

Diplomat punched at UN human rights meeting

Julian Ryall, Tokyo

13 Mar 2012

South Korean politicians scuffled with a North Korean diplomat on Monday at a United Nations meeting convened in Geneva to discuss allegations of human rights abuses in North Korea.

A delegation of four South Korean politicians confronted So Se-pyong, Pyongyang's ambassador to its mission in the Swiss city, after he dismissed a UN report critical of North Korea's record on human rights. So said his government "roundly rejects this useless interpretation," which had been "fabricated by hostile elements." He also demanded that the UN not renew the mandate of Marzuki Darusman, the special rapporteur on human rights issues.

The report stated that between September 2011 and January 2012, the rights of North Korea citizens "continued to deteriorate."

Headed by Kim Hyung-oh, the South Korean delegation chanted "Do not oppress defectors" and "Do not tell China to repatriate defectors," according to Yonhap News.

As So attempted to leave the chamber, the two sides briefly clashed before security officials intervened to separate them.

The meeting of the UN's Human Rights Council, with some 500 delegates present, was delayed for several minutes as a result of the scuffle.

The issue of North Koreans who have crossed into China to escape the regime has become a major issue in South Korea in recent weeks. That been heightened by plans by China - which insists the defectors are economic migrants rather than victims of persecution - to repatriate around 30 North Koreans that have been arrested in the border zone.

Human rights groups say any defectors that are returned to North Korea are likely to end up in its extensive system of labour camps.

"The repatriation of North Korean defectors is not just a matter concerning Korean people, but a matter of the infringement of universal human values," said Kim.

"It is regrettable that the Chinese authorities have not changed their attitude, even though they know what kind of situations North Korean defectors could face when they are sent back to the North," he added.

In the UN meeting, the French delegate stated that "serious and massive violations" of human rights had occurred in the North and expressed concern "at the deteriorating human rights situation noted in the UN expert's report, including sending many people to prison for political reasons."

The EU and the United States noted their concerns, although Cuba, Zimbabwe and Syria claimed that the report is an attempt by Western nations to undermine North Korea.

Separately, Japan has decided to extend its sanctions against North Korea for another year as there has been no progress in efforts to resolve the issue of Japanese nationals abducted by North Korea.

The sanctions include banning all imports from North Korea and all exports to the country.