

Testimony of Mi-il LEE

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First of all, ladies and gentlemen and distinguished members of Congress, I would like to convey my gratitude on behalf of our organization, the Korean War Abductees Family Union (KWAFU), for giving me this very precious opportunity to testify about the long-forgotten issue of Korean War abductees. This is the first testimony of its kind, which will bring, I believe, historic momentum to the search for justice for Korean War abductees. I wish to say that the blood shed by American servicemen and women during the Korean War (1950-53) contributed enormously to laying the foundation of a free democracy in my country. I assure you that these heroic sacrifices were not in vain.

Allow me to reveal the details of North Korea's pattern of abduction that took place during the Korean War and the plight of these abductees thereafter. My information is based on government documents, testimonies of family members of abductees, members of KWAFU, records, biographies, letters, etc.

It is important to point out that North Korean abductions of civilians did not begin in the 1970's in Japan, but much earlier-- with a large-scale kidnapping of South Korean civilians during the Korean War in 1950. The Korean War, which started with a sudden invasion from the North, has yet to be fully concluded, despite a half century of an uneasy cease-fire. Because of this excruciatingly long state of limbo, the enduring images of fathers, husbands, and sons taken by force to the North during the war remain as unhealed wounds in the memories of abductees' beloved families. Many, both abductees in the North and surviving family members in the South, are gradually passing away from age, exhausted by decades of waiting for news of their loved ones. Where else in the world can such a human tragedy be witnessed: no news at all of loved ones in 56 years?

The number of Korean War abductees is a staggering eighty-two thousand, nine hundred fifty-nine (82,959), according to government documents of the Republic of Korea (ROK) published in 1952. This official record, published in five volumes (at the

recommendation of the then US Ambassador Muccho) reveals personal details of each abductee, organized by cities and provinces.*

Please permit me to explain why such an enormous number of South Koreans were abducted.

When Korea was liberated from Japan in 1945, the Korean Peninsula was divided along the 38th Parallel as a by-product of the Cold War between the US and the then-Soviet Union. North Korea reflected the Communist influence of the Soviet Union: private property was confiscated and landowners and were purged, Japanese sympathizers and religious believers, mainly Christians, were persecuted. As many as 3.5 millions North Koreans, mostly influential people, intellectuals, priests, landowners, flooded into the South seeking to preserve their life and freedom. KIM Il-Sung, well aware of the draining of human resources from the North, planned as early as 1946 to forcibly take necessary human resources from the South to provide the necessary professional base of North Korea's communist state.

When North Korea invaded the South on the 25th of June 1950, the ROK military proceeded on June 28th to bomb the single bridge over the Han River, the only route of escape, thereby leaving the citizens of Seoul people under communist control for three months until September 28 Reclamation, which followed General MacArthur's Incheon landing. During this 90-day period, the North Korean regime systematically sought out and imprisoned politicians, academics, government ministers, civil servants. The North's military then gathered this incarcerated multitude and abducted them by forced march to the North before the Reclamation of Seoul took place.* The various abduction routes were later testified to by escapees from the North.

During the North's military retreat, additional young people from the South as well as technicians were abducted to serve the North's purposes. Many of them were also enlisted for frontline duty as 'forced volunteer' soldiers.

The objectives of their abduction were to meet the necessary human resources; to promote political propaganda of the North, and to create confusion in the South, in hopes of readying it for communist unification.

The war abductees taken for use in the North Korea are clearly nationals of the Republic of Korea. Consequently, they were considered the lowest class in the North and were under constant surveillance. From the end of the 1950s, the abductees were

literally persecuted, subject to the worst conditions, particularly when they did not cooperate with the tenets of communist ideology. These individuals were purged and banished to labor camps, remote mining areas, difficult labor in lumber camps, and political prisons. Post-war South Korea in the 1960s was one of the world's poorest countries, and as the Cold War persisted, military regimes in 1970s and 80s governed the South. During those dark decades, we did not dare to dream of publicly seeking out our lost ones who might be alive in the North Korea. It is our belief that the war abductees who had somehow survived were the likely first victims of the notorious food shortage that began in 1990s. Even so, we have not given hoping that there are those who have survived. Even if a single abductee is alive in the North, we will look for a way to rescue him with his family, if he managed to make one in those hardships. For the thousands who've already died there, it is our filial duty to bring back their ashes.

My father's case

Unfortunately, my mother who experienced the tragedy and witnessed the abduction of her husband could not come here. She is very weak and of advanced years (84 years), but to this day still waits for any news of her beloved husband, torn from her when she was 28 years. I was two years old at the time and do not remember the scene of abduction. However, I can vividly picture the scene of his abduction because my mother constantly talked about it to us, her three daughters.

When the Korean War broke out on 25 June, my father was 30 years-old, an entrepreneur that started a brassware factory in Cheongryonggri, on the eastern side of Seoul. Two days after the invasion, he, like everybody else, went to the Han River bridge with his family (his parents, me, my elder sister and his pregnant wife in her 9th month of pregnancy). When the bridge was suddenly cut off, he had to return home. Later we realized that it was providential that my mother was not on the road with other refugees when she gave birth to another daughter in August.

As mentioned above, Seoul was under the communists from June 28th. On September 4th, around 4:00 pm, a member of the 'North Korea Political Defense Bureau' came and asked my father to go with him to the police station for the purpose of investigation. The purpose was related to the activities of anti-communist group my father had joined. Later when my mother went to the police station and met him, he told her, "they said the investigation is yet to be completed. I have to go to their

headquarters and may be back tomorrow" That was the last time my mother saw my father.

When my mother finally found him out at Dongdaemun police station, she was told that he was not guilty and would be released within a week. Then again, upon new instructions from the North, he was not released and taken to the North.

Upon hearing a rumor that the People's Army killed everybody they had taken on their retreat to the North, my mother went nearly insane with grief and desperation. She searched every heap of corpses but in vain. At that time my mother's only thought was to find the body of her husband, then die with her three daughters to join him beyond the grave.

Then yet another tragedy struck my mother: a babysitter accidentally dropped me, causing spinal caries. My mother rushed me to clinic to save me as I slipped in and out of consciousness. She cried, repeating over and over, "Don't die before we see your father." She prayed fervently. Thanks to her endless love and professional efforts (she was a medical doctor), I appear before you today and am able to stand as a witness, although I am a disabled person. Now I am a born-again Christian and pray that I live to return the love and grace I have received.

My mother continued to live with me in the very same spot where my father was taken, anguish and hope for reunion as our constant companions. More than 50 years have passed without news. Six years ago, my mother suffered a stroke, impairing her speech and mobility. It dawned on me that she may very well die suddenly without seeing or hearing a single stitch of news from her beloved husband whom she missed so terribly all her life. I decided that I simply could not sit and wait any longer for my government to take action. I launched an NGO family union with a group of abductees families in 2000 with its primary objective of finding some way to obtain news of our fathers' whereabouts.

KWAFU activities

The Korean War Abductees Family, the forerunner of the KWAFU, was actually formed during the war in 1951 in Korea's second largest city, Busan. They made a list of abductees and even held a rescue rally on city streets. Those wives of war abductees gathered and did their best to rescue their husbands, shedding bitter tears. My mother was an active leading member in the rescue activities of those days. Then

in 2000 when the South-North Summit took place in Pyongyang, seemingly arousing new hopes for peace on the Korean Peninsula, we, the abductees' families, gathered and inaugurated a new KWAFU. We focus on collecting extreme cases of human rights violations among the Korean War abductees, seeking confirmation of their whereabouts, their well-being and eventual repatriation.

In order to develop our activities more systematically, the KWAFU has established a resource center for Korean War abductions, as an affiliated organ, where it collects materials on Korean War abduction. The center started a new project last year: VTR filming and recording of witness testimonies on each abductee case. The results will be published soon entitled "Source Book of Korean War Abduction"

In solidarity with many North Korean human rights NGOs, we participated in the 'International Convention for North Korean Human Rights' held in Seoul last year and urged confirmation of whereabouts of the Korean War abductees. The 'Japanese Rescue Group for Abducted Japanese in North Korea' is one of our strong partner NGO's and we participate in their convention held in Japan every year.

Another result of our consistent efforts has been that the ROK Ministry of Unification included the names of four abductees under a different category, 'specially dispersed families' at a recent family reunion meeting between the South and North. This means that the four requests for confirmation of their whereabouts were officially forwarded to the North Korean authorities. The North's replies were identical: 'impossible to confirm.' It may be impossible because they are from the South, with no addresses in the North. This confirmed clearly that we need a different approach and separate negotiations at the South-North meetings.

In addition, last year a documentary on Korean War Abduction entitled "People of No Return" was finally completed after four years of preparation and its national premiere was held in downtown Seoul. It is submitted to the New York International Independent Film Festival and will be viewed in 9th of May.

The hope of abductees' families

Fifty-six years ago more than eighty thousand (80,000) South Koreans were forcibly taken to the North, Ever since, no one in the South knows what happened to them. Our longing to see them again one day has never died. That one day has

unimaginably lengthened to fifty- six long years. Our abiding wish to see them again. If we cannot, we wish to know what happened to them, to receive any news about them, how longer they survived, the dates of their death, and finally, to obtain their ashes.

The United States government has invested a great amount of effort, money and time in excavating ashes of US Armed Forces, killed in action during the Korean War and repatriated their remains to their families. I envy your nation's iron will and attitude to protect your nationals to the end, regardless of outcome.

We in South Korea waited and waited. The first generation of abductees is quickly disappearing, passing away one by one even now. An old lady, whose husband, a public prosecutor in 1950 when abducted, had been sick and had waited long to see him again, passed away last year. An old mother whose son, then a high school student when kidnapped to the North, still waits for news of him. How much longer can we continue to wait? Time is running out.

Please remember the heartbreak and decades-long agony of our members, the families of Korean War abductees, and take up this issue in your next meeting with North Korea. We have great confidence in you. Your place at the negotiation table is the only one we can trust to resolve our abduction problems. Finally, I pray that the kingdom of God will soon be free to spread its words of truth and freedom, as well as healing in North Korea. Thank you.

My Father

As you can see, I am very short. My voice is also very small. It is because my spine got injured during the Korean War in 1950. When I was sick with a high fever during the wartime, my father had already been kidnapped to North Korea. He was a young businessman in his thirties, and he loved my mother and his three daughters. My mother believed that she would be able to meet him after the war was over. She did her best to save me in order to show him that I was alive, safe and sound.

My mother was a very beautiful and competent woman. She still is. However, the only love in her heart during the last 55 years has been my father, so she is still waiting for him at the same spot where he was taken, being single. She turned 84 already. A few years ago, she had a stroke and it is difficult for her to speak or move around. Still, she is whole-heartedly supporting me with the repatriation movement to bring my father back if he is still alive, or at least his ashes if he is not.

My family has never forgotten about my father. We have consistently been praying for him. Sometimes I think that God spared my life so that I could do this work for my father. I could not attend elementary school until I became a fifth grader and the middle school I wanted to attend rejected me for my disability, but I survived with my mother's hope. I believe that my father will make his way back since my mother never gave up on her hope.

As I said earlier, my voice is very small. Some of you may feel uncomfortable because of my small voice. But I trust in God who brought me here to the Congress of the United States to testify before you so as to find my father, even with my weakness. I rely on God's mighty hands to ask all of you here for your help.

My mother told me that after the United Nations and the Korean army had recovered Seoul, she made up her mind to die with her three daughters upon finding my father's body. But when she went to the prison to which my father had been taken away, it was empty and she became aware of the fact that my father had been kidnapped to North Korea. Because of hope that my father would be alive, she hoped to live again and she has led her life in that hope.

Honorable members of Congress,

I urge you to help us bring back the large number of people who had been kidnapped to North Korea including my father. I feel that the only country that could put pressure on North Korea with nuclear issues or human rights issues is the United States. I ask for your help, for the sake of the human rights of those who had been kidnapped during the Korean War which the United States and the United Nations have come together to support.

The remaining wives whose husbands had been taken away were put in tragic situations to leave their children with orphanages because they were not financially able. Even so, they did their best to find their husbands and sons back. There was no progress; however, because North Korea kept on saying, “we have not kidnapped anyone.” Lives that are stained with memories full of tears, sweat and blood are common to us, the families who have our loved ones taken away. What we are hoping for is to be able to show those members of our dear families that we have been waiting for them and we still love them. Our hope has always prevailed against despair.

Many people tried to stop me from coming here. Some said it is already a history and some others were doubtful of what the United States could do.

But, how can those become history while our voice is still so loud, to find our lost ones? In September 2002, Kim Jung-Il, the chief of the state said that he would try to find the missing during the War; however, there was no progress. As you know, he does not seem to keep his promises. However, we are very inspired by the fact that the Japanese brought their people back in their collaborative effort.

I believe that there is nothing impossible as long as we do not despair. It sounds like a cliché but it is still the most important principle for us. It is difficult to overcome that despair sometimes when members of the families pass away, one by one. Three years ago, a 94-year-old grandmother died in waiting for her son. Last year, a 90-year-old wife passed away who raised seven children alone, not knowing whether her dear husband was alive or dead. These days, people in my children’s generation in their sixties and seventies are breathing their last breaths as well. In a hurry, we have begun to put the testimonies on record from last year. I would like to send them to you once they are translated.

The reason that our hearts are not filled with hope only is that we know that there is nothing much we will be able to do other than bringing back the ashes as time goes by. Today as I speak, a 92-year-old mother is waiting for the news of her son who was a student at the time of

kidnapping. Please help the old lady to have a chance to touch the warm hands of her son, whom she sees in her dreams every night. I would also like to show my father how I survived through the horrific war and am well alive. I would like him to let him know how much my mother loved him, and still does, and she has led her life only for him.

My story is not so special. The number of those kidnapped exceeds 80,000. The number of people working together to bring back the kidnapped exceeds 700. We have been under surveillance and discriminated against from the South Korean government as Korean peninsula became an extremely hard-fought field of the Cold War.

As South Korea became developed both economically and democratically, we are not concerned about such issues any more. However, there are not many people who understand our issues as human rights issues and actively help out. Our government is not active either.

I tend to run to where there is even a dim light. As I was running here, toward the American Congress, I felt a light stronger than ever. It is because I know that there are at least many faithful servants of God, like House representative Mr. Hyde, who know the importance of one person and one family.

In conclusion, the Korean War has not yet come to an end. The United States probably knows this fact better than anyone. The war, including my own, for which many victims have shed their blood to protect freedom and democracy, will finally be over around the time when my father will come back to us.

I would like to work together with you, brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ, until the day where my father comes back, the nuclear issues are resolved and political camps like Yo-deok vanishes in North Korea. I express my deepest gratitude to all of you for your patience with me and my small voice.