

CRACKDOWN ON CRIMINAL ACTIVITY IN DPRK MARKETS

An informed source from within North Korea has reported that authorities are cracking down on illegal trade and cellular-phone use in markets throughout the border region. State security personnel are also vigorously investigating illegal drug trade and human trafficking.

On March 28, a resident of Musan, North Hamkyung Province, spoke over the phone with a reporter from the *Daily NK*. The resident stated, "North Korean authorities said, 'rations would be issued from April, and from now on, life will be good. However, do not trade illegally.'" He added, however, "Who listens when they forbid trade based on ration distribution all the while not giving out any rations?"

The local resident went on to say that authorities are spreading the word, "Do not use cellular phones to sell state secrets . . . if those people who have already used phones come in on their own, they will receive leniency." He also remarked that North Korean authorities have been cracking down on cellphone use in the border region since last year. "Almost every official notice released asserts that promotion of, or turning a blind eye to, illegal drug sales, human trafficking (brokers), or other illegal activity must be reported at once." Last February, authorities raided the home of an official in Hyeryung, seizing illegal drugs.

As party and government authorities addressed these issues directly in speeches, authorities operating under economic investigators, regular police, and security units loaded into cars in the city of Hyeryung and swarmed in on the local market. The raid on the market, according to the informant, was to curtail illegal sales of provisions. In particular, the authorities were seeking to shut down sales of goods manufactured in China and other foreign countries.

Police and security forces complained, “Socialism is being polluted by capitalist ideas as traders make money, leading to a divide between ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’.” The interviewee stated, however, that despite the crackdown, the authorities were able to sense the mood of the traders, picking up on the example set by the market. Most of the goods were confiscated by the security forces. Local traders would come to the security office and pay a fine in order to have their goods released. However, even here, traders had to bribe officials in order to have their property returned.

The interviewee complained that he had sought the return of one carton of cigarettes (10 packs), only to receive but half. He went on to report that when he went to claim his goods, the authorities blatantly told him, “We, too, have to eat and survive.”

Following North Korea’s nuclear test last October, authorities have been propagandizing, “because the world is providing goods and cooperating with us, we can live well from now on,” in order to instill confidence and solidarity in all North Koreans, and to build a ‘military-first’ strong nation. As DPRK authorities deal with the issue of reopening the rationing system, they have gone to lengths to shut down markets, but in the face of ordinary citizens’ want for money, these moves have not been met with favor.