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Member , Free the NK Gulag

September 20, 2011

House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Human Rights

Hello, my name is Kim Hye Sook.

I am a North Korean defector who was incarcerated in political prison camp number 18, Bukchang prison camp, in Bukchang-gun, South Pyongan Province, for 28 years, and in 2009 I escaped North Korea and entered South Korea via China, Laos, and Thailand.

In February of 1975, for reasons that were unknown to me at the time, I was dragged with my parents to the prison camp. I was 13 years old the time. During my incarceration at camp number 18, I lost my grandmother, mother, brother, and my husband.

I only found out after I was out of that that hell on earth, camp number 18, why I was sent to the prison camp – because my grandfather had defected to South Korea during the Korean War, but by then I had nowhere to go to complain about this.

I would like to say that the term ‘kwan-li-so’ in North Korea is a living hell for human beings, a place where people who have committed so-called crimes are sent and incarcerated as a group, and forced to work in manual slave labor.

There are political prison camps where people who have been found guilty of being against Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong-il or those resisting the regime are sent and held, whereas in places like camp number 18 where I was incarcerated in, besides political prisoners those who are guilty of economic crimes are sent along with family members and are forced to work in coal mines.

In camp number 18 in Bukchang where I was imprisoned, the whole prison camp was encircled by 13-foot high electrified fence, and trying to escape through this 3,300 volt electrified fence was unimaginable.

When I first entered the prison camp, we were told to memorize 10 articles/rules of the prison camp, and I still remember it vividly because I remembered them from such an early age. One of the rules was that prisoners were not supposed to know the reason for ending up in the prison camp, and those caught violating this rule will be relentlessly executed by a firing squad.

For young people like me who ended up in the prison camp at a young age, we were given very rudimentary education, and then when we turned 16 or 17, everyone without exception was sent to the coalmines to dig out coal – this goes without saying for the adults as well.

We had to work 16 to 18 hour work days without rest or holidays, and for food, our family of seven was provided only around 10 pounds of corn per month.

I was plagued with hunger from the day I entered the prison camp and until the day I was released. My one wish was to eat just one bowl of white rice for one meal. After I became an adult and during my times of working at the coalmine and walking to and from work, I would look around for anything to eat, and regardless of season it became a habit to scrape or pluck anything that was green and make soup and eat it.

I cannot even begin to describe how many people suffered and died because of starvation in the prison camp, and how many people were killed without reason for not listening to authorities or not showing enough 'repentance', though public executions by firing squad, their bodies riddled with countless bullet holes.

There was a time when I saw the bodies of people who were killed by firing squad who were rolled up in straw mats and carried away in carts, and said to myself, 'even dogs will not die so pitifully'.

In this place where human lives were worth less than those of flies, was where my brother and husband died also. Their deaths were classified as due to accidents, but their deaths were intentional deaths carried out in the atmosphere of the prison camp where there was nothing normal. As a result, I also lost my grandmother, father and mother, and my brother, all of who were sent to camp number 18 with me.

As a result of working in the coalmines I contracted Pneumoconiosis ('black lung'), and faced death many times, but in place of my mother who passed away before me, I vowed to survive and live on and look out after my remaining siblings, and that devotion was what allowed me to survive that hell.

My siblings are still incarcerated at camp number 18. In December of 1974, before our family was sent off to camp number 18, my father was hauled away by the state security bureau, never to be heard from again. I do not know what happened to him, to this day. And even at this moment, there are over 10,000 people who are in camp 18 without knowing the reason why, people who are dying from abuse and lack of rights...

And this is not just happening in camp number 18, but I would like to say that this is the suffering and sadness that 23 millions North Korean citizens are going through and experiencing.

Not only that, but besides the human rights violations going on in North Korea, there is now cruelty and misery inflicted on North Korean refugee women who have escaped North Korea into China, through the terrible situation of human trafficking happening in different places.

After narrowly escaping death and coming out of North Korea and into China and third countries, and then becoming victims of human and sexual trafficking, I can say with authority that the tragic situation of the North Korean refugee women must be told and told again in the international community.

North Korea is a country where in the 21st century, political prison camps are in existence and a society where in the prison camps the lives of human beings are more easily disposed of than those of animals. A society where the whole country is a prison. A society where those who escaped the country in search of freedom are caught and imprisoned and executed, and where those who have escaped become lost people and orphans in the international community. A society where chastity and virginity, which is more precious than life, is sold cheaper than the cheapest of things...

Please end the existence of such a society, and make it into a place where humans can live as people. Please let the people without any rights in North Korea live in freedom and happiness, please get rid of the political prison camps, and please tell those who do not know about freedom, what freedom is about!

I sincerely hope that my earnest pleas will be delivered to the United States Congress, to the United States Government, and to the people of America. I also want to deeply thank the honorable Members of Congress here today who have made it possible for me to speak, as well as to Ms. Suzanne Scholte of the Defense Forum Foundation.

I am encouraged that through my presence here today, by exposing the inhumane atrocities happening in the North Korean political prison camps, the crimes against humanity perpetrated by the North Korean regime can be condemned. I believe that one of the reasons and purposes for my survival from the prison camp was for me to live and be able to be a witness in the U.S. Congress -where order and principles, and human rights are cherished - to what I experienced and saw regarding the lives of the North Koreans who live without any rights,

The fact that I am sitting before you is the sole reason why I had to survive the political prison camp of North Korea, and again I thank Ms. Suzanne Scholte for allowing my wish to come true.