**Surgery Reveals North Korean Defector Is Riddled With Parasitic Worms**

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https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/17/world/asia/north-korean-defector-parasitic-worms.html?mtrref=undefined&gwh=56F83FEBDF00474BA1AF52878BD1F0E2&gwt=pay

SEOUL, South Korea — A North Korean soldier’s bold attempt to defect by crossing the heavily guarded border with South Korea galvanized attention this week.

But perhaps more surprising was the disclosure by surgeons struggling to save his life of what they found while repairing his intestinal wounds: dozens of parasitic worms, some as long as 11 inches.

“In my 20 years as a surgeon, I have only seen something like this in a medical textbook,” said Dr. Lee Cook-jong, a lead surgeon.

The discovery opened a window on the dire conditions in North Korea, including poor hygiene and nutrition. The news shocked many people in prosperous South Korea.

Surgeons raced to save the North Korean soldier, whose name and rank have not been released, who sustained [serious bullet wounds](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/13/world/asia/north-korea-defector-south.html?_r=0) racing across the border while his own troops fired on him.

“We have found dozens of fully grown parasitic worms in his damaged intestines,’’ said Dr. Lee Cook-jong, a lead surgeon.

“It was a serious parasitic infection.”

During a news briefing this week, Dr. Lee showed photographs of worms as long as 10 or 11 inches.

Experts in parasitic worms were not surprised, however. They said that the finding was consistent with the broad sense of conditions in the isolated, impoverished North.

Defectors to the South have cited the existence of parasites and abysmal nutrition. Because it lacks chemical fertilizers, North Korea still relies on human excrement to fertilize its fields, helping parasites to spread, the experts said.

In a 2014 study, South Korean doctors checked a sample of 17 female defectors from North Korea and found seven of them infected with parasitic worms.

The North Korean soldier drove a jeep into the [Joint Security Area](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/15/world/asia/north-korea-soldier-defected-village.html), one of the most heavily guarded portions of the Demilitarized Zone, on Monday. He then ran across the border to defect to the South while fellow North Korean troops unleashed a hail of rifle and pistol shots trying to stop him.

He collapsed about 55 yards south of the border, bleeding profusely. South Korean officers pulled him to safety, and a United States Black Hawk military helicopter rushed him to a hospital near Seoul, where he underwent a series of surgeries.

His was the most dramatic defection from the North in years, making headlines in South Korea.

But more startling news came from the doctors who were working to clean and patch up his dietary tract, which was torn by bullets.

The soldier’s condition was particularly noteworthy because North Korean soldiers, especially those deployed near the border with South Korea, receive priority in food rationing. Yet, in addition to the parasitic worms, doctors found kernels of corn in his stomach.

South Korea itself was afflicted with widespread parasitic infections through the 1970s, when more than 80 percent of the population carried parasitic worms. After a 9-year-old girl died in 1963 and doctors found more than 1,000 parasitic worms in her body, the country launched a national campaign to eradicate parasites.

Schools collected stool samples from students and distributed anti-parasitic pills. The campaign succeeded: Parasitic infections have become rare in South Korea as hygiene and economic conditions have improved.

More than 30,000 North Koreans have fled to South Korea since a famine killed more than a million people in the North in the 1990s. Since then, international relief agencies have reported widespread malnutrition and stunted growth among many children in the North.

The wounded soldier, who is believed to be in his late 20s, is 5 feet 5 inches tall and weighs 132 pounds. In contrast, an average high school male senior in South Korea is 5 feet 8 inches tall and weighs 154 pounds.