Fish being processed on board a Chinese tuna longliners in the Indian Ocean. © EJF

- 1 OHCHR. 2024. Forced labour by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/korea-republic/forced-labour-democratic-peoples-republic-korea-en.pdf>.
- 2 Human Rights Watch. 2024. North Korea: Events of 2023. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/north-korea#81c309>.
- 3 US Department of State. 2022. 2022 Trafficking in Person Report: North Korea. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-trafficking-in-persons-report/north-korea/>.
- 4 The Outlaw Ocean Project. 2024. The North Koreans behind Global Seafood. Available at: <https://www.theoutlawocean.com/investigations/china-the-superpower-of-seafood/the-north-koreans-behind-global-seafood/>.
- 5 EJF. 2022. The ever-widening net. Available at: <https://ejfoundation.org/reports/the-ever-widening-net-mapping-the-scale-nature-and-corporate-structures-of-illegal-unreported-and-unregulated-fishing-by-the-chinese-distant-water-fleet>.
- 6 EJF. 2024. Tide of Injustice. Available at: <https://ejfoundation.org/reports/tide-of-injustice-exploitation-and-illegal-fishing-on-chinese-vessels-in-the-southwest-indian-ocean>.
- 7 See: L'express.mu. 2022. PIO: arrestation de six clandestins nord-coréens sur un bateau chinois. Available at: <https://express.mu/s/article/416661/pio-arrestation-six-clandestins-nord-coreens-sur-un-bateau-chinois>; Le Matinal. 2022. Six North Koreans arrested in Mauritius. Available at: <https://english.lematinal.media/six-north-koreans-arrested-in-mauritius/> (N.B. The vessel is incorrectly identified as 'Philippine-flagged' in this report).
- 8 Despite multiple inquiries to confirm whether these individuals were returned to the vessel or repatriated to North Korea, EJF have not received responses from Mauritius' Ministry of Blue Economy, Marine Resources, Fisheries, and Shipping.
- 9 This refers to the earliest date any of the interviewed fishers were on board, and the latest date that any of the fishers were on board. There may be periods between the start and end date that no fishers were on board the vessel.
- 10 No crew were interviewed on VESSEL B, however based on the weight of additional evidence available it has been included in this report.
- 11 UN sanctions: see UN Security Council Resolution 2375 (2017), 11 September 2017, Doc. no. S/RES/2375 (2017), <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/2375-%282017%29>, para. 17. EU sanctions: see Council Decision (CFSP) 2016/849 of 27 May 2017 concerning restrictive measures against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and repealing Decision 2013/183/CFSP, <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dec/2016/849/oj>, Art. 26a(1).
- 12 UN sanctions: see UN Security Council Resolution 2397 (2017), 22 December 2017, Doc. no. S/RES/2397 (2017), <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/2397-%282017%29>, para. 8. EU sanctions: see Council Decision 2016/849, Art. 26a(5).
- 13 UN sanctions: see UN Security Council Resolution 2371 (2017), 22 December 2017, Doc. no. S/RES/ 2371 (2017), <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/s/res/2371-%282017%29>, para 9.
- 14 Council Decision (CFSP) 2016/849. Article 9a. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3AA02016D0849-20240730>
- 15 Tariff Act of 1930 (as amended), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/COMPS-8183/pdf/COMPS-8183.pdf>, s. 307.
- 16 North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act 2016 (NKSPEA) (as amended), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/COMPS-11985/pdf/COMPS-11985.pdf>, s. 302A.
- 17 NKSPEA (as amended), s. 104(g)(1)(c). See also 31 CFR 510.201(a)(3)(ix)(C).
- 18 NKSPEA (as amended), s. 104(b)(1)(L); Executive Order 13722 of March 15, 2016 Blocking Property of the Government of North Korea and the Workers' Party of Korea, and Prohibiting Certain Transactions with Respect to North Korea, <https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2016-06355>, s. 2(a)(iv). See also 31 CFR 510.201(a)(3)(viii)(L).
- 19 NKSPEA (as amended), s. 104(g)(1)(A)(i)(I). See also 31 CFR 510.201(a)(3)(ix)(A)(1).
- 20 NKSPEA (as amended), ss. 104(a)(5) and 304(b)(2). See also 31 CFR 510.201(a)(3)(vii)(E).
- 21 EJF. 2024. Tide of Injustice. Available at: <https://ejfoundation.org/reports/tide-of-injustice-exploitation-and-illegal-fishing-on-chinese-vessels-in-the-southwest-indian-ocean>.
- 22 Available at: <https://www.data.gov.uk/dataset/595901f1-b613-475e-a32b-c02c0085675d/establishments-approved-to-export-animals-and-animal-products-to-great-britain>
- 23 A likely trans-shipment "means a fishing vessel and a fish carrier have had an encounter that is a minimum of 1 hour to maximum of 6 days". See: <https://help.starboard.nz/en/articles/8407016-how-are-likely-transshipments-defined>
- 24 This is the date from which vessel AIS transmissions are available from on the Starboard vessel tracking platform.
- 25 A country has been included in here if one of the reefers suspected of involvement in a trans-shipment travelled there after meeting the listed fishing vessel.

**Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF)**

Gensurco House, 3-5 Spafield Street  
London, EC1R 4QB, UK  
tel: +44 (0) 207 239 3310

[info@ejfoundation.org](mailto:info@ejfoundation.org), [ejfoundation.org](http://ejfoundation.org)  
Registered charity No. 1088128



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