Are North Korean Military Construction Workers Getting Sent to the DLNR?

The establishment of diplomatic relations between the DPRK and the Donbass republics has brought some implications, including negotiations on the restoration of areas destroyed by the Kyiv regime with the participation of North Korean construction workers.

On June 17, the head of the Ministry of Regional Development of the Russian Federation A. Chekunkov stated in an interview with a Russian newspaper that the DPRK "asks to increase the number of quotas for the education of its students in Russia. They are interested in specialties in information technology. Professions in construction are also in demand." Although students were involved, this wording was understood in the West as a willingness to import labor under the guise of students who would "study and practice" in Moscow institutions, and not only there.

On July 18, Russian Ambassador to the DPRK Alexander Matsegora said in an interview to the Russian media that "highly qualified, diligent Korean construction workers ready to work in the most difficult conditions will be a great help in solving the tasks of reconstructing social, infrastructural, and industrial facilities destroyed by the retreating Ukronazis" in the DPR and the LPR. The ambassador also pointed out that North Korean metallurgical and transportation enterprises, established with technical assistance of the USSR, still use equipment manufactured by Donbass factories. Therefore, the DPRK is very interested in the products and components manufactured there to modernize its own production base.

Later, Pyongyang confirmed its readiness to supply Donetsk and Lugansk with magnesite clinker, which has been used as a refractory material for the blast furnaces of Donbass metallurgical plants since Soviet times, and the DPR and LPR can offer North Korea wheat supplies when it needs food. According to the Russian ambassador, trade
between the Donbass republics and the DPRK can be hampered in the conditions of international sanctions, but these problems are quite solvable.

On hearing this, the anti-Pyongyang propaganda in the guise of the notorious Daily NK held its own investigation and, citing unnamed sources, reported that although the order has not yet been issued, the North Korean authorities "seem very determined to send compatriots to Ukraine. Back in July, the companies received instructions from the authorities to send about a thousand construction specialists to the pro-Russian Donbass."

On August 1, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin said in an interview to RBC that a tiler from North Korea could replace two Russian workers of the same specialty. He called the North Korean market "very interesting" but closed, without directly mentioning that the use of labor from North Korea outside the country is prohibited by UN sanctions. The author agrees with this assessment - throughout the country, especially in the Far East, construction workers from the DPRK enjoyed a high reputation due to the plausible correlation between price, quality, and non-crime.

On August 10, similar issues were discussed at a meeting between the DPRK and LPR ambassadors. The parties agreed to actively support each other in exploring promising areas of cooperation in depth.

On August 18, in an interview with RIA News, P. Ilyichev, director of the Russian Foreign Ministry's International Organizations Department, responded to a question about the possible use of North Korean workers to restore the DPR and LPR. According to him, the international restrictions established by the resolutions of the UN Security Council "apply to the member states of the world organization, to which the People's Republics of the Donbass currently do not belong. UN Security Council resolutions do not create obligations, by which other countries could force anyone to comply with certain international restrictions. Russia will certainly not be such a self-proclaimed "Cerberus."

On August 19, Marat Khusnullin said that more construction workers were necessary to restore Russian-controlled areas in Ukraine and that a proposal had already been made from the DPRK: "I would like to say that North Korean workers are very productive in labor terms, some of them work in our country, we know them. They know how to work. And if there are no legal problems, I think it's possible."

Legal problems, however, are very likely to emerge. Western experts believe that the appearance of North Korean workers in the DLNR is a violation of sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council, which has banned the export of North Korean labor. From their point of view, the ban applies to any country, regardless of whether it is recognized by the UN or not, and if it is not recognized, this can generally be interpreted as a violation by the Russian Federation.

From the author's point of view, the likelihood of North Korean construction workers arriving in the DLNR is currently estimated at a conditional 20%, although it may increase against the background of the conflict escalation, as "it all depends on how the old rules are respected in the new era." On the one hand, some progress has been made through the "May veto." On the other hand, outright violation of UN Security Council resolutions is a much more serious step from an international law perspective. The issue of logistics/transport, shelter, and control must also be considered.

The author would like to point out a curious aspect of this problem, which has nevertheless triggered a broad discussion in the West.

It all started with the fact that on August 1, Kremlin Laundress, an anonymous social media, dropped either a fake or an inside report: allegedly, the DPRK through diplomatic channels made it clear to the DPR and the LPR that it was ready to help the republics with military force in the status of volunteers or in accordance with a purported alliance agreement. It could be about the deployment of war-strength (up to 100 thousand men) ground units to the Special Military Operation zone, as well as special tactical units.
For the author, anonymous social media channels spreading the “secrets of the Kremlin court” are a source with about the same degree of validity as the “anonymous informants” of Daily NK, but the hot topic raised a big discussion, including that the talk show by Vladimir Solovyov on Channel One Russia.

The news was eventually legitimized by a reputable media Asia Times. After that, the news reached the Ukrainian media, which began to portray the case as true reality, spitting out in patriotic zeal something like, “Come over, we’ll get all of you dead.”

On August 11, the Russian Foreign Ministry called fake “the allegations circulating on the Internet and picked up by some bloggers and near-expert circles, but the Internet continued to discuss the news at least as a hypothetical thought exercise similar to, “Will the Avengers riding on Godzilla defeat Uchiha Madara riding on the Great Cthulhu.””

For the author, however, there is nothing to discuss yet.

First, given the image the DPRK has in the Russians’ mass consciousness, it is more likely that asking for help from such a regime would hit the Kremlin and show that it is unable to do things on its own.

Second, the involvement of North Korean troops in the Donbass conflict would immediately internationalize it and open the door for similar actions from the other side. Even an attempt to portray North Korean troops as volunteers could entail similar actions on the part of the West, which will greatly exacerbate tensions and prolong the conflict rather than end it.

Third, the emergence of the North Koreans would raise a number of problems ranging from communications (language barrier) to logistics - even US military transport aircraft would not be able to move a group of this size quickly. In addition, the Korean People's Army does not conduct joint exercises with the Russian or other militaries, which presents coordination problems.

Fourth, according to Asia Times experts, the Korean People's Army is trained exclusively for combat on and around the Korean Peninsula. In the 1960s, Pyongyang sent its air force into conflicts in Vietnam and the Middle East, and in the 1980s it sent military advisers to African countries. But in recent years, there has been no regular involvement of North Koreans in foreign operations. Therefore, North Korean special forces in the Donbass will only live in the fantasy of anti-Pyongyang propaganda.

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