



Online Series

2019. 07. 09. | CO 19-15

Necessity and Action Plans of Hometown Visit Project for Separated Families

Suh, Bo-hyuk

(Director, Humanitarianism and Cooperation Research Division)

The issue of separated families of South and North Korea, of which the number has decreased to approximately 100,000, has been the greatest human rights and humanitarian issue caused by the division of the Korean Peninsula. Politics and ideologies need to urgently address the unfulfilled wishes of families living in South Korea torn apart by the division who hope to “go back to their hometown in the North once in their lifetime.” As a responsive measure, this paper proposes a hometown visit project where separated families are given a tour in North Korea. The proposed project, which will jointly be conducted by private enterprises of South Korea and China, will have the advantage of being implemented promptly in a large scale as it will be exempt from sanctions. The understanding and cooperation of relevant countries will play a pivotal role in the success of the project. The project is expected to create a virtuous cycle where the resolution of humanitarian issue of the separated family leads to further progress in the denuclearization process, which in turn will improve the inter-Korean relations.

Separated Family Issue Sacrificed by Politics

The issue of separated families of South and North Korea, an exemplary human rights and humanitarian issue driven by the war and division of the Korean Peninsula, is in a very desperate and dire situation. Humanitarian issues have been frequently ignored and sacrificed in the name of politics and security. Now, there is no time to repeat such wrong practices. Due to the prolonged division, the number of deaths of separated family members is increasing as time is limited for the old population. Fortunately, a series of inter-Korean summits and the North Korea-U.S. summit in Singapore held last year concluded with an agreement to resolve humanitarian issues.

This paper will reflect on past policy practices and propose new policy recommendations with the recognition that solving the separated family issue is a very urgent matter. This discussion is expected to be helpful in developing a practical measure to fulfill the wishes of the separated families who are in a race against time.

Desperate Status of Separated Family Issue

The issue of separated families has been one of immense scale, even having been referred to as involving “10 million separated families.” However, according to government data, the number of people living in South Korea who identified themselves as a member of a separated family and applied for a family reunion has decreased to 133,305 since 1988. Among them, 54,634 (42%) are still alive while 78,671 (59%) have died. Those who had died have significantly outnumbered the living (as of late May 2019).

Since the majority of applicants are elderly citizens, the number of members dying is increasing every year, aggravating the severity of the issue. The number of applicants who died last year stood at 4,914 (3,795 in 2017 and 3,378 in 2016), which shows that the number of deaths of separated family members is growing rapidly. Currently, 64.3% of living members are 80 or older (including 12,998 who

are 90 or older), which means most could die in the next decade.

Far less than half of the applicants have been able to confirm whether their family members are still alive or not. In many cases, applicants die without knowing. Therefore, the issue of separated families cannot be postponed any longer.

Limitations of Conventional Policies for Separated Families

Given that more than half of family reunion applicants have died and the days of the rest are numbered, “urgency” should be the top priority when it comes to addressing the separated family issue. There are many solutions, from enabling members to check whether their families and relatives are alive or not to enabling them to reunite. In terms of frequency, the most frequently used policy measure by the two Koreas has been a face-to-face reunion, followed by checking whether separated family members were alive or not, exchange of letters and video reunions. However, all of these have their limits considering the urgent nature of the issue.

Conventional methods including face-to-face reunions have been restricted by political developments in inter-Korean relations. In addition, it could take some additional months to hold another reunion even if the heads of the two Koreas agreed to one. In particular, face-to-face reunions offer extremely limited opportunities for participation. Only a few hundred applicants are granted participation and furthermore such reunions were held intermittently. With such measures, most applicants are unable to meet their family members even once during their lifetime. This is due to the fact that only one in a few hundred applicants have the chance to take part in a face-to-face reunion even if one is agreed by the two Koreas.

Facilities and equipment for a video conference reunion have been brought in place to compensate for the limitations of face-to-face reunions. However, video reunions have been halted after taking place for a few occasions. Reunion events, whether face-to-face or video call, are all affected by inter-Korean relations, the political and security situation, and financial, technological, and geographical pressures on North Korea. Though exchanging letters could be regarded as part of the preparation process for further reunions or visits, the implementation itself

would be extremely difficult.

A New Project of Hometown Visit for Separated Family

“I will strive to make it possible for separated families and displaced people to visit their hometowns and meet with their relatives, going beyond mere reunions as before,” said President Moon in a congratulatory speech on the 100th March First Independence Movement Day. The government has considered various measures including fundamental solutions to the separated family issue. However, the constraints mentioned above require going beyond existing ways and finding new solutions to deal with the urgent issue to heal the pain of separation. A new measure would be to push for a hometown visit of separated families through a tour to North Korea.

On every Lunar New Year’s Day and Korean Thanksgiving Day (Chuseok), senior members of separated families gather at the Mangbaedan Memorial Altar in Imjingak near the Demarcation Line to hold ancestral rites by bowing toward their hometowns in the North. They all say that “It is my dream to set foot in my hometown once in my lifetime.” They share their dying wish, stating that they would at the very least want to be buried in their hometowns.

The last wishes of separated families can no longer be postponed for any political or administrative reasons. Sanctions against North Korea also can no longer hinder humanitarianism. The 1718 (Sanctions) Committee of the United Nations Security Council on DPRK states that humanitarian and people-to-people exchange activities are exempt from sanctions and it has no intention to obstruct such activities.

It has been reported that the working-level talks held in Washington on March 14 between South Korea and the U.S. reached a consensus on granting North Korea sanctions exemption regarding the reunion of divided families. The number of Korean-Americans who have families in North Korea exceeds 100,000. As a result, the U.S. Congress has proposed the Divided Families Unification Act (H.R. 1771) and is proceeding with its legislation. Another positive factor for the promotion of new separated family policies is the growing momentum for the resumption of

denuclearization and peace talks after the Panmunjeom trilateral meeting on June 30.

Then what are a project of hometown visit through a tour in North Korea proposed in this paper and its expected effects? This project mainly focuses on enabling the rapid and continuous facilitation of separated family hometown visits in North Korea. In other words, it is a project where private companies from South Korea and China cooperate to allow separated families to visit their hometowns in the form of a tour of the North. These tours are exempt from the sanctions against North Korea.

Currently, many Chinese private companies are carrying out various North Korea tour programs. South Korean companies, particularly those with experience in tourism to North Korea, can arrange separated families' visit to the North by contacting Chinese travel agencies. Thus, the new solution to the separated family issue would be implemented as follows: separated families living in South Korea apply for a tour in North Korea; South Korean private companies arrange the tour; Chinese private companies carry out the tour in North Korea; and applicants visit their hometowns in the North.

Hometown visits through a tour in North Korea is an effective way to address the urgency of the separated family issue mentioned above. It will minimize the time it takes for senior members of separated families to visit their hometown in the North because it eliminates the time spent for negotiations and administrative procedures between the two Koreas which have systematic differences in many aspects. It only requires time for the application of a tour and visit to North Korea through China, which is considerably shorter compared to the time originally needed for reunions. Additionally, this method proves useful in addressing the pressing issue as it can accommodate more applicants compared to the conventional reunions. This kind of hometown visit will reduce North Korea's political and administrative costs, raising the possibility to successfully launch the project.

The implementation of hometown visits in North Korea through the private sector is a very practical measure to ensure the continuity of reunions considering the intermittency of conventional reunions. The project could be carried out without

knowledge of whether an applicant's family and relatives are alive or not. Even under those circumstances, the tour could still make the dreams of separated families come true. They would be able to set foot on their hometown and request North Korea to check whether their families are alive and then head back to the South with an expectation of reunion. If the project proposal is accepted, North Korea could earn short-term profits through tourism. In addition, from a mid- and long-term perspective, it could help North Korea successfully achieve its ultimate goal of economic development through the improvement in its diplomatic relations with other countries.

Prerequisite for New Hometown Visit Project

Despite the significance of the project as mentioned above, for the success of this tour project, understanding and cooperation among the governments of the two Koreas, the U.S. and China is essential. First of all, it is desirable for the Moon and Trump administration to reach a consensus through working-level negotiations on addressing humanitarian issues in a way that does not involve direct intervention of the two governments. This approach can not only promote humanitarianism but also demonstrate the unified stance between South Korea and the U.S. on the denuclearization and peace process to North Korea and China.

Cooperation at a governmental level between South Korea and the U.S. is meaningful when it leads to the cooperation of private companies in South Korea and China as well as the North Korean authority. If the governments of each of the countries involved in the project coordinate on handling diplomatic and administrative regulations and processes and companies in the private sector take charge of actual tours and visit projects, it could proactively prevent factors that could lead to trigger issues revolving around sanctions and diplomacy.

However, it may be difficult to let every member of the separated families visiting North Korea actually go to see their hometown. Allowing family members visit the metropolitan cities and provinces in North Korea first and then reviewing whether individual visits to their actual hometown are possible would be a feasible

way. The vital prerequisite of this project is the promise of North Korea that it will completely guarantee the safety and health of the elderly separated family members during their visit to the North.

It is difficult to normalize North Korea-U.S. relations in a short period due to mutual hostility and mistrust that has been internalized under long-term division and armistice. Fortunately, the peace process which began after 2018 is expected to be sustainable. Nevertheless, peace negotiations that are not accompanied by practical solutions to the separated families, the biggest victims of division and war, will have significant limitations. Hometown visits to North Korea through a tour could provide a creative alternative in terms of effectiveness of resolving the protracted issue. This method will be useful to simultaneously make progress in denuclearization and peace negotiations and the development of inter-Korean relations. It is time for the ROK government to take an active and creative approach. ©KINU 2019

※ The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).