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# Implications and Tasks of Inter-Korean Humanitarian Cooperation

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What sets the Panmunjom Declaration apart from previous inter-Korean agreements on the resolution of humanitarian issues is that for the first time it specifically defines the cause of humanitarian issues as the division of the nation. Now comprehensive efforts are required in all fronts as opposed to a gradual approach to remedy the pain that has lasted for 65 years. All possible means should be put into practice at once: whether families of all applicants are alive should be notified; exchange of letters and face-to-face & on-screen reunions should be conducted throughout the year; and all applicants should be allowed to visit their hometowns and burial ground of their families. To that end, it is necessary for South-North Korean Red Cross to institutionalize humanitarian cooperation on a permanent basis that combines separated families projects with health service and disaster aid.

In the Panmunjom Declaration, leaders of the two Koreas clearly stated that “South and North Korea agreed to endeavor to swiftly resolve the humanitarian issues that resulted from the division of the nation.” Hence, the reunion of separated families that have been halted since October 2015 will be resumed as of August 15. In fact, two leaders have discussed the resolution of humanitarian issues regarding separated families and specified the results in prior statements, such as the June 15th North-South Joint Declaration and the 2007 October 4 Declaration. Some evaluation suggests that the content of the Panmunjom Declaration on the subject of separated families was short of expectation. However, what sets the Declaration apart from previous declarations is that for the first time it specifically defines the cause of humanitarian issues as the division of the nation.

Applicants for reunion of separated families are required to register through the Integrated Information System for Separated Families run by the Ministry of Unification. There are 131,896 applicants as of April 30, 2018 — an increase of 365 compared to last month. This number continues to increase due to the announcement of inter-Korean summit. Among that figure, however, 1,161 applicants passed away in April alone, with only 57,124 remaining survivors. The rate of death for these applicants has dramatically climbed recently, compared to last year with 3,700 deaths per year. In 2018, there are over 400 applicants who passed away every month, with three times the average figure during last April. This is due to the fact that, of all the applicants wishing a reunion, those who are 80 years old or over take up 63.6% of the entire applicants with 12,609 applicants in their 90s, and 23,733 in their 80s. This is one of the main reasons why leaders of the two Koreas should promptly resolve the issue of separated families.

Paragraph 3 of Article 16 in Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 26 of Geneva Convention relating to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (the 4th Convention) clearly dictate the society and the state’s duty to protect families. As such, UN Human Rights Mechanisms and International Committee of Red Cross have continuously emphasized the principle that efforts should be made for separated families to identify the current status (life or death)

and address of their families and to be reunited. During the 37th UN Human Rights Council that took place in Geneva in March 2018, Tomas Ojea Quintana, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea welcomed the Inter-Korean Summit and, at the same time, put heavy emphasis on addressing human rights issues and security issues in a balanced manner for peace and prosperity of Korean peninsula. Especially, the Special Rapporteur pointed out the importance of the dialogue and cooperation of the two Koreas to fundamentally resolve issues on separated families.

Kim Jong-un, North Korean leader stated during the inter-Korean summit that existing agreements between the two Koreas should be strictly implemented. The two Koreas have already made agreements for resolution of humanitarian issues in a considerable range. For example, Article 18 of 'non-aggression and exchanges and cooperation agreement and reconciliation between the two Koreas' signed at the 5th high-level talks in 1991 states that "separated families and relatives should be allowed to freely exchange letters and visit each other and be reunified according to their free will, and the two governments should seek solutions for other humanitarian issues as well." Furthermore, 'Chapter 3: annex agreement for the implementation of and compliance with the inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation agreement' of the aforementioned agreement also states free exchange and mutual visit of separated families, establishment of reunion centers, reunification according to free will, cooperation in case of disaster, and provision of comfort, such as handling the articles left by the deceased and transfer of remains.

Leaders of the two Koreas agreed on August 15, 2000 that they would strive to resolve "humanitarian issues such as permitting mutual visits for separated families and relatives and to address issues of unconverted long-term political prisoners." In the Inter-Korean Summit in 2007, the two governments agreed to actively engage in 'humanitarian cooperation projects,' suggesting an expansion of separated family reunions and launching video-letter exchange programs. To that end, it was agreed that a reunion center should be constructed at Mt. Kumgang, where representatives of each government would be stationed upon its completion

and host family reunion events on a permanent basis. In addition, the two Koreas have vowed to “actively provide assistance to one another in case of disaster, including nature disaster, based on the principle of fraternity, humanitarianism, and mutual aid.”

Since August 15, 2000, there have been 20 face-to-face reunions and 7 on-screen (video) reunions. So far, 57,567 individuals from 7,970 families have confirmed whether their family members are still alive; 19,930 individuals from 4,186 families had a face-to-face reunion; and 3,748 individuals from 557 families had an on-screen reunion. Most of the applicants were not given a chance of a family reunion due to the limited quota (100 applicants per session). Also, even though one is to be selected for a reunion program after a fierce competition, only to find out that his or her family members have long been deceased, that person was not given precise information regarding their death, such as when they passed away and where they were buried. Furthermore, separated families were not even allowed to freely communicate with each other after the reunion, which proved to be painful for families on both sides of the DMZ. Separated families were in despair by the fact that no progress could be made without government efforts, even for humanitarian issues. Reunion events of separated families have always been dependent on the status of inter-Korean relations, hence giving it the appearance of a political event. Therefore, it is evident that comprehensive efforts are required in all fronts as opposed to adopting a gradual approach to remedy the pain that has lasted for 65 years. All possible means should be put into practice at once: whether families of all applicants are alive should be notified; exchange of letters and face-to-face & on-screen reunions should be conducted throughout the year; and all applicants should be allowed to visit their hometowns and burial ground of their families.

Leaders of the two Koreas confirmed in the Panmunjom Declaration that “During this year that marks the 65th anniversary of the Armistice, South and North Korea agreed...with a view to declaring an end to the War, turning the armistice into a peace treaty...” The divided nation and the war have left hostility and deep

scars on the Korean Peninsula, which will not be healed by a simple declaration of peace. Without concrete efforts to “promptly remedy the humanitarian crisis caused by national division,” our ongoing “war at heart” is unlikely to end in the near future. Therefore, it is essential that the two governments work to institutionalize humanitarian cooperation on a permanent basis through the Red Cross of both Koreas.

Organization of the Republic of Korea National Red Cross Act and the Law on the Red Cross Society of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea both dictate Red Cross’s unique tasks as follows: projects regarding separated families and disaster aid; and emergency medical projects, involving blood and communicable diseases. Inter-Korean Basic Agreement and the 2007 October 4 Declaration also specify humanitarian issues such as separated families and humanitarian cooperation between Red Cross of both Koreas in case of disaster. In June 2005, the South-North Korean Red Cross adopted the agreement on the South-North Red Cross exchanges and cooperation, which included a construction of reunion center at Mt. Kumgang, modernization of Red Cross General Hospital in Pyongyang and exchange of medical faculty, and Red Cross Youth’s annual tree-planting event at Mt. Kumgang. Based on such agreements and experience of cooperation, it is necessary for South-North Korean Red Cross to institutionalize humanitarian cooperation on a permanent basis that combines separated families projects with health service and disaster aid. ©KINU 2018

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