North Korean diplomat ‘has defected and fled’

Sean O’Neill Chief Reporter

A diplomat at the North Korean embassy in London has defected and fled abroad, newspaper reports in South Korea claimed yesterday.

The defection is said to have happened this month and involved an aide who was responsible for monitoring North Korean dissidents in Britain and countering criticism of the communist regime’s human rights record.

If true, the loss will be a major embarrassment to the secretive regime in Pyongyang, which sees London as one of its most significant diplomatic outposts.

The defector will have come from a team of five who work under the ambassador, Hyon Hak Bong, at the embassy of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea — a large detached house on the North Circular Road in Acton, west London.

No defections have previously been reported since it opened in London 13 years ago. Officials from the embassy visited a barber’s in Ealing two years ago to demand the removal of a poster which they believed ridiculed the supreme leader, Kim Jong Un. The barber had put a picture of the dictator in his shop window alongside the caption “Bad Hair Day?”.

The defection was reported in JoongAng Ilbo, which said: “A DPRK diplomat in London is going through procedures to seek asylum in a third country.”

Speculation centred last night on Thae Yong Ho, the most senior figure at the embassy after the ambassador. One of Mr Thae’s key roles was defending the reputation of North Korea and he has often addressed meetings organised by the Communist Party of Great Britain (Marxist-Leninist). His message was that North Korea was a socialist country where everyone was employed, housing was free and children could walk the streets safely day and night. He told one gathering that western media “totally distorted” his country’s image.

John Nilsson-Wright, head of the Asia programme at the foreign affairs think tank Chatham House, said: “There have been reports trailing a defection for some weeks and while there has been no confirmation neither has there been any denial.”

The diplomat is said to have vanished with his wife and children. Dr Nilsson-Wright said that he might have used a holiday in Europe to make his move. He added: “The reasons could be very personal, to do with family or the wish for a better life. Or it may be that they were uneasy about the tougher political climate back at home — perhaps the regime was setting higher targets for the monitoring of dissidents.”

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office declined to comment.