

## **Did North Korea abduct an American student from China in August 2004?**

### ***An American Linguist Disappeared Without a Trace in Yunnan Province China on August 14, 2004***

Brigham Young University student David Sneddon of Providence, Utah disappeared while visiting Southwestern China's Yunnan province on August 14, 2004. Sneddon was a proficient linguist who spoke Mandarin Chinese and Korean as well as English. The 24-year-old had just completed Chinese language studies at the Department of Chinese Languages at Beijing's University of International Relations before he set off to hike in southwestern China.

Sneddon was last seen at a Korean restaurant in Zhongdian, a town renamed Shangri-La in 2001. A Korean-Chinese woman is said to own and operate the restaurant. She said that David visited the restaurant two times in his short stay in their town. There is no apparent link between the restaurant and North Korea. In fact, the restaurant takes pains to identify itself as a South Korean oasis in southwestern China, to attract South Korean tourists. Over 130,000 South Korean tourists visit Yunnan annually. When Sneddon ate there in 2004 it had a small South Korean flag displayed on one of its signs; in the years since, it has installed a large South Korean flag over its front door and even features the South Korean flag on its chopstick wrappers.

Chinese police officials were unable to find evidence of Sneddon's death but nevertheless theorized he died by falling off a trail while hiking through a gorge. This is unlikely; Sneddon had extensive hiking and backpacking experience in much rougher terrain, and witnesses reported seeing him after he had hiked through the gorge. His parents were able to hike the gorge with no difficulty themselves when they visited the region weeks later. Local witnesses also told investigators that Sneddon understood the culture and languages of the region too well to get lost. When he left the restaurant, he was on his way back to the youth hostel where he was staying and his backpack was found there, so his disappearance occurred shortly after he left the restaurant. No physical evidence of David Sneddon has been found in China; his passport has never been used; and his personal effects have not been found in the seven years since his disappearance. This is highly unusual; David Sneddon's case is the *only* unexplained disappearance of an American citizen traveling in China.<sup>1</sup>

### ***North Korean Activities in and around Yunnan at the Time of Sneddon's Disappearance***

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<sup>1</sup> Information obtained from the State Department by journalist Claudia Rosett.

Yunnan Province is a recognized thoroughfare for North Korean refugees attempting to escape to Southeast Asia.<sup>2</sup> As escape routes in northeastern China have been monitored more rigorously, refugees have increasingly sought escape routes to Southeast Asia, travelling across China and through Yunnan to the borders of Thailand, Laos, and Burma. North Korean agents have also been known to follow in pursuit of refugees escaping through Southwest China. North Korean agents operate in Yunnan province with the cooperation of the Chinese government to capture and repatriate North Korean refugees.<sup>3</sup>

Seven months before Sneddon disappeared—in January 2004—North Korean defector Kang Byong-sop disappeared from the Chinese-Laotian border after escaping from North Korea with documents revealing the regime's biological and chemical experimentation on political prisoners.<sup>4</sup> Mr. Kang's oldest son survived an abduction attempt two weeks earlier by North Korean agents in Bangkok.<sup>5</sup>

There are also other more sensitive connections between Yunnan province and North Korea. North Korean workers are assembling missiles and constructing underground military facilities at a secret site about 315 miles NNW of Rangoon in Burma, across the border from Yunnan.<sup>6</sup> According to the Burmese newspaper, *The Irrawaddy*, in 2004 North Koreans were operating in Burma and Yunnan officials were accepting numerous invitations to visit Pyongyang.<sup>7</sup> A group of North Korean military personnel transited Kunming airport on their way to Burma in May 2011; they may have completed some training at the Chinese military training center there.

By 2004, North Korea and Burma had established a secret relationship to promote high-level trade and military exchanges.<sup>8</sup> Burma and North Korea severed official diplomatic relations in 1983 after North Korean terrorist agents detonated a bomb at a Burmese monument in an attempt to assassinate South Korean President Chun Doo Hwan. Although the official diplomatic relationship was not restored until 2007, the two countries engaged in significant informal relations from about 1993 until 2007. China

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<sup>2</sup> David S. Lee, *North Korean Human Rights: A Story of Apathy, Victims, and International Law*, STAN. J. OF EAST ASIAN AFFAIRS, Vol. 4, Num 2 at 111 (2004).

<sup>3</sup> Yoo Gwan Hee, *North Korea Taking Fight to China*, DAILY NK, July 07, 2010, available at <http://www.dailynk.com/english/read.php?cataId=nk01500&num=6586>.

<sup>4</sup> Robin Gedye,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/northkorea/1454112/Chinese-agents-seize-N-Korean-defector.html>

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> *Alleged North Korean Involvement in Missile*, Embassy Rangoon cable, Aug. 27, 2004, available at: <http://wikileaks.l0cal.com/cable/2004/08/04RANGOON1100.html>; *Burma: Rumors of Construction of a Nuclear Reactor*, Embassy Rangoon cable, Jan. 20, 2004, available at: <http://wikileaks.l0cal.com/cable/2004/01/04RANGOON88.html>

<sup>7</sup> *What is Pyongyang up to in Kachin State?*, THE IRRAWADDY, April 2004, available at [http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art\\_id=941&page=1](http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=941&page=1).

<sup>8</sup> See Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control, *North Korea Missile Update - 2005*, available at <http://www.wisconsinproject.org/countries/nkorea/missileupdate2005.html>

was also reportedly working behind-the-scenes during this time to promote cooperation between Burma and North Korea.<sup>9</sup> In 1998, Burma reportedly bought several 130mm field guns from North Korea.<sup>10</sup> Then in June 1999, the Director of Procurement of the Burmese Armed Forces made an unofficial visit to Pyongyang.<sup>11</sup> Another Burmese government delegation secretly visited North Korea again in November 2000 for high-level talks with the North Korean People's Armed Forces Ministry.<sup>12</sup> Then, In June 2001, North Korea sent a high-ranking delegation to Rangoon to discuss further military cooperation.<sup>13</sup> Military discussions continued to escalate through 2002 and 2003.<sup>14</sup> In 2003 there were several significant developments:

1. 15 to 20 North Korean technicians were spotted at the Monkey Point naval base near Rangoon and at a Defense Ministry guesthouse;<sup>15</sup>
2. There was a secret meeting in Rangoon to discuss Burma's desire to purchase short-range ballistic missiles;<sup>16</sup>
3. Technicians from North Korea's Daesong Economic Group, part of the bureau responsible for earning foreign currency, were seen in Rangoon; and
4. North Koreans were seen unloading "large crates and heavy construction equipment" from trains near two secret Burmese defense factories.<sup>17</sup>

### ***North Korean Security Officials May Have Had Reason to Suspect Sneddon***

It is possible that North Korean or Chinese security forces may have suspected that David was connected to efforts to rescue North Korean refugees or to look into illicit activities in the region. A friend of David's had attended Yanbian University of Science and Technology in Yanji, with a small grant from Duke University to study Korean minorities living near the North Korean border. He requested a visa to enter North Korea as part of his studies, was denied the visa, and soon thereafter was asked to leave China. While arranging for transportation home from China, he stayed with David Sneddon in Beijing for five days.

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<sup>9</sup> *Burma-North Korea/Arms*, VOICE OF AMERICA, (Aug. 4, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Selth, *Burma's North Korean Gambit: A Challenge to Regional Security?* at p. 19, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No 154. (2004).

<sup>11</sup> *N. Korea, Burma explore military cooperation*, KYODO, Seoul, July 3, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> *NK, Burma Increase Military Cooperation*, KOREAN INFORMATION SERVICE, July 3, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Selth, *Burma's North Korea Gambit*, p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Bertil Lintner, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, July 10, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Selth, *Burma's North Korea Gambit*, p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

### ***Sneddon's Case Fits North Korea's Modus Operandi***

US Government personnel involved in the investigation of the incident told HRNK that no one at the time suggested North Korea might have been involved. In all of the cases of successful North Korean abductions, however, that is naturally the case. To question whether North Korea might have been involved, one would have to be aware of the history of North Korean abductions, their method of operating, their interest in linguists, the structure of the espionage services, how agents win favor with Kim Jong-il, and their training objectives—obtaining native speakers who can educate infiltrators so that they can enter targeted countries without being noticed.

It is only from this perspective that anyone can suspect that the Sneddon disappearance might have a link to North Korea.

As with most of the abductions carried out by North Korean agents, Sneddon disappeared without a trace and his family has not heard from him since; this tends to indicate that his disappearance was caused by trained professionals.

Other patterns similar to known North Korean abductions are reflected in the Sneddon case. The history of North Korean espionage is replete with examples of operations conducted in and around restaurants: In 1977, North Korean agents lured Yutaka Kume to a restaurant and abducted him; in 1980 Tadaaki Hara was abducted from a noodle shop in Osaka so a North Korean agent could use his identification papers; in 1984, Megumi Yao was sent to Japan to open a café to facilitate North Korean intelligence operations near a US and JSDF base. Pastor Kim Dong-Shik also disappeared after being lured to a restaurant in China—North Korean agents had lured him there.<sup>18</sup>

Some surmise that the number of North Korean abductions that occur in early August are a kind of “calling card,” as though the practice of abduction is a kind of gift to Kim Jong-il in celebration of national independence day in Pyongyang. Sneddon disappeared on the day before independence day.

It is also possible that in 2004, North Korea may have been looking for an opportunity to bring an American speaker of English to Pyongyang. Just a month earlier, on July 9, 2004, one of only two remaining American teachers of English, Charles Jenkins, was reluctantly permitted to leave North Korea.<sup>19</sup> The high-profile loss of Jenkins left North Korea with Joseph Dresnok as the last surviving American in North Korea and Dresnok was in “failing health.”<sup>20</sup> Both Dresnok and Jenkins speak with heavy Southern rural regional accents. If North Korea were interested in having an American English teacher,

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<sup>18</sup> See The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, *Taken!: North Korea's Criminal Abduction of Citizens of Other Countries*, at 30–31 (2011) (describing the abduction of pastor Kim Dong-Shik).

<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.* at 95 (describing North Korea's attempts to prevent Jenkins from leaving).

<sup>20</sup> Mark Russell, *An American in North Korea, Pledging Allegiance to the Great Leader*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 19, 2006.

Sneddon would have fit the bill well, since he spoke the dialect commonly used in the mid-west. Called “Standard Midwestern,” this dialect is regarded as the most widely used dialect in America.

***Prior to Sneddon’s Disappearance, North Korea had Threatened to Take Action Against Americans Who Rescued Refugees***

In addition to the release of Jenkins in July, two other developments inflamed North Korea's anger toward the U.S. in the summer of 2004.

First, on July 21, the U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed the North Korean Human Rights Act (HR 4011, later to become Public Law 108-333), which condemned North Korea for its human rights violations, set up new procedures for assisting North Korean refugees, and established an office headed by a presidential envoy with the rank of ambassador to address North Korean human rights concerns.

The North Korean propaganda organ, called the Korean Central News Agency, complained, “In the bill the U.S. raised the ‘offer of information about abduction issue’, ‘transparency of humanitarian aid’, ‘freedom of religion’, etc. as preconditions for ‘humanitarian aid’ to the DPRK,” and said, “This is also part of the pre-arranged preparations to destroy the DPRK's system.” North Korea threatened, “The U.S. is well advised to stop its rash acts, pondering over the grave consequences to be entailed by its extremely hostile moves to isolate the DPRK.”<sup>21</sup>

A week later, on July 28, the Government of Vietnam cooperated with South Korea and permitted 468 North Korean refugees to go to Seoul. They had escaped from North Korea, crossed China, made it through the province of Yunnan, and arrived in Vietnam seeking asylum. This was the largest mass defection from North Korea since the end of the Korean War. Vietnam’s role in this transfer was strongly condemned by North Korea: “Vietnam self-exposed that it can stoop to any perfidious action, discarding elementary sense of obligation and morality between the states, in order to meet its own interests.”<sup>22</sup> North Korea withdrew its ambassador from Vietnam, cancelled bilateral economic talks with South Korea, and denounced the South Korean government as “wicked terrorists.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> “DPRK FM Refutes U.S. Accusation against It over "Human Rights Issue" (<http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2004/200407/news07/28.htm>) Pyongyang, July 27, 2004. (KCNA)

<sup>22</sup> U.S. and S. Korean Authorities Hit for Their Allurement and Abduction of North Koreans Abroad (<http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2004/200408/news08/04.htm>) Pyongyang, Aug. 3, 2004. (KCNA)

<sup>23</sup> Klingner, Bruce. “The Tortuous North Korean Refugee Triangle.” Asia Times Online. Sep. 22, 2004. Accessed: May 26, 2011. Available at: <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/FI22Dg01.html>.

After the rescue of the refugees from Vietnam, North Korea said, “The DPRK will certainly make non-governmental organizations in some countries pay for their flesh traffic worldwide as they have been engrossed in threatening, alluring and trading off DPRK citizens under the signboard of humanitarianism at the instigation of the U.S. The U.S. seems to calculate that it can use the issue of 'defectors' for bringing down the DPRK as it did erstwhile East European countries.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> U.S. and S. Korean Authorities Hit for Their Allurement and Abduction of North Koreans Abroad (<http://www.kcna.co.jp/item/2004/200408/news08/04.htm>) Pyongyang, Aug. 3, 2004. (KCNA)