

Reconciliation and Cooperation of North and South Korea and the Issue of Separated Families

Lim, Soon-Hee

(Senior Research Fellow, KINU)

The fifth South-North Korean family reunion took place via video link for three days from March 27 to 29. The reunion was the first since last July when North Korea unilaterally cancelled the reunions. Like the previous reunions this one had many tearful and sad stories and also happy news regarding separated family members; tears and laughter were present throughout the event. Some of the oldest participants' ambiguous expressions on their faces made peoples' hearts ache. South Korean families were heartbroken at some of the North Korean families' North Korean regime propaganda and some remarks made out of loyalty and praise toward their leader.

Main Achievement in regard to the Settlement of the Separated Family Problem since the South-North Joint Declaration of June 15

Authority-level official interchange began in earnest with the South-North Joint Declaration of 2000 and since there has been great development on the issue of the separated families. The main achievements can be outlined as four below.

Firstly, the scale of the interchange and reunions of the split families has been greatly increased. Over the last seven years the two Koreas held face-to-face reunions fourteen times, life and death status and address verification projects two times, one letter exchange project and five video reunion projects. 14,471 Koreans were reunited through the fourteen face-to-face reunions and 2,732 Koreans met their beloved ones through the five video reunion projects. 39,217¹ The newly verified numbers of life and death through the fifth video reunion are not included.

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Koreans' life and death status and addresses were verified and in the process of the mail exchange project in March 2001, a total 600 Koreans, 300 each from the two Koreas, exchanged mail. Secondly, repeating the reunions and with efforts to be more substantial, the events have become more meaningful. The number of family reunions has increased and there were additional private individual reunions. There was a reunion in Samilpo and for the weak and aged attendants their family could accompany them. With all these, the meaning of the family reunions has escalated even though it was just a short two nights and three days schedule. Also with establishing a land link to Mt. Geumgang, inter-Korean family reunions can occur at Mt. Geumgang, and this is especially good news for aged and weak citizens. Thirdly, there has been great progress in solving the abductees and POW issues. Even though they are not enough numerically, the family reunions of abductees and POWs after the war have been being held and last year the issues of wartime and postwar abductees and POWs became a regular agenda item. Fourthly, the possibility of regular and institutionalized family reunions has increased with the start of building a family reunion center at Mount Geumgang.

Political Influence toward the Humanitarian Issue

The issue of separated families is not only the issue of the human rights and humanity of the divided families themselves, but it is also a humanitarian issue. Therefore, the two Koreas have to figure out a solution in a humanitarian way over the difference in politics, ideology, and social systems. Any premise or conditions should not be followed in solving the problem and no limit should be set by the changes of political and military situations since that can be an invasion on the human rights of the families and a defilement of the separated family members. However, the two Koreas still hold the antagonistic relationship in political, ideological, and military ways, and that reality affects and limits the reunions and the interchange of the families in various ways. For example, three days before the fourth family reunion, which was scheduled to take place in October 16 to 18 in the year 2001, North Korea unilaterally announced the suspension of the exchange of the groups of separated families in reprisal for the South Korean "Emergency Guard Measure." In regard to the tightness of the relationship between the two Koreas due to the North Korean missile launch last July, the North unilaterally suspended family reunions and the construction of a family reunion center. The North has dealt with this kind of humanitarian matter in a political way. North Korean regime propaganda and the remarks of praise and loyalty toward the leadership popped up from some of the North Korean families at the reunion and remarks related South Korean presidential election aimed at specific South Korean parties in the process of the fifth video reunion are all examples of the North Korean way of putting political influence on humanitarian issues.

Importance and Urgency of Settlement of the Separated Family Problem

Establishing peace on the Korean peninsula doesn't mean just demolishing the physical walls between the two Koreas. Real peace and a substantial peace footing on the peninsula can only be realized when Korean citizens' hearts come together with the release of the physical walls. To demolish the walls of the two Koreans' hearts, humanitarian matters, especially the separated family problem, should be settled as a first matter. Settling the inter-Korean separated family problem means not only the realization of the families' human rights, but it is also a sign of improvement in the inter-Korean relationship through actualizing humanitarianism over differences in politics, ideology, and social systems. Therefore, the separated family problem should be dealt with in regard to human rights and in a humanitarian way. It also should be dealt with as an essential process for improving the relationship of the two Koreas. In addition to that, the inter-Korean separated family problem should be settled with nationwide interest and support prior to unification since it is closely related to inter-Korean social integration. Therefore, it is desirable to raise citizens' interest on separated families through education and promotions related to the matter and through encouraging assertive and active participation in the settlement of the problem.

Future generations will not be able to feel sympathy for the pain and agony the first generation of separated families has been through, so naturally the interchange and reunion of separated families cannot be a serious problem to them, and, as a result, the separated family problem will likely lose its importance and substance. In the age range of the applicants for the present reunions, senior citizens over 70 years of age make up over 70% of the group and the death rate of these aged people is rapidly increasing. It is predictable that the death rate of the aged first generation of separated families will increase as time goes by and this implies that it is an urgent and desperate matter to settle this separated family problem.