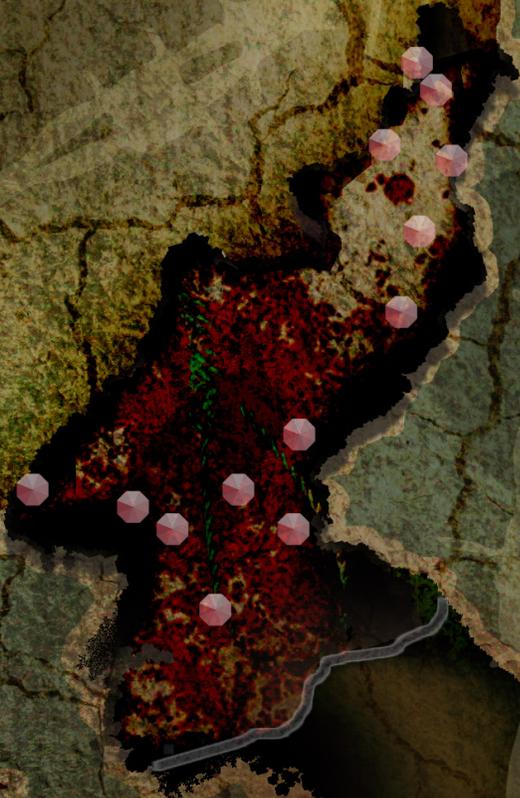


# **NORTH KOREAN POLITICAL PRISON CAMPS**

**BY RADIO FREE ASIA KOREAN SERVICE**



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# North Korean Prison Camps

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# Chapter 1 Prison Camps from Hell

## 1) What are Political Prison Camps?

The North Korean prison camps incarcerate up to three generations of families of people who are accused of opposing the government, as well as Christians and anyone seen as a threat to the Kim family regime. The inmates are completely cut off from North Korean society, which in turn knows little about the camps.

## 2) Testimonies of Former Prisoners

The first witness is Ms. Kim Young-soon, who turned 78 this year. The reason she had to go to a prison camp was because she was friends with leader Kim Jong-il's second wife, Sung Hye-rim. The North Korean authorities seized Young-soon and seven of her family members and confined them in Yodok political prison camp for nine years to prevent her from revealing secrets of Kim Jong-il's private life.

The second witness is Mr. Kang Chul-hwan, a Pyongyang-born third generation Korean Japanese who had been repatriated to North Korea at the age of nine when his grandfather was purged. He was imprisoned at Yodok prison camp with his family for 10 years on a guilt-by-association charge. Kang is author of the prison memoir, 'The Aquariums of Pyongyang' an account of the actual conditions of North Korean prison camps, now works as the president of the North Korea Strategy Center (NKSC).

The third witness is Ms. Kim Hye-sook. While living in Pyongyang she was dragged to Kwan-li-so No. 18 in Puk-chang at age thirteen without any explanation and was imprisoned for 28 years.

Kim Young-soon, who was in Camp No. 15 from 1970-79: "The bodies don't even get covered with straw bags or even a piece of a straw mat. That was our fate. I was dragged there on a guilt-by-association charge and what... they told me come out and stamp on some corn when I couldn't even use my arm because I had fallen from a mulberry tree. So then I had to do it with just one hand... That is what humiliation is all about."

Kang Chul-hwan, who was in Camp No. 15 from 1977-87 : "When I was little I hated my grandfather so much because they said that it was he who committed a crime. But when I came to have some sense, I realized on my own that my grandfather was innocent."

Kim Hye-sook, who was in Camp No. 15 from 1975-2001: "This year will be the 44th year for my younger sibling but we still don't know what the charge is. Once you are in, the first thing you need to remember is not to ask what you are in for."

The common element in the testimonies of these three are the fact that they had to unjustly spend many years living as criminals doing forced labor. They were sent there without a trial and since they didn't know when they were going to be released, pain and fear were that much greater.

According to the late Hwang Jang-yop, the former secretary of the North Korean Workers' Party who defected to South Korea in 1997, the history of the North Korean political prison camps starts with the so-called "August Faction Incident" in 1956. These prison camps were born when the North Korean regime established 'Kwan-li-

so' throughout the country and started locking up people in Deuk-jang mine in Puk-chang Gun, South Pyongan Province to make its people adapt to the regime through harsh labor.

Kim Young-soon describes her time from 1970 to 1979 at Yodok prison camp.

Kim Young-soon: "You don't have any time to talk or see other people. That is hell. The intensity of labor is high and you have to work until night time. When frost falls at night, the guards ring a bell. Then everyone has to take their blankets outside and cover food supplies. People who had once been riding in Mercedes Benz cars, living comfortably under the care of the regime were all there. That truly was hell on earth. You could die any day. You have to go out there at 3:30 in the morning. Lumbermen can break their limbs while cutting trees and die. They can be knocked down or take a wrong step and die. Some eat poisonous plants such water hemlocks or toadstools out of hunger and die, while others get pellagra and die. When you get pellagra, your anus opens up and all the corn you had eaten just comes out. So it is no exaggeration to say that dead bodies cover up the road in the wretched Yodok prison camp."



### 3) North Korea Keeps its Political Prison Camps Secret

Researcher Oh Gyeong-seob from the Sejong Institute in Seoul says North Korean political prison camps isolate a political prisoner and his/her family members for up to three generations in certain mountainous areas. Individuals are housed in communal houses and they live collectively in a group setting under strict rules. For example, there is a set time to report to work in the morning and also to leave work. It is a place where the lives of people are monitored and controlled by rules and regulations.

Most of these prison camps are located in mountainous areas but there are also cases where they build and run camps in a city, like Soo-sung prison camp in the city of Chongjin. No matter where the camp facility is,

outsiders' access is strictly controlled, so it is difficult to know what is going on behind the gates of the camp.

Information regarding North Korean political prison camps has never been released to the public and the camps are run in total secrecy. Since the regime runs the camps under the disguised names of military bases, it is difficult for outsiders to become aware of these prison camps. Although the testimony of former camp prisoners has helped confirm the existence of some of these camps, most of these former prisoners were from Yodok prison camp, while testimony from former prisoners of other camps were almost nonexistent. That was until former guard Ahn Myong-chol testified that there are at least several other camps just like Yodok in North Korea.

#### **4) Names Used by North Korea to Disguise the Camps**

Since, in most cases, these camps are the place where the North Korean authorities send people they deem to have political issues, these are called political prison camps in South Korea. North Korea, however, conceals the true nature of the camps by using different names according to the regime's internal logic. Former Kwan-li-so guard Ahn Myong-chul describes the way it works:

Ahn Myong-chol: "The correct name is '00 Military Base of Democratic People's Guard Unit'. We do not, however, take orders from the Guard Unit. We are under direct control of the State Security Agency, sort of like a special force unit. We are not even a part of the North Korean People's Army. It is called the People's Guard Unit but internally we just call it the guards."

These political prison camps, or Kwan-li-so, run by the Bureau No. 7 of the SSA of North Korea are sometimes called the 'Zones under Special Dictatorship' or 'Relocation Zone' by North Korean people. Surrounded by fences, the camps are heavily guarded.

Ahn Myong-chol: "The number of armed forces guarding a single camp is close to 2,000, including the guard unit of the SSA. Kwan-li-so No. 22 had 50,000 prisoners and there always were two units of troops in the headquarter as backups as a riot squad. And in the outer area, there were guard posts for every troop and there were six units. And there was also an anti-aircraft unit. The number of people in a troop was 140-150. So the guard force alone had about 1,200 people in it."

#### **5) The Intensity of Labor and the Guilt-By-Association System**

Lee Young-guk, who spent 4 years and 6 months in Yodok from 1995, says that the prison camp is set up in such a way that prisoners have no choice but to work at a high intensity level to make up the set workload for each day even without much pressure from the guards.

Lee Young-guk: "They give you just a little bit of corn to eat. They gave us boiled soup with inedible cabbage sprouts that had been salted and that's what we had to live on. Since that's all you are given, you get hungry after an hour. Because of malnutrition, your belly sticks out and you lose weight. You get hungrier after an hour and while all of this is going on, you're given work to do. When they tell you to take weeds out you can't leave a single weed behind, if you do, your ration is reduced by half when you come back in in the evening."

In the case of former prisoner Kang Chul-hwan, after his grandfather was sent to Yodok prison camp, three generations of the family had to live in a revolutionizing zone, totally isolated from the society for ten years from 1977. Kang talks about crimes against humanity committed in the camp.



*Young Guk Lee is showing his legs with torture scars received from a North Korean prison camp. -RFA PHOTO*

Kang Chul-hwan: “Many children have it all wrong. They think that they are suffering because someone committed a huge crime. The children believe this because that is what they are told but when they grow up and are able to think for themselves they come to their senses. There were many cases where fathers of many families had to die in this way. What I mean by that is grown-ups sometimes die of hunger because their children take their meals. In other words, immoral things are happening in families. In some cases, a guilty person comes in to the camp with his/her family. In such families, the children often cornered their fathers and most of those fathers died. But when these children grow up, they see that the facts were often different. These prison camps not only lock up the person who committed an alleged crime but his/her children as well and make these children despise their parents. This I think is a heinous crime against humanity that only North Korea commits.”

In North Korean prison camps, children sent to prison camps on the guilt-by-association charge have to live in the camp for their entire lives, and if a child is born in the camp the child also has to live as a criminal. Even if you get out of the prison camp by a miracle, it is highly unlikely that you can go back to your former life as an ordinary person. Former Yodok camp survivor Lee Young-guk describe his experience..

Lee Young-guk: “When you first come out of the camp, the whole world feels empty. You don’t want to have people next to you and you don’t want to see anyone. When you sleep you have nightmares often and become aggressive. To cure this, you take medications but when you do, you oversleep and can’t work. It’s been 17 years since I came out of the camp but I am far from a complete recovery. You don’t want to lose control, but because you can’t sleep you resort to drugs and when you take them you have no energy and it makes it difficult to live. So, often, you drink and sleep to avoid having nightmares. I don’t want to be around people, but I love puppies. Tears often come into my eyes. I get anxious quickly and when I do, I go to the bathroom and cry. I don’t think these nightmares will ever be forgotten.”

## Chapter 2 What is My Crime?

### 1) Total Control Zones and Revolutionizing Zones

North Korean prison camps are divided into total control zones for prisoners who cannot come out alive and “revolutionizing zones” for those who are expected to return to society after serving their sentences.

### 2) Nine Years of Imprisonment as No.1 Criminal

Kim Young-soon : “I am a so called ‘No. 1 criminal.’ No one else has ever gone through preliminary investigations by Unit 312. I am the only one in South Korea.”



*Young soon Kim who served nine years in No. 15 Yodok prison camp from 1970 is testifying about her life in the camp. – RFA PHOTO*

Kim Young-soon spent nine years in No. 15 (Yodok) prison camp from 1970. The No. 1 Criminal in North Korea means a person who criticized the regime or defamed the honor of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un or other leaders. Kim was sent to the camp for the crime of unintentionally becoming acquainted with secrets of a North Korean leader.

In 1970, Kim Young-soon was a supervisor at a foreign tourist shop in Pyongyang. She dealt with goods that were supplied to Kim Il-sung's family and had a wide variety of elite clientele. She became a friend of Sung Hye-rim, who was living with Kim Jong-il.



Sung Hye-rim is the second wife of Kim Jong-il and was active as a movie actress until she met the North Korean leader. Sung was married to Lee Pyong and had a daughter but after she caught the eye of Kim Jong-il who was five years her junior, she divorced her husband and started living with Kim Jong-il. Kim Il-sung, her father-in-law, however, did not approve of the relationship and Kim Jong-il married a woman named Kim Young-sook as his father had arranged for him. Sung became severely depressed due to that incident and left for the Soviet Union in 1974 to recuperate. Kim Jong-nam, Kim Jong-il's first born son, was born in 1971, a year after Sung moved into Kim Jong-il's Residence No. 5.

Kim Young-soon: "I wrote it all down when I was being interrogated by the SSA. What else could I have done, when they came knowing about everything? I was surprised when Sung Hye-rim came to my house and said she was going to Residence No. 5. I asked what was to become of Lee Pyong (her husband) but she didn't answer me. Then she said, 'Since I will be going into the official residence, today will be the last day for us to see each other.' I never saw her again after that. And when I heard a broadcast in 2002 after I had escaped to China, it said that Sung Hye-rim had died of a heart attack in Russia."

Lee Young-guk worked as a bodyguard for Kim Jong-il for ten years but he too had to serve time in Yodok prison camp after being discharged from the military service.

Lee Young-guk: "When I was working for him, Kim Jong-il took in a married woman and even had a daughter but when his father was alive, he protected her with bodyguards for fear of being found out. There was the official residence and the mistresses lived separately in a place called Residence No. 2. It is in a part of Rungra Island in Pyongyang's Pyongchon District, near the Taedong River area. The walls of those residences are 11 meters high and they had five houses for the mistresses. They all had separate entrances in the basement. It was guarded so that no one would know who the next door neighbor was."

Since the most important thing Kim Jong-il avoided was exposing his private life to the outside world, he sent a person who knew about his mistress to a political prison camp, a facility totally isolated from society.

Kim Young-soon: “Officials from the SSA came to see me again and said that I had been brought up free from all worries and it was about time I went through some hardships. When I asked where I was going, they said something like if you do well you will be out, if you don’t, you won’t be. Then I got on a train to Keum-ya. We traveled for six hours after leaving West Pyongyang Station and arrived in Keum-ya Gun, South Hamgyong Province all together with four children, my mother and father who were in their 70s. We went to a motel with the agency official who had taken us but compared to Pyongyang, Keum-ya Gun in the 1970’s was incredibly shabby, so much so that I was at a loss for words. A truck came at night. They don’t transport people during the day, only at night time. They travel at night so that no one notices. It came around nine at night and they told us to get in. I can’t express the feeling that I had at that moment.”

Kim Young-soon said she was shocked when she realized that even ten years after her release from the camp, the authorities were still keeping an eye on her.

Kim Young-soon: “When a high-ranking counterintelligence official came to see me in a Mercedes Benz my face really turned as white as a sheet. He showed me his identification card and said, “Don’t be alarmed, I came to see that you understand something.” Don’t be alarmed, he said simply. It was 1989. He said Sung Hye-rim is not Kim Jong-il’s wife and she didn’t have his son. That is a groundless rumor. If you expose this anywhere ever again you will not be forgiven, he said. Then he told me to go. My heart pounded for a week for fear of being taken away by the SSA again. I couldn’t sleep. That was when I decided to come to South Korea. After the counterintelligence official visited me in 1989, the security agency in the city of Hamhung made me a People’s Leader to put me in their surveillance net. So, I was a People’s Leader before I escaped North Korea.”

### **3) Christians All Go to Prison Camps**

In North Korea, the fact that you had an acquaintance with a Christian can also be a crime bad enough to be sent to a prison camp. After his son was arrested, Kim Dong-nam suspected that soon he and his family could all be dragged to prison camps. He fled the North and now works as a human rights activist in South Korea, exposing actual conditions of North Korean prison camps.

Kim Dong-nam: “My son’s name is Kim Kyung-jae. He was arrested at six o’clock in the morning on September 23, 2009. I heard that he spent about a year in a detention house and then went to a Kwan-li-so. I only heard security agency officials talk about how or why he went there but trials for going to a political prison camp are only given within the security agency under the control of the province in North Korea. For example, there is no such thing as a sentencing like, ‘Kim Kyung-jae, your prison term is how many years under Paragraph No. X, Article No. Y of the Criminal Laws of Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.’ Only the person himself knows what his prison term is when he goes in there. In these circumstances, it’s impossible to find out which Kwan-li-so he is in. According to the security agency officials, my son was not the only one who was arrested but there were more than fifteen people at the time and they are now all in the same situation. That’s how he got there, to the Kwan-li-so. The only crime he had committed was the fact that they all had received the good news, the gospel through Rev. Lim Myung-cheol and met with a pastor from the United States while in China. He never broke any state laws.”

### **4) Preposterous Espionage Charges and Passed-Down Prison Lives**

Another way of getting sent to a political prison camp is when an espionage charge is filed against on a North Korean for getting acquainted with South Korean people. Jung Gwang-il served his term at Yodok prison camp from 2000 to 2003 for that reason.

Jung Gwang-il : “I had been working at a trading company since the mid 1990’s and during that time I made

frequent trips to China and became acquainted with a South Korean. It was only for business; no other purpose. Because I lost a lot of money dealing with Chinese people, I started dealing directly with a South Korean and in the process they found out that I was earning a lot more than other people and started to spy on me. I also had a friend and he reported to the SSA that I was a spy. So I got arrested and interrogated for ten months and it was just too much to bear so I just admitted that it was true. I got arrested on July 29th, 1999 and it was April of 2000 when I formally admitted the charge.”

In North Korea, a minor sometimes becomes a criminal with a passed-down charge of his/her grandfather by guilt-by-association system, as Kang Cheol-hwan experienced.

Kang Cheol-hwan: “The year 1997 was when I got arrested and sent to a prison camp and it was also a time when the power transfer from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong-il was taking place. For that reason many officials who opposed the North Korean hereditary power succession system were purged. I think my grandfather was also taken in to a camp for that reason. When I was in Pyongyang, many of my friends suddenly disappeared and some people were dragged away. And when I got to the camp, I saw a lot of my friends from Pyongyang.”

## **5) Reasons Why the International Community Criticizes Political Prison Camps**

In North Korean law, there is no mention of political prison camps. It is therefore difficult to know who receives what kind of sentences on what charge. Director Yoon Yeo-sang from Database Center for *North Korean Human Rights* says that is a big concern for the international community.

Yoon Yeo-sang: “There are of course cases in North Korea where sentences are given through trials but in most cases imprisonment takes place without following the law or due process of trials. So it is only natural this became a subject of criticism by the international community. Neither North Korean authorities nor the people are aware of the fact that these kinds of punishments that are being carried out with no legal basis are illegal and unjust. This is because there is no understanding of matters such as constitutionalism, human rights and the importance of the rule of law in North Korean society or the school curriculum. From a normal society’s point of view, it is a huge problem. It’s a human rights issue and definitely illegal but North Korean people don’t have an understanding that enables distinguishing whether it is illegal. And what’s worse, they don’t even have the ability to think that if there is no such provisions in the law it is wrong. They have never been educated on such matters.”

## Chapter 3 Detention Facilities in North Korea

### 1) The Republic of Detention Facilities

North Korea is equipped with such a diverse and systematic system of detention facilities that it can be called a “Republic of Detention Facilities.” Among these facilities, political prison camps are the ones with the worst human rights abuses, because once you are in you are forced to labor until your death.

### 2) Types of Detention Facilities

Yoon Yeo-sang: “The current situation in North Korea is that even the policies that they have promised to make into laws are not being observed. That is why we are saying they should at least abide by the laws that they have promised to follow.”

The international community is concerned about the human rights abuses that are being committed by the North Korean regime. In every country, there are detention facilities for investigating and detaining victims or the accused. There are places such as police stations that hold people briefly for investigation, detention centers that house people until their sentencing, and prisons where the convicted are sent to after receiving their sentences through trials. For North Korea, however, there are four more types of places of detention.

Yoon Yeo-sang: “There are places that you don’t see in other societies, such as Kyo-yang-so (long-term prison labor facilities), Ro-dong-dan-ryun-dae (labor training centers), Jip-kyul-so (short-term labor detention facilities for misdemeanors). If you add Kwan-li-so (political prison camps) to the list, there are seven different types. It is difficult to confirm the numbers but if you add them all together there are about 700 detention facilities throughout North Korea. North Korea has the most diverse detention facilities in the world and most of these facilities are not mentioned in North Korean law. Political prison camps, Jip-kyul-so and Kyo-yang-so are detention facilities that are not even in the North Korean laws.”

### 3) Human Rights Abuses in Detention Facilities

Kim Young-hwan, who once was absorbed in the study of Marxism and Leninism, met with Kim Il-sung on two different occasions when he secretly went to North Korea while propagating Kim’s Juche (Self-reliance) ideology in South Korea. He says that the level of human rights abuses happening inside detention facilities run by North Korea is something that you cannot find anything to compare it to.

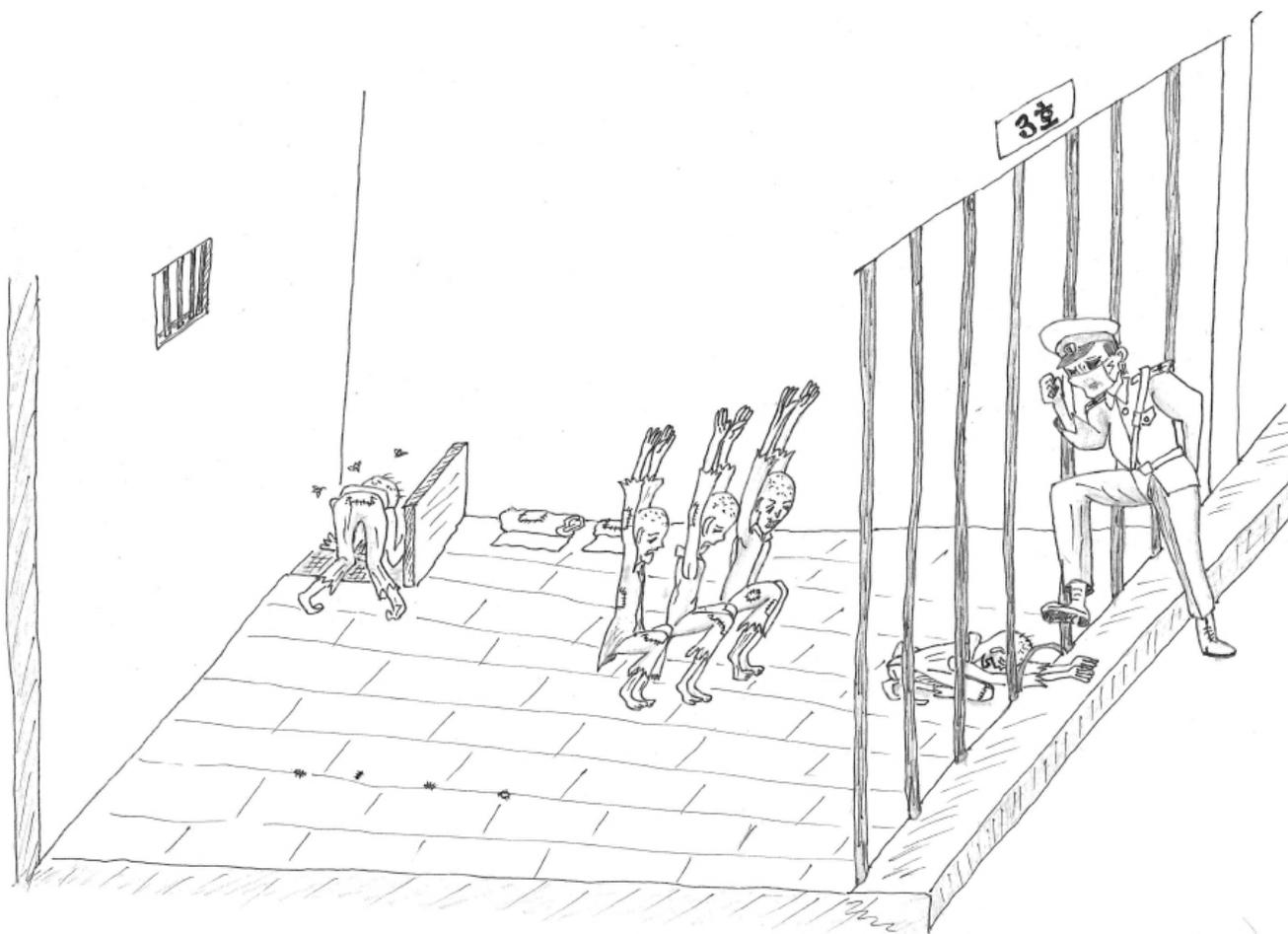
Kim Young-hwan: “Labor training centers are places where inmates are forced to do labor while lodging together in as a group. The purpose is to enlighten the person’s mind through labor but the general prison term is not very long — just about six months. Kwan-li-so were at first set up as ‘zones under special dictatorship’. North Korean prison camps are in fact, quite different from regular prisons. It is very different from standard prisons because there are general residential areas, private housing, and even schools and factories. In Nazi concentrations camps, there are prison-like buildings and inmates sleep and eat together and go out to work as a group but in North Korean camps, individuals have their own houses and earn their own living. When you look only at this aspect, you might mistake and think that it is much better than Nazi concentration camps or gulags of Soviet Union, but when you take a look at how prisoners are actually treated, you can find many elements that are even

worse than those camps. Various types of exploitation such as extreme insults, indiscriminate beatings and sexual harassment take place every day.”

General detention facilities in North Korea are controlled by the People’s Security Department and political prison camps or Kwan-li-so are controlled by the SSA. The difference is that the SSA is in charge of political offenders and has jurisdiction over incidents related to anti-state or anti-national crimes. The People’s Security Department, on the other hand, oversees and investigates general crimes.

#### 4) Ku-ryu-jang in Province Security Agencies

As in other North Korean detention facilities, human rights abuses can also be found in Ku-ryu-jang (interrogation-detention facilities) where crime suspects are temporarily detained. North Korean defector Lee Eun-shil (a pseudonym) was locked up for one year in the Ku-ryu-jang of the Ryanggang Province Security Agency office building in Hyesan on the charges of illegally crossing a river and being a spy.



Lee Eun-shil: “People died after about six months. I’m not sure whether the cause was torture, but it was also incredibly unsanitary. Since you don’t have water, you collect your urine and use it as water to soften your hardened stool by rubbing and pressing with your hands. And you roll up your clothes like a hammer and push the drain. Because you don’t have water, you soften it with urine and push it down. There is not enough water even to wash your stool off so you wash it lightly with your own urine. Then you get rash from the stool and get infected in the area.”

The place where Lee had been detained is called a ‘dungeon’ for being in the office building’s outhouse basement of the Ryanggang Province Security Agency. When you look at the structure, five or six people are detained in a single room and there are seven or eight such small rooms and a bathroom in each room. The size of solitary cells are a little less than 36 square feet and each one has a toilet in it. One meal was about 150 kernels of corn, an amount so small that she even counted how many kernels were there, Lee said.

Lee Eun-shil: “Because everyone is sitting in the lotus position, everyone is itching to move. So if anyone makes a little movement, it’s not the instructors in charge that beat the person but the people in the same room are ordered collectively to beat that particular person. It’s an opportunity to move your body around. Since everyone needs to stretch his/her arms and legs, people frantically beat one person. They were merciless.”

There are not that many books or findings on detention facilities in North Korea. In order to understand the actual situation of detention facilities in North Korea, a field investigation would have to take place but the North Korean authorities do not allow outsiders to access these places. There is therefore no choice but to make inferences based on limited but available North Korean official documents and the testimony of former prisoners or North Korean defectors who have worked at such facilities.

## 5) Author of ‘The Hidden Gulag’ Talks About North Korean Prison Camps

Using satellite images, American researcher David Hawk confirmed the locations of the most notorious prison camps in North Korea in his book, ‘The Hidden Gulag’ in 2003. Hawk has observed North Korean political prison camps for more than ten years.



*David Hawk, Chul hwan Kang and Gwang-il Jung (Left) are checking satellite pictures of prison camps. – RFA PHOTO*

David Hawk: “Such abuses of human rights cannot be found anywhere else in the world today. Such concentration camps are in operation only in North Korea. Residents are deported without a trial and sent to camp facilities in mountainous area and isolated from the society normally for several years to a lifetime to do forced labor. I assume that they are sent to prison camps for having wrong ideology or connections to anti-regime organizations.”

In 1990, the number of prisoners was thought to be about 150,000 – 200,000. It was because the number of prison camps at the time was also that much greater. But now, the number is thought to be about 80,000 – 120,000. The international community also is using the term, ‘Kwan-li-so’ and is aware of the places. There are also Kyo-hwa-so (Long term prison labor facilities for convicted felons) and a range of other facilities in North Korea that by international standards, places for political prisoners, not general criminals. Those who are forcibly repatriated to North Korea for escaping the isolated state, for example, are sent to a prison camp by the North Korean authorities.

Among these facilities, political prison camps are operated in the most impersonal and inhumane manner. But compared to the past, their number has decreased for unknown reasons.

David Hawk: “Fifteen years ago, there were twelve political prison camps and since then these have been combined to six camps. And now depending on how you look at it, 4 or 4.5 prison camps are in operation. It is difficult to say for sure that such changes came from pressures from the international community. It is difficult to know what the real reason is but it looks like it is due to some internal circumstances.”

## **6) Human Rights Abuse Are Happening with the North Korean Authorities’ Connivance**

Experts on North Korea say that the treatment of prisoners ranges from facilities with relatively low level of pain and oppression to those with high levels abuse, with political prison camps as the worst. In these facilities human rights abuses that are not authorized by the state are happening alongside draconian punishment meted out by authorities, says researcher Oh Gyeong-seob from the Sejong Institute.

Oh Gyeong-seob; “Political offenders in prison camps not only suffer indiscriminate beatings, violence, assaults systematically at the hands of security agency staff during the process of controlling prisoners, but can also take place arbitrarily.”

In normal societies, official conduct that does not comply with the due process, such as arbitrary detention and torture to extract confessions, cannot be justified or allowed for any reason. That is why the outside world is concerned about North Korean detention facilities, and especially the human rights situations in political prison camps, says Greg Scarlatoiu, Executive Director of the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK)

Greg Scarlatoiu: “It is a problem because first of all, North Korea has its own constitution and yet it is being violated. Secondly, North Korea has joined the United Nations in 1991. As a member of the United Nations, North Korea has to adhere to the standards of the international human rights and as a member of the United Nations observe the international humanitarian law. When you look at the human rights situations in North Korea, you can say that they have been continuously violating such international agreements.”

## Chapter 4 Actual Administrative and Operational Situation of Prison Camps

### 1) Transient Existence of Prisoners

Former prisoners say that people in charge of the prison camps are viewed as gods and inmates are beings that are lower than flies. In the political prison camps that are not even mentioned in North Korean law, human dignity is being destroyed by a logic understood only in the prison camps.

### 2) Class Enemies Deprived of Rights

Ahn Myong-chol: “Prisoners were called political offenders but the guards referred to political offenders as ‘emigrants’ and ‘factionalists’.”



Using “Google Earth”, Secretary General Myong chol Ahn (Former Guard, Camp No. 22 in Heoryong) of Democracy Network against North Korean Gulags is claiming that Camp No. 25 in Chong-jin is under construction to be extended. –RFA PHOTO

Ahn Myong-chol worked as one of the guards in the currently disbanded Kwan-li-so No. 22 in Hoeryong at the time of his defection in 1994. He was working as a guard in that camp at the time of his escape in 1994. According to Ahn, he was trained to see the camp inmates as prisoners who had been stripped off of their civil rights and not as the same human beings.

Ahn Myong-chol: “Political police agency people or guards are only there to watch, so you don’t care who the prisoner is. It’s fortunate if you are cleansed of your crime and go back out into the society and live, but if you die, you die. So you didn’t care about people. If you call political offenders when they pass you by or when you have work for them to do, and if they respond in a halfhearted way or if you just didn’t like the way they acted, they can be beaten. Also, prisoners shouldn’t make eye contact with instructors. If they do or look up, they will, again, be beaten but that isn’t always the case. Depending on the day’s mood, you can make up pretexts and be harsher on them. If you call a prisoner, they have to come running no matter what and take off their hats and scarves and stand politely with hands folded together. Otherwise they will be beaten.”

### **3) Daily Beatings Happening in Prison Camps**

Lee Young-guk described daily beating he saw in Yodok.

Lee Young-guk: “They prepare about 20 oak and ash branches and beat you with those sticks for not doing your job well. They whip your legs or back, and some people die while getting beaten. When instructors are in a good mood they smile but on other days they beat you. So you get nervous thinking that you might just die like this someday. Instructors see us as animals so they just do as they please. They become beasts themselves and reveal every single aspect of their personalities. They become pleasure-seeking hedonists.”

### **4) Education and Labor for Adolescents**

In political prison camps, minors are merely criminals who are not eligible for protection, says researcher Oh Gyeongseob of the Sejong Institute.

Oh Gyeongseob: “In prison camp, school teachers don’t properly manage children as students since their parents are political offenders. Cases like Bo-wi-bu officials coming into classrooms wearing guns on their sides or indiscriminate beatings that sometimes lead to death during the process happen. Because women were weak, sexual assaults were frequently committed by Bo-wi-bu officials. There is countless testimony like that.”

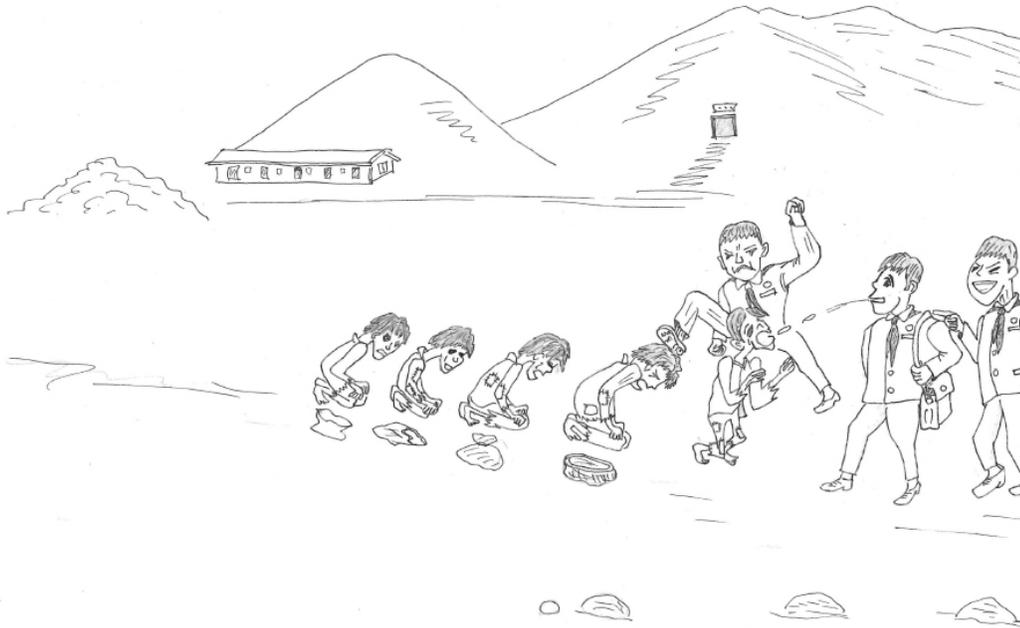
Kang Chul-hwan, who entered Yodok camp at age 13 and spent his youth there, said there were schools in the camp but they were dysfunctional.

Kang Chul-hwan: “Revolutionizing zones and total control zones are different in terms of how they educate prisoners. In the total control zones, they don’t educate people about Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. In the revolutionizing zones, however, they educate prisoners about Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. They educate people on a similar level as the society in general because the prisoners in the revolutionizing zones have the possibility of going back to society, but quality education is almost nonexistent. They are called revolutionizing zones, but the administration system itself is just the same as the total control zones. Children have almost given up on their studies and just live doing forced labor. Actually, whether it is revolutionizing zone or total control zone, studying itself is impossible for children in the camp. Labor begins as you enter an elementary school.”

### **5) Scorn for Inmates**

Political prison camps are run like a village and the guards in charge also live as a group in an area designated only for them. Human rights abuses also take place when family members of camp administrators confront the prisoners, says Kim Hye-sook, who was a prisoner in Camp 18 from 1975–2001.

Kim Hye-sook: “There are many ruffians among sons of security guards, Bo-wi-bu families, Kwan-li-so chief engineers and mine leaders. Since it is a mine, dust is everywhere and they tell you to come over and sit. Then when you sit, they tell you to open your mouth and spit out their phlegm into it. They won’t beat you if you swallow it but the moment that warm stuff comes in, you start to gag on it, and then they start to beat you recklessly. It’s not that you are guilty of some crime. You just get beaten for no reason.”



Since camp administrators regard inmates as anti-national criminals, or enemies’, they heap inhuman scorn on inmates, and inmates have no choice but to feel humiliated. Former Yodok camp prisoner Jung Gwang-il experienced inhuman treatment.

Jung Gwang-il: “Being treated as less than human was the most difficult thing for me. For example, I was once beaten by a Bo-wi-bu official in charge, so much so that I couldn’t even stand up. We were treated like we were less than animals. It was in the summer when we were farming corn. We had to take water from our stools and pour it on corn but they told us to use our rice bowls to do that. So in the morning we put rice in our bowls and ate from it, then got some stool water with that same bowl and poured it on corn. Then for lunch, we had to wash the bowl in ditch water and get rice again in the bowl. Even animals do not eat from the bowl that they have defecated in. We were treated like we were less than animals.”

One of the many inhuman ways of managing inmates in political prison camps is a system of “collective responsibility” in which inmates are organized into groups and if your fellow group member makes a mistake everyone has to collectively take responsibility. In these cases, it’s not the administrators but inmates that encourage others to beat the members of the group.

Jung Gwang-il: “Beatings often took place in the camp when they gave the scariest group punishments to the prisoners. It’s collective punishment. They don’t feed us. They don’t provide food for one group, so then people jump on the person responsible and start to beat him. Then, that person cannot live. The collective punishment was the most terrifying thing. In the winter, for example, it’s not meals that they don’t provide but the heat. They don’t let us make a fire in the bedrooms. It’s so cold that you shiver all night and can’t sleep. People get infuriated and they gather together and beat one person. Then he or she is beaten to death.”

## 6) Food Rations and Starvation

Since prisoners are not permitted to have private lives in the camp, they have to live entirely on food they receive through rations and subsidiary foods, said Kang Chul-hwan.

Kang Chul-hwan: “In the camp, corn is a staple food. Salt and corn are basic foods and the rest have to be provided by the prisoners themselves. Normally the amount of ration is 500-600 grams, but when this and that are taken out, you are just left with 300-400 grams. Even if you got enough rations, if you only eat corn, malnutrition is inevitable. In comparison to the amount of labor, the amount of food is insufficient, with harsh forced labor combined, malnutrition inevitably comes. People who can’t adjust the amount of their food will starve in half a month. That’s why people starve to death.”

Kim Young-soon describes what is meant by food must be “provided by the prisoners themselves.”

Kim Young-soon: “We caught and ate rats, and anything that was flying around in the Yodok camp. We killed crows with plastic bullets and ate them. Butterflies, dragonflies, anything that flew around and any plants that were growing and anything that crawled around, we ate them all. That’s what it was like in the camp. You couldn’t even find rats anywhere, because youngsters caught and ate all of them. Adults, children and all were suffering from malnutrition and they all went out and caught rats because they said pregnant rats have three fetuses in their bellies and if you roast and grind them and eat it, your swollen belly would go down. So you couldn’t find a single rat anywhere. That was Yodok. After my mom passed away, my father too, passed away the following year of our arrival. He died of hunger for lack of food. I buried him rolled up in a straw bag.”

People fall ill one after another for lack of food and a brutalizing environment, but medical facilities in prison camps are nothing but a name. Inmates cannot receive proper treatment and if the illness didn’t get better through folk remedies, it inevitably leads to death.

Oh Gyeong-seob: “Medical benefits do not exist at all. In the prison camps, even if you are suffering from fatal diseases such as hepatitis, tuberculosis and others, you live without medication. And since they cannot live with other prisoners, they are quarantined. Then they are again forced into labor. Without basic medical benefits, many people are exposed to diseases with no care at all and are dying in there. This is the biggest problem in prison camps.”

## 7) Shoot and Kill Runaways

Former guard Ahn Myong-chol said he and other prison guards had been trained to shoot and kill everyone in the camp if a sudden change occurred.

Ahn Myong-chol: “We have always looked at political offenders as our enemies. It was our role as guards to put down a riot if it were ever erupted and in case of a war, it was our job to shoot all of them dead to destroy all evidence. A 14.5 mm caliber anti-aircraft machine gun is originally intended to attack helicopters but in case of an emergency, it would used to shoot political offenders cornered in one place.”

Runaways were to be caught and killed, he said.

Ahn Myong-chol: “If you didn’t catch him, you would be shot dead. So you have to catch him, no matter what. Otherwise secrets would leak out.”

## Chapter 5 The Secrets of Prison Camps

### 1) Three Generations of Families Pressed into Forced Labor until Death

Three generations of families — the accused, their parents and their children — are thrown into political prison camps together without a trial, and forced to labor until death. North Korean political prison camps are places that people cannot escape even after death.

### 2) Sixteen Hours a Day of Forced Labor

Kim Hye-sook was forced to labor for more than 16 hours a day in a coal mine at Camp 18 since she was 16 years old.

Kim Hye-sook: “There are labor tasks. There are about 18 people in each group and a quota for the day like X amount of coal.”

Kang Chul-hwan said that in his experience at Yodok, forced labor began as soon as children entered elementary school, and that human beings were viewed merely as a tool for production.

Kang Chul-hwan: “Since they needed to punish not only the guilty people but also their families under the guilt-by-association system, an area that could accommodate a lot of people was necessary and the area became a huge camp. By pressing many people into earning money, or producing coal or lumber for the regime through forced labor, the regime gets a cheap workforce that is helpful to the North Korean economy. There are coal mines in Kaechon, and coal mines and lumber in Yodok. You have plenty of ways to make money. Hoeryong, too, is abundant in coal. In order to make use of political offenders, camps were built in regions where the North Korean regime makes money. Don’t just die, die after offering even the very last drop of your blood to your country!”

### 3) Camps as Sources of Commodity Supplies

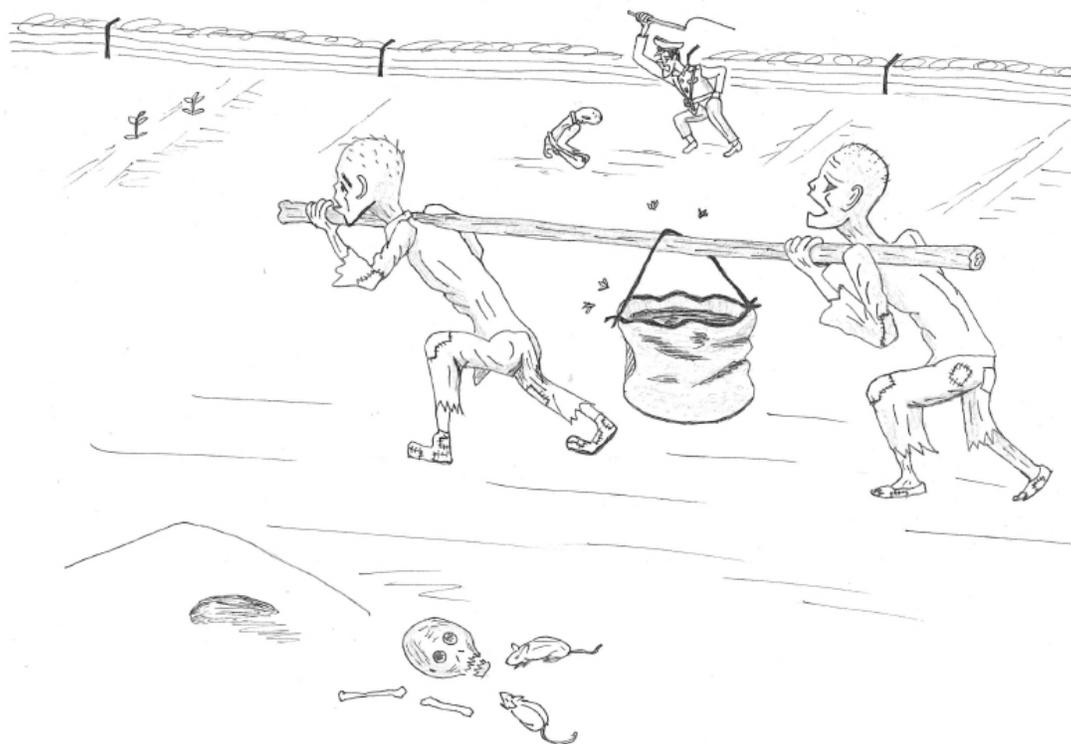
In addition to the purpose of frightening North Korean people by sending political offenders to facilities totally isolated from the society, North Korean authorities meet the needs of not only the camp itself but also domestic demand by providing supplies through forced labor performed by political offenders, said former Yodok camp prisoner Kim Young-soon.

Kim Young-soon: “Farm products from the camps go to Pyongyang or the Security Department and also to the Ministry of People’s Security. High-quality furniture is produced in the camp with high-quality woods such as linden and lacquer trees made into building materials in the commodity factory. All of the high quality grains and products produced in the camp go to the Ministry of People’s Security in Pyongyang. And if you ever find wild ginseng, you have to offer it to your guards. When wild boars come down, again, you catch them and offer it to the guards.”

## 4) Labor and Rations

For families the camp provides staples and subsidiary food rations and for singles the boarding house offers a specified amount of food. Prisoners have to meet the specified quota to receive rations of corn or rice, said Jung Gwang-il.

Jung Gwang-il: “For food, there is a daily quota and if you don’t meet it you don’t get your rations. So most inmates died of malnutrition. You can say that in North Korea, the prison camps are the places where the strong prey upon the weak in the worst way. If you can work even for a bit more, you can take food from others who didn’t meet the quota. You just cannot express how you feel when food is taken from you.”



## 5) Prison Labor Products

North Korean prison camp inmates produced goods ranging from farm products like corn, rice and vegetables to mineral products such as coal and iron ore. They produce consumer goods like clothing, bicycles and farm machinery. Since these products are made by skilled workers under strict supervision, the quality is high and it is known that these products are provided to high-ranking officials in Pyongyang. When viewed from outside, the prison camps are difficult to differentiate from normal villages, says former political prison camp guard Ahn Myong-chol.

Ahn Myong-chol: “If you take satellite photos of a Kwan-li-so, it looks like a normal village. But when you look at the surroundings, the camps are closed off with iron fences. The size of the area is quite large. In the case of Camp No. 22, the size is one third of Seoul. And because No. 13 was built along the valley it was a little smaller than No. 22. The number of prisoners varies according to the size.”

While other countries have pressed inmates into forced labor in detention facilities, no place is as harsh as North Korean prison camps, says Greg Scarlatoiu at the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK).

Greg Scarlatoiu: “There was something similar in Romania as well. There was a village like that not far from the Danube and beaches of the Black Sea. And the prisoners were ordered to build a canal connecting the Danube and the Black Sea. It was the leader of the Soviet Union, Stalin’s idea. People who worked there were mostly political offenders. The purpose of the project was to completely annihilate Romania’s elites. Currently, more than 120,000 people are imprisoned in North Korean political prison camps and three generations of a family get committed by a guilt-by association system. Such things cannot be happening in the 21st century global village.”

## 6) Secrecy Is of Paramount Importance

Although people get sent to political prison camps without any trial, the investigations on people subject to imprisonment are conducted in a very thorough way. Investigations take place in secret so that personal information of the people in question cannot be shared even among the investigators.

Lee Young-guk: “I worked as a bodyguard for ten years and after I was discharged from the service became a supervisor of the party of Musan-Gun, and when Musan’s status was raised to that of a city, I graduated from college and worked as a leading member of the city. I also studied at the Kim Il-sung Higher Party School for three years. China was often on television so I went to China out of curiosity and became a political offender. The authorities arrested me in China and put me on a plane and sent me to the Preliminary Investigation Department of the SSA in Pyongyang.

When you look at the investigative documents all the things that I said about Kim Jong-il’s vacation house, what I said about Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il being dictators, about going to South Korea and everything else are all there. So when they interrogated me, they divided it into three parts: the SSA investigated the part about me talking about coming to South Korea, Office No. 6 of Bodyguard Department of the Workers’ Party’s Central Committee grilled me about being a bodyguard, and Office No. 10 of the Workers’ Party’s Central Committee asked me about bashing Kim Jong-il, so that interrogators themselves don’t find everything out about the person in question. The reason for doing that is because if the investigators learn about the whole system, the deification of the ruling family won’t work anymore. That is why they investigate all things separately. They divide by categories and investigate.”

If you mentioned human dignity in North Korean prison camps, you will probably be treated like an alien. The inmates are just powerless beings who have no choice but to live by following survival instincts like animals, said Lee.

Lee Young-guk : “Dae-seung Ri, Yongpyong and Ipsok were total control zones. There, the person committed a crime in the past and his/her children were all taken in. Even if the convict was dead, his or her descendants continued to live there. Three generations come in together in accordance with the guilt-by-association system and live there, but the intensity of labor is high and the amount of food is very small. You lose your human nature and become nonchalant about people dying. I also buried about 300 bodies. You put them in a cart and go up on a flowery hill. You bury the bodies in both vertical and horizontal rows. When you are going up the hill with bodies on your shoulders, fluids flow down from those bodies and run along from your backbone to tailbone, but after you carry about ten bodies on your shoulders, you become numb. We become devils ourselves. All you can think of is that you just want to get out of there alive.”

Although Bureau No. 7 of the SSA is in full charge of managing political prison camps, because these camps are not law-based detention facilities, the existence of it is a secret even to North Korean residents. Even when making arrests, they would come in to your house early in the morning when everybody is asleep and just say something like, go with us for a minute.” When sending people to the camps, they only do it at night after sunset, say former prisoners. It is shocking even for North Korean defectors themselves to learn about actual conditions of political prison camps, says the founder of Free North Korea Radio, Kim Seong-min.

Kim Seong-min: “North Korean political prison camps are completely veiled even to North Korean residents. So much so that I myself who had been a military officer and a writer in North Korea didn’t even know that they actually existed. At first, it was so hard to believe that I wondered if their stories could be true. But as I was listening to Kang Chul-hwan Kim Young-soon, it touched a chord in my heart, the ‘chords in our hearts’ that only North Korean people can understand among ourselves. We have heartstrings. I realized that what they are telling us is not lies. I came to believe that the North Korean authorities really have killed their children, parents, brothers and sisters. And finally, I was able to confirm that such horrible places were actually there in North Korea where I came from.”

## 7) Reasons for Maintaining Prison Camps

North Korean political prison camps are in operation to maintain the the regime by isolating and internally exiling people who pose a threat to the regime or are politically against it. Moreover, political prison camp products now account for a significant portion of the North Korean economy. Professor Kim Seok-hyang of Ewha Women’s University in Seoul sees no sign that the camps will be shut down any time soon.



*Prof. Kim Seok-hyang from Ewha Women’s University – RFA PHOTO*

Kim Seok-hyang : “It is a very sad prediction but I think it is highly unlikely that political prison camps will disappear before the collapse of the North Korean regime. The reason for that is because as long as the family of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un must be acknowledged as having the highest prestige in North Korea and other people only have to exist to work for the glory of the Kim family, because human beings are thinking beings, there will always be someone who will oppose this. So they have to take care of these people. Either you kill them or isolate them from the society, but places like kyo-hwa-so (long-term prison labor camps) won’t do, and they need some place to totally isolate these people. By the time political prison camps disappear, I

think the North Korean regime will collapse or there will be some fundamental changes and the opening of the country will take place. In other words, I think there is no possibility of political prison camps dismantling as long as the North Korean regime exists.”

## Chapter 6 North Korean Prison Camps must be Dismantled

### 1) A Just Demand of the International Community

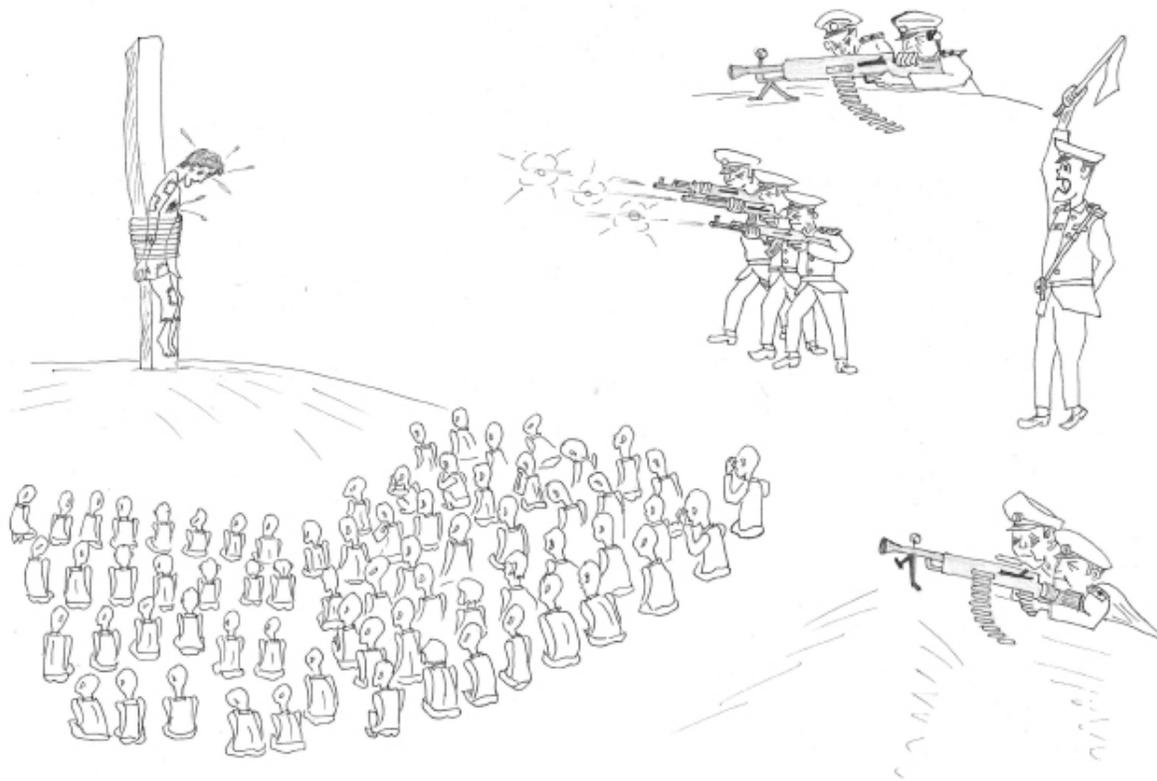
In any country, domestic laws take priority over international laws. But when those laws cannot protect a country's own population, the international community has to take action. This is because human dignity takes priority over all else.

### 2) North Korean Defectors Surveyed on Awareness of Political Prison Camps

Radio Free Asia conducted a survey to see how much North Korean defectors, who typically know more about actual conditions in North Korea than anyone, really knew about political prison camps in the area that they had lived in. This survey was conducted with Saejowi (The Organization for One Korea), a private organization in South Korea that helps North Korean defectors settle down in South Korea. Dr. Mi-nyeo Shin of Saejowi, said the existence of the prison camps was known by about 83 percent of respondents, but relatively few defectors knew exactly what went on there.

Shin Mi-nyeo: "The survey was conducted for a month from March 15th to April 15th. Most North Korean defectors knew about the existence of political prison camps and thought that it was a place where the innocent get unjustly deported to. But most of them did not know what was happening in the camps or how many and where these camps existed."

These respondents said public execution is frightening, but among younger defectors, the most frightening punishment is getting imprisoned for life, Shin added.



### 3) Psychological and Physical Health Effects of Prison Camp Life

As of the end of 2014, more than 28,000 North Korean defectors had left their hometowns and were living in South Korea. They chose to exit their country despite the fact that getting caught would result in them being sent to a political prison camp. Kim Hye-sook still suffers from pneumoconiosis from her years working as a coal miner for at Camp No. 18.

Kim Hye-sook: “I was hospitalized and treated for hours to remove coal dust. When I came out of the hospital I felt good and light. The South Korean government providing me with housing and resettlement funds were all good but I couldn’t feel totally at ease. It’s because I still have my younger siblings there in the North. I have a daughter and a son there, too. I thought they were all dead, but now I know they are alive and yet I can’t see them. It’s been five years since I came to South Korea but I have never dreamed of South Korea, only Camp No. 18.”

Kang Chul-hwan, said he looks back at his ten years at the No. 15 camp in Yodok and laments his lost adolescence and that of many North Korean youth.



*President of North Korea Strategy Center Kang Chul-hwan – RFA PHOTO*

Kang Chul-hwan: “Now that I have lived here and seen my kid going to school, I realize that the adolescence is a wonderful period in life. The fact that I spent my adolescence in such place makes me feel a little chagrin because not just me but thousands of children were facing the same fate. For me, though, I feel less bitter because I came to South Korea and was compensated, but my friends who were born in North Korea and even though they are now out of the camps, I think they are living empty and worthless lives.”

Lee Young-guk says he is angry and baffled at the fact that North Korea’s system survives.

Lee Young-guk: “When North Korea talks, it makes me angry because it is all lies. Once born, we’re all equal. How can a society like this still be maintained and how can a dictatorship that promotes idolization of its leaders as divine figures can be sustained? I think it has to collapse. But people working underneath these leaders fear the people above them. So they just back them and pick up and eat the crumbs that fall and even stand by them. That’s what I don’t understand.”

Dr. Lee So-hee, the head of the psychiatry department at National Medical Center, says that a situation that looks abnormal from the outside is maintained and run without a concern because when one side exercises absolute power, others just adapt to it.

Lee So-hee: “First, when a handful of people are bringing a multitude of people under their control, some great power can be bestowed upon those few. If too much importance is given to these few, even if you are dealing with a multitude of people it can be seen as a kind of a revolution. You can stand up to it but if you cannot take responsibilities for it you will eventually, by your survival instincts, have to adapt to the situations in order to survive in there. And as you stay and live in there for a long time, you won’t be able to make sound judgments. If you have lived in there since your childhood, because it has been that way for you the whole time, it might be better just to learn how to live in there.

## 4) Official Response from North Korean Authorities

Concerned about North Korean prison camps, the international community has demanded an in-country investigation, but the North Korean authorities have rejected all criticism and entreaties. Rather, the regime is criticizing the international community by saying that it is manipulating public opinion to isolate North Korea.

“Right now, anti-DPRK enemy powers including the United States are engaged in all kinds of childish ploys to manipulate public opinion on human rights abuse issues that do not even exist in our republic. Particularly, they are fabricating our actual human rights situation with false documents by putting up evil North Korean defectors who ran away from our republic after committing crimes,” said an Internet broadcast of Uriminzokkiri (Our Race Alone), an official North Korean media outlet run from a server in China.

## 5) U.N.’s Demands on North Korean Prison Camps

The U.N. Human Rights Council and the U.N. General Assembly have over the past decade adopted resolutions that demand improvements in North Korea’s human rights practices. These efforts culminated in a damning report by a U.N. Commission of Inquiry last year. Michael Kirby, a former chairman of the U.N. Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, says the projected was grounded in key U.N. principles.

Michael Kirby: “There are many principles in the U.N. Among them, there is something called the ‘Human Rights Up Front’ principle. According to this principle that the U.N. has adopted, if human rights abuse exists anywhere in the world as pointed out in our report, the U.N., the organization as a whole, has to make human rights the priority. Another one is the U.N.’s “Responsibility to Protect” principle. If a U.N. member state fails to protect its people, the responsibility falls on the U.N. This is the principle that was unanimously adopted by every heads of state and government present at the time of the 2005 U.N. World Summit.”

## 6) General Prisons in South Korea and Detention Facilities in North Korea

North Korean human rights activist Kim Young-hwan, an authority on North Korea’s Juche ideology, was accused by the South Korean government of following the North and served time as political prisoner in South Korea in the 1980s. Human rights abuse cannot be justified even in prisons, Kim says.

Kim Young-hwan: “We all, universally, have human rights. Whether you are in a prison or in a Kwan-li-so, whoever you are, the essential core part of your human rights should not be violated. I also went through many different prisons: seven in South Korea, even though terms were short, two in China. In a very unique environment such as a prison, human rights abuses inflicted by people in charge can be even more difficult and painful.”

Kim said he ate relatively well and was not overworked during his time as political prisoner in South Korea .

Kim Young-hwan: “Except for the fact that you have to work for certain amount of hours and stay in a confined space, South Korea prisons give you relative freedom. You usually work for about six hours, but for the rest, you can read books, play board games or do anything you want to do. Working conditions are also quite comfortable, unlike some factories in the outside world.”

When it came to meals in South Korean prisons, “they never give you a small amount. The amount is always enough, just limited. You get three side dishes for one meal. You can have as much rice as you want and you also get plenty of side dishes.”

## 7) Current Conditions in Political Prison Camps

Currently political prison camps, No. 15 in Yodok, South Hamgyong Province, No. 14 in Kaechon, South Pyongan Province, No. 16 in Hwasong, North Hamgyong Province and No. 25 in Chongjin, North Hamgyong Province are known to be in operation. It is estimated that at least from 80,000 up to 120,000 are imprisoned in these camps. Researcher Oh Gyeong-seob from the Sejong institute says the camps remain hotbeds of abuse.

Oh Gyeong-seob: “About 70 percent of prisoners in the political prison camps are not political offenders but their families. So just for being born in a political prison camp, you become a political offender. About 60 to 70 percent of the imprisoned don’t even know why they are there in the prison camps. The daily routine in North Korean prison camps is filled with human rights abuses. The places where the most serious cases of human rights abuses are happening are North Korean political prison camps. Therefore, the international community needs to aggressively work toward dismantling these prison camps.”

## 8) Hopes of Former Prisoners

Kang Chul-hwan says that he will continue to work until the day that political prison camps in North Korea disappear.

Kang Chul-hwan: “Once I asked (high-level defector) Hwang Jang-yop the reason he was fighting and he said that not even a single intellectual in North Korea stood up to such a miserable country in which millions of people had died of hunger. He told me that he was fighting not to leave such a dishonorable stain on his name. As a former camp prisoner myself, when millions of people are being dragged into the camps and dying so miserably... the international community is putting pressure on North Korea over this, but if former prisoners had not come out and testified, it would not have been possible. The camps are still there and I am in a position where I cannot ignore all those who perished in the camp in the past.”

If Pyongyang claims that political prison camps do not exist in North Korea, the simple way to prove this would be for authorities to let the U.N. investigators visit the sites that have been identified by former prisoners and investigate those locations. Now, North Korean human rights issues are not just a matter of global concern, but have reached a stage where the man responsible should face trial before the International Criminal Court.