

Statement of Mr. Koh Myung Sup
Abducted to North Korea in August 1975, and returned July 2005

Before the Committee on International Relations
Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific and
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights, and International Operations
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Abduction

On August 2nd of 1975, my fishing boat with thirty three crew onboard departed the Joomoonjin Harbor of South Korea for a fishing expedition.

Around the time of the ship's scheduled return on August 15th, our boat experienced a mechanical breakdown and was adrift for two days. We informed the other fishing groups of our situation and then were able to repair the ship and soon were on our way home.

On the morning of August 17th, North Korean vessel appeared out of nowhere and ordered our boat to stop at a gunpoint and abducted the vessel to North Korea.

Our communication was cut off and we were all fearful thinking that "we are now finished." We were completely helpless and our boat was towed to the Moonchun Harbor in North Korea.

We were briefly searched and locked up in a small inn and investigated for a week. During the investigation we repeatedly asked to be released on a humanitarian basis to no avail.

Life in North Korea

After the investigation, we were transferred to the North Korean Communist Party's Communication Facility in Wonsan and from then on were subjected to endless educational processes including mental rehabilitation and field trips for easing into the North Korean society.

After one year of the forced education, we were secretly assigned to the Party's pre-designated living places and we were briefly hopeful that we may be able to return to South Korea based the assessment we made on the progress being made on the hitherto ongoing South North Red Cross Negotiation. The negotiation ended without any fruitful results and I felt I had no choice but give up my wishes to return after hearing the words from my instructor that "South Korea abandoned us and we would surely be put to death if we return."

We were separated from each other and assigned to different living places. I was assigned to a chicken farm in Pyungnam and have been living as a laborer since.

Any information regarding the fate of my other crewmates was limited to whatever bits of stories I picked up during the re-educational process I was subjected to every three to five years.

At the time I was unmarried and subsequently got married in 1977 and had a family with one son and one daughter.

Initially, basic necessities of life were met with rationing but worsening economic situations beginning from the mid 80's put a stop to the rationing and life was a struggle itself with a constant threat of starvation.

For food, we tried to cultivate forest land and we felt lucky to be even alive subsisting on tree barks and the hardship was simply indescribable.

I lived a life worse than death and twenty years passed by.

Escape from the North and Return to Home

As the 90's approached, the situation for the North Korean people turned for the worse and they would end up doing anything in search of food.

Around this time many rumors were abound that if you can manage to cross the Chinese border, you can get to South Korea known to be a rich country by now and if you know of anyone in China or South Korea, you can ask for a financial help and as this became real for some around me, it reignited my will to convey the news of my existence to my parents and brothers.

Meanwhile, I learned in 1997 that my neighbor frequently traveled to China where he could meet his family from South Korea and receive assistance and through him I was able to find an opportunity to send a letter to my parents and brothers notifying them of my existence and needs for help.

However, I was not able to receive financial help and only heard about how my family was doing in South Korea and I missed my family even more and was broken hearted as time passed.

In 2002, through a messenger sent by my brother, I attempted to escape with a hope of meeting my mother in China. However, because of the reinforced North Korean border guards to prevent rampant escapes, I reluctantly gave up the idea of escaping at the border after sensing that I was being followed.

Fortunately, my travel to the border was not directly linked to an escape attempt by the authorities and I was able to return home but felt that I was constantly being watched from then on.

Several years passed and I was becoming weaker and from the autumn of 2004, I was spending most of the days sick in bed and was spending the days wishing to end my life. In 2005, I was again approached by a messenger and I realized that only the help from my brothers and parents will save my family in North Korea and this was the last chance and whatever danger I faced, I did not have a choice and I attempted to cross the Chinese Border.

After a great difficulty, I entered China and was directed to the Republic of Korea consular office on March 31st.

However, I was extremely ambivalent at this time. My initial purpose for escaping was to meet my parents and brothers in China and receive financial assistance and reenter North Korea.

Of course, there was not a day in thirty years I did not miss my parents and brothers. At the same time, I was tormented all night thinking about my family still living in North Korea. Will anyone understand the dilemma and the pain of someone facing another heart wrenching family separation?

The maximum number of days you can travel in North Korea without a permit is limited to ten days and it was well past my obligated return date and I knew that if I return to North Korea, I might as well be dead. Furthermore, when I heard my teary eyed mother's voice after having lost her own flesh and blood for thirty years, I was able to make a decision, "I will go! To my home... I will be able to retrieve my family in North someday only if I survive. I shall return to the Republic of Korea, the only place where my dream can be fulfilled."

Last Wish

When I think back, my life has been series of twisted fates.

I experienced the tragedy of the Korean War as a child and having been raised in a poor family; I was hungry and did not have the opportunity for schooling.

One pride I have is of the contribution I made during my younger years to my country by fighting for peace and freedom in Vietnam War.

My lost thirty years! How I wish I can erase all my past pains and memories and purge them into the East Sea where I was abducted.

However, I feel so empty and betrayed when I realized that, as a former South Korean resident, I was worse off than other escapees not originally from the South. I am not an escapee from the North! I was the citizen of the Republic of Korea deserving all its rights of the citizenship and dutifully fulfilled its obligation.

I am also not one of the typical families separated by the North South Border. When I returned home, I was flabbergasted to find out that in 2002 and 2004, a request was made during the official family reunification negotiations and that the request was returned with “Unable to Verify” notification.

How can I explain in words my tormented thirty years of sacrifice that I was forced into by the reality of a country separated? Who will ever repay my losses?

Here I wish to express my last wishes.

First, I want to ask that the Government does its utmost to have my surviving crews still living in the North be returned as well as all other abducted citizens. Because my escape was accomplished not with the help of the Government but with the help of “Association of Families with abducted members” and my brothers, I beg you, while thinking of the torments and heart wrenching of many abductees still waiting for the helping hands of South Korean Government, to free them from the tyranny.

Secondly, I want to ask for a way to earn a living as the citizen of the ROK. Too much time has passed for me to return to where I started from. I lost my youth and returned as a weak old man. I don’t feel I have enough time and I lack the necessary means to start anew. I need an institutional and systematic help in order to live the rest of my remaining life with some hope.

Thirdly, please don’t spare government generosities to help out the families with abducted family members. It was heart wrenching to hear how the family members of my crewmates had to live all these years thinking about their fathers, sons, husbands and brothers in heart and how they were harassed during the Cold War era. Abductees have nothing to do with isms or ideology but simply were victims of the Government neglects and their human rights were forcefully repressed. I ask that abductees and their family members are no longer violated by the Government and that the Government does its utmost to restore their rights.

It is said that blood is thicker than water. Through countless tears of my mother and my brothers over thirty years, I am now able to return to the rightful place where I belong as the son of an old mother and as the citizen of the ROK

However, my joy is short lived. When I think of my loving wife and children still living in the North, I am despondent and saddened. As my mother and brother felt for me, I too am deeply attached to my own flesh and blood and I fervently desire to retrieve them.

I am just a just a toddler here barely learning to walk after three years and feel powerless to reunite with my own family and to live happily.

Only your continued love and attention will stop the pain felt by all abductees and their families and I ask you from the bottom of my heart to give us the reason for hope and courage.