

Berlin Human Rights Congress 2017: Dialogue with North Korea needed

By Daily NK - 2017.12.08 11:19am



**Pic1: (Front, l. to r.): Kwon Eun Kyung (ICNK),
Chang Hye Young (North Korean refugee),
Kim Seung Chul (North Korea Reform Radio);
(Back, l. to r.): Kang Shin Sam (ISFINK), Nicolai Sprekels (Saram)
Image: Christian Koch**

The Institute for Cultural Diplomacy hosted The Berlin Human Rights Congress 2017 on November 24-25. Together with topics including equality issues, international law and crimes against humanity, human rights violations in North Korea were also covered.

The opening speech was given by Nicolai Sprekels, the Chairman of Saram. Saram is a Berlin-based NGO, which focuses on raising awareness of human rights violations in North Korea while also giving defectors a platform to talk

about their stories and experiences in Europe. Sprekels emphasized the issues with information sources on North Korea in Europe, and emphasized the value of the almost 31,000 North Koreans living in the South. "These people are valuable sources and all too often being ignored," he stated.

"Most preconceptions we have about North Korea are untrue and this is why it is so important to talk with defectors about their experiences." Sprekels also noted the delay in information from defectors, as escapes from North Korea can take up to two years and involve passage through several countries. While touching on the potential unification of Korea, Sprekels said that it is in general a valuable approach to learn from the German division and reunification, but added that it is a mistake to compare them directly as the political circumstances of the time were quite different from the current state of the Korean peninsula. He also pointed out that there exists a significant ideological problem. Sprekels emphasized that the Allies of World War II had extensive problems regarding denazification, which will also prove a complicated issue if the North Korean system collapses.

"Because you now have three generations of people that are completely indoctrinated, and who for example believe that the United States started the Korean War," he pointed out.

Sprekels ended his speech with the observation that "simply visiting the DPRK will not help with any of these issues and will only bring false results [...] we need dialogue and as North Korea is very concerned about their image around the world, this is where we can start."

The session was also joined by defector Chang Hye Young, Kim Seung Cheol, Director of Radio Reform NK, Eunkyong Kwon, General Secretary of ICNK and Kang Shin Sam, Chairman of ISFNK.

Chang Hye Young escaped from North Korea in 2013 upon her third attempt and arrived in the South two years later. She talked about the inhumane treatment she experienced in detention facilities run by the State Security Ministry, as well as in a Gyohwaso (a prison run by the People's Safety Ministry).

Chang and her family lived in South Hwanghae Province until 1994. Her father worked as an official for the State Security Ministry, while she trained to be a marathon runner in Pyongyang. "For unknown reasons, my father was dragged into a political prison camp. I still don't know the exact reason for my father's arrest. However, it was thought that my grandfather was in service of the civilian police siding with the South's military during the Korean War and the information was revealed at some point," she explained.

Chang and the remaining family members were sent to a political prison camp in North Hamgyong Province (Camp No. 22). "We all suffered from extreme hunger and forced labor for about two years [...] it was lucky for us that my mother's brother worked at the provincial Ministry of State Security office [in



the same province] and was able to get help," Chang said. In the end, each of her family members was released, except her father, lamenting the fact that she still doesn't "know where he is or what happened to him."

Chang explained how inmates are not allowed to talk to each other, not even with their own family members, who she was soon separated from. Inmates were forced to work from 3:30 AM until 8 or 9 PM and had to continue on with different tasks in their dormitories.

"Our food was only around 30 grams of corn a day [...] and we were told to always keep our heads down," she said. When she left the camp with her family in 1996, each of them were forced to sign a pledge to never tell anyone about their experiences in the camp. During that time the Arduous March was at its peak in North Korea.

"In order to survive, I tried to escape to China in 1998," she explained. In China, Chang was sold to a Chinese man living in a remote area and worked there for about a year, only to be arrested and repatriated back to North Korea by the Chinese authorities. After being interrogated by the State Security Ministry, she managed to escape during her transfer to Changjin by jumping off a train while handcuffed to another inmate. Back in Yanji, China, she was sold to a Chinese man for 8,000 Yuan. Chang explained that it was a comparatively safer way for female defectors from North Korea to survive in China, compared to the other options. She added that her new husband was an alcoholic and a gambling addict who often physically abused her, but following the birth of her daughter in 2003 she tried to continue living in China with him.

Chang was caught again by the Chinese authorities with her daughter. She managed to give her 4-month-old baby to a Chinese broker, who promised to bring her back to her husband. "Years later, I learned that she hadn't arrived at my Chinese home and I still have no clue if she's alive or not," she said. She was sent to a detention house in Onsung and was beaten up by the guards. "I was beaten so terribly that I was not able to stand up," she recalled. After being humiliated and abused by the guards in the detention house, Chang decided to commit suicide by swallowing a pin from another inmate. When the guards found her, she was dragged "by [her] legs to another room [...] and a doctor tried to use an anesthetic, but the chief guard shouted that [she] did not deserve it. The doctor cut [her] stomach open without any anesthetic and removed the pin." Due to the terrible sanitary conditions and malnutrition, Chang's health deteriorated to a critical state, and the surgical wound on her stomach was eventually swarming with maggots.

Chang was sentenced to seven years of imprisonment. "Because of my desperate health conditions, the correctional labor camp that I was sent to [Hamhung Correctional Labor Camp No.9] was reluctant to accept me. If I died in prison, the authorities had to face possible consequences from the

government. At the same time, the guards at the Ministry of People's Security would be in a precarious situation if I died under their jurisdiction. So the guards offered some cigarettes to the camp officials as a bribe," she explained. Chang said that she was sent to a "weak inmates unit" where "the only thing to do is wait for death."

She remembered how one of her inmates, a girl named Yunhee, passed out and was put in a sack by guards and was never seen again. "After witnessing Yunhee's death," she said, "I knew that someday I would face the same situation."

Chang begged the guards to send her to the farming unit. "After three days, they sent me to the farming unit and then I ate everything I could find: grass, worms, frogs, roots and so on. When I found a frog or a worm, I had to swallow it whole, with no chewing [...] I ate a lot of fodder too. The guards put poultry waste and feces in the corn fodder, to deter the inmates from eating it. But we ate it regardless," she said.

Violence and abuse were rife within the prison, Chang recalled, stating that the guards would strike her head with a gunstock, and her jaw turned sideways and her skull was broken at times. "Since my dignity as a human being had been lost long ago, I just took the beatings," she said, adding that even though the physical attacks were endurable to a certain extent, the real torture was being unable to sleep enough.

In February 2011, Chang was released and eventually managed to arrive in South Korea in October 2015 upon her third attempt to escape North Korea. "The only thing left after my 38-year long stay in North Korea is my body covered with all kinds of scars, and my trauma," she said.

The session continued with Kim Seung Chul, Director of North Korea Reform Radio, who worked in Russia as a logger in 1991, and escaped two years later, arriving in South Korea in 1994. He now works as a broadcaster, providing external information to the North Korean people.

Kim stated that last August and September, North Korea Reform Radio conducted interviews with 30 North Koreans who previously worked in foreign countries like China, Mongolia and Russia. "Seven of them had to flee from their worksites due to the extreme work environment and wage exploitation. Although they had escaped, they were still residing in those countries. Six of the thirty escaped to South Korea," he explained.

Noting that most overseas workers come from Pyongyang, he said, "It's because Pyongyang citizens' lives are more stable compared to the rest of the country, and hence, they are seen as more loyal to the government [...] When North Korean citizens volunteer to work abroad, they have to get visas, passports, and tickets for flights or trains. These costs are usually covered by the workers themselves. So, before they even start working, they are already in debt, just because they want to work."

Those who are eventually selected to work in foreign countries must also go through an education process by the Intelligence Office, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Worker's Party. He emphasized that there is barely any information about salaries for the workers. In other cases they would be told that the company went bankrupt and that the managers were not able to pay them anything at all. "During the education process, they are never told about the state fees they will be required to pay, or about their salary," Kim added. The workers are dispatched to countries like China, Russia, Angola, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Indonesia, Kuwait, Libya, Malta, Equatorial Guinea, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Congo, Mozambique, Nigeria, Nepal, Oman, Poland, Qatar, Singapore, South Sudan, Tanzania and the United Arab Emirates. KINU estimated that there were around 30,000 North Koreans working in 2015 and 2016 in Russia alone, while the Russian Federal Statistics Service counted 50,000 North Koreans in 2015. Additionally, the Sejong Institute reported that there were at least 70,000 to 80,000 North Koreans working in China.

Kim elaborated that work contracts are made through either the North Korean authorities or North Korean trade companies. "Of course," he explained, "workers don't get any information like working hours or payment. In many cases, even the companies don't inform the workers. This shows how the North Korean authorities and the state-run companies extort the workers' wages so easily [...] their annual income reaches only \$300 to \$1,000, because the state allocated fee, charges for board and lodging, and other political payments in the name of loyalty funds and so on are deducted from their earnings."

In some cases, North Koreans work between 10-20 hours per day, and are only paid for about 10% of their labor, while managers in Russia, China and Mongolia earn between \$500,000 to \$1,500,000 per year. And even though North Korean workers are exploited and additionally work under harsh conditions, a lot of the money does not stay with the companies themselves, but rather goes to the Worker's Party, the Department of State Security and the cabinet in Pyongyang.

Kim concluded that steps must be taken to help North Koreans who work abroad. "The government must let workers keep their own passports," he said, adding that the contracts with workers must clearly describe the working conditions, while also letting them sign them themselves, free from any interference from the government.

Additionally, the government and each company should ensure workers are being paid through private bank accounts, so that they are aware of how much is taken by the government. But Kim stressed that it is inevitable that these workers will gain access to media such as TV, newspapers or the internet, noting that "they will slowly learn about their rights under such conditions."

Authorities fail to provide food for soldiers prior to December drills

[Video] Female North Korean workers dispatched to summer resorts in China



Daily NK

Questions or comments about this article? Contact us at dailynkenglish@uni-media.net.

RELATED ARTICLES MORE FROM AUTHOR



N. Korean air force calls on pilots to exhibit traits of martyrs



N. Korea orders harsh punishment for consumers of S. Korean cultural content



Kim Jong Un's Lunar holiday order emphasizes rest for workers



N. Korea's January ideological propaganda focuses mainly on nuclear program achievements



Inmates in North Korea's prisons still face dire conditions



N. Koreans quietly speculate about Kim Jong Un's successor

Sign up now!

Subscribe

ARCHIVES

Select Month ▼

Recent Articles



One N. Korean trader's perspective on the reopening of trade

2024.01.23 8:10pm



N. Korean air force calls on pilots to exhibit traits of...

2024.01.23 9:48am



An in-depth look at Kim Jong Un's "two states" narrative: Part...

2024.01.22 5:00pm



N. Korea orders harsh punishment for consumers of S. Korean cultural...

2024.01.22 2:00pm



Kim Jong Un's Lunar holiday order emphasizes rest for workers

2024.01.22 11:19am



N. Korea's January ideological propaganda focuses mainly on nuclear program achievements

2024.01.22 9:00am



Inmates in North Korea's prisons still face dire conditions

2024.01.19 4:00pm



N. Koreans quietly speculate about Kim Jong Un's successor

2024.01.19 3:42pm



N. Korea's police agency chastised for impolite language in reports to...

2024.01.19 11:30am



North Hamgyong Province surveys local population for potential defectors

2024.01.19 10:21am

[Load more >](#)

Most Popular Articles

[Contact Us](#) [Copyright Notice](#) [Donate](#) [Newsletter[^]](#) [RSS Feed](#)

© DailyNK. All Rights Reserved