



Online Series

2018. 09. 27. | CO 18-40

Humanitarian Cooperation for Resolution of the Issue of Separated Families

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Leaders of South and North Korea reaffirmed the will for strengthening “humanitarian cooperation” to fundamentally resolve the issue of family separation through the Pyeongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018. In fact, the agreements on separated families stipulated in the Pyeongyang Joint Declaration are indicative of the practical implementation of October 4 Declaration of 2007. The two leaders have stressed the need for a declaration to end the 1950–53 Korean War and the peace settlement. One way to make the public feel the actual impact of the end-of-the war declaration is to step up efforts to address the issue of family separation in a forward-looking manner. Moreover, the strengthening of humanitarian cooperation, as set forth in the Pyeongyang Joint Declaration, will mark the new beginning of creating a community of humanitarianism on the Korean Peninsula in the long term.

Humanitarian Cooperation Specified in Pyeongyang Joint Declaration

One of the deepest pains caused by the division of the Korean

Peninsula and the subsequent war is “family separation.” Leaders of the two Koreas declared in Panmunjeom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula (hereinafter referred to as “Panmunjeom Declaration”) on April 27 that the issue of separated families is defined as a humanitarian issue caused by the division of the nation. Taking a step further, both leaders reaffirmed, in the Pyeongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018, the will for strengthening humanitarian cooperation to fundamentally resolve the issue of separated families. In fact, reunion meetings for separated families actually took place from August 20 to 26 in areas of Mt. Kungang as agreed upon in the Panmunjeom Declaration, which specified “South and North Korea agreed to proceed with reunion programs for the separated families on the occasion of the National Liberation Day of August 15 this year.” Through the 21st reunion meeting this time, a total of 1,992 people (292 cases) were able to confirm whether their remaining family members on the opposite side of the DMZ are still alive and 833 people (170 cases) met their family members in person.

By the end of August 2018, 132,731 separated family members have been registered to be included in a list for reunion visits at the Integrated Information System for Separated Families of the Ministry of Unification,¹⁾ among which 76,024 already passed away and only 56,707 people are alive. Of those registered for reunion visits, people aged 90 or over accounted for 21.3% (12,061 people) and those aged 80 or older, 62.7% (35,531 people). The number of separated family members newly registered for reunion visits has significantly increased as the expectation for family reunion has never been higher after the 1st 2018 Inter-Korean Summit on April. In 2017, the number of people newly registered for reunion meeting was only 16 on average per month. But in 2018 that number markedly went up to 365 in April, 228 in May, 360 in June, 119 in July, and 128 in August.

In fact, the agreements regarding separated families set forth in the

1) The Integrated Information System for Separated Families of the Ministry of Unification, <<http://reunion.unikorea.go.kr>>.

Pyeongyang Joint Declaration are indicative of the practical implementation of Declaration on the Advancement of South-North Korean Relations, Peace and Prosperity of October 4, 2007 (hereinafter referred to as “October 4 Declaration of 2007”). The October 4 Declaration of 2007 stated “The South and the North have agreed to actively promote humanitarian cooperation projects” and “The South and the North have agreed to expand reunion of separated family members and their relatives and promote exchanges of video messages.” It also stipulated “To this end, the South and the North have agreed to station resident representatives from each side at the reunion center at Mt. Kumgang when it is completed and regularize reunions of separated family members and their relatives.” In addition, the two Koreas agreed to actively cooperate in case of emergency including natural disasters. In fact, South and North Korea once agreed on carrying out projects on a quarterly basis of special reunion meetings and exchange of video messages for roughly 100 people at the 9th Inter-Korean Red Cross Talks on November 2007. The Pyeongyang Joint Declaration was devised with a reflection on the implementation failure of the past agreements triggered by worsening relations. Furthermore, it also carries the meaning that such efforts of both sides should be made as part of humanitarian cooperation.

Preparation for Full Operation of the Mount Kumgang Reunion Center

The two Koreas agreed on establishing the Mount Kumgang Reunion Center at the 15th inter-Korean ministerial meeting held on June 2005. Not long after, the Korean Red Cross adopted an Agreement on Exchange and Cooperation between Red Cross in South and North Korea laying out cooperative measures as follows: preparations for construction of the Mount Kumgang Reunion Center, modernization of Red Cross General Hospital in Pyeongyang, and an annual tree-planting campaign of Red Cross Youth (RCY) members of the South and the North. Although the construction of Mount Kumgang Reunion Center was completed on July 2008, its operation had been halted since the shooting and killing of a South Korean tourist

by a North Korean soldier in the territory of the North at Mt. Kumgang. It was until after September 2009 that the Center resumed its operation for reunion meetings in group. As such, the Center had long remained dormant after its completion. In addition, during that period, North Korea had also enforced a freezing of assets for an area of Mt. Kumgang. However, those restrictions imposed on the Reunion Center were lifted after the 2018 Inter-Korean Summit Pyeongyang. Accordingly, measures will be followed to restore facilities for the proper operation of the Center. In that regard, there should be consultations and agreements on how to operate the Center between the two Koreas through inter-Korean Red Cross talks in the coming days. Resident representatives from Red Cross of both the South and the North will be stationed at the Reunion Center and be in charge of making a venue regularly and permanently open for families separated by the Korean War.

So far, 3-days and 2-nights reunion meetings were limited only to 100 people from each side, all of whom have not been able to contact or see their family members again thereafter. This very limited number of people allowed for reunion visits have inevitably left separated families feel frustrated. Family separation, caused by the division and war of the nation, is not only a humanitarian issue but also an issue of human rights rightly approached from the perspective of restoring family right. In fact, South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un have both stressed the need for a declaration to end the Korean War and the peace settlement on the Korean Peninsula. Forward-looking attitude and active efforts for the issue of separated families could help make the public feel the impact of the end-of-the war declaration. When a war ends, people should be able to confirm whether their lost families, split by the war, are still alive and be able to meet with each other without any restrictions. In that regard, a new approach is required for operating the Mt. Kumgang Reunion Center.

Resumption of Video Correspondence and Exchange of Video Messages

The Pyeongyang Joint Declaration stipulates “The two sides agreed to

resolve the issue of video meetings and exchange of video messages among the separated families as a matter of priority through the inter-Korean Red Cross talks.” Through a visit of special envoy in 2005, both Koreas agreed to hold video meetings at the 15th Inter-Korean Red Cross Talks on August 15 as a pilot project on occasion of the National Liberation Day. In accordance with those agreements, video meetings had been held seven times from 2005 to 2007 with the participation of 3,748 people from 557 families. Given the aging facilities for video meetings, which were initially established in 2005, it is required to newly renovate them with new technology.²⁾ Moreover, it is necessary to consider the health status of aging separated family members and to expand facilities for video meetings in every province for their better accessibility.

The ROK government, since 2005, has commissioned video messaging projects for separated families to the Korean Red Cross. The projects aim to deliver video messaging of separated families in the South to families in the North once inter-Korean relations improve so that recorded tapes can be delivered even after one’s death. In 2008, as a pilot project, 20 video messages of 20 families, who have already met through reunion visits, were made and exchanged according to inter-Korean agreements. By the end of 2017 thereafter, a total of 19,560 video messages had been produced. Currently, there are 1,570 video messages available at the Integrated Information System for Separated Families of the Ministry of Unification. Considering all those efforts of the past, a practical approach is to deliver already made video messages to separated family members in the North whose whereabouts and survival were confirmed.

2) Kim Sung-keun, “How to Proceed Reunion Visits for Separated Families Independently of the Political Situation?” (in Korean) (Proceedings of the 4th Strategic Seminar on Inter-Korean Humanitarian Issues hosted by the Korean Red Cross, June 13, 2017), p. 37.

Full Investigation into Whether Family Members Are Still Alive

The first priority for the fundamental resolution of the issue of separated families is to launch an investigation into whether all the separated families who were registered for reunion meeting are still alive. In fact, the ROK government once carried out an investigation on separated family members who are alive and still wish for reunion visit. According to the 2016 survey, 32,000 people were confirmed to be in that category when excluding those who did not wish for investigation of survival of family members, did not participate in the investigation, and were not investigated properly.³⁾ At the first half of 2018, a complete enumeration survey on the survival of separated families was conducted with a consideration for those who passed away after the first 2016 survey and those newly registered for the reunion. Reflecting on experiences of the past, the future investigation should focus not only on notifying families of whether their other family members in the North are still alive but also on sharing information regarding the death of their family, such as the date of death, graveyard site, and belongings of the deceased. Another option to seriously consider is to review how to utilize the gene sampling of separated family members in order to verify whether remaining families whose separated family members passed away are blood-related.⁴⁾

Moreover, there should be efforts to shine a light at the society level through the media on the will of authorities of the two Koreas, both of whom are determined to fundamentally resolve the issue of separated families. It is because that the full-scale investigation of survival of remaining families primarily requires the participation of families of both sides. Social pledges should be made to declare the following: there should be no discrimination against families just because their separated family members reside in the opposite side of the DMZ; and the pains

3) Jung Jae-eun, "Research on Improvement for Institutionalized Exchange for the Resolution of Separated Families," (in Korean) (Proceedings of the 4th Strategic Seminar on Inter-Korean Humanitarian Issues hosted by the Korean Red Cross, June 13, 2017), pp. 52~54.

4) 22,693 cases of genetic information of separated family members had been collected by the end of 2017. In 2018, additional 5,000 cases of gene sampling are being collected.

of those families should be understood and alleviated supported by the best efforts to resolve the issue. Furthermore, the Korean Red Cross should install and operate a center for exchange of separated families on a regular and permanent basis to confirm whether family members are alive. One viable option in the short term would be to establish such center in Kaesong where the inter-Korean liaison office is located.

Visit to Hometown and Graveyard

The 2016 survey on the current status of separated families suggests that 68.3% of separated family members in South Korea who originally came from North Korea responded “yes” to a question of “I have the intent to visit a graveyard of families in the North.”⁵⁾ The 2018 enumeration survey on those registered for reunion visits indicates that 79.2% of those whose came from the North have an intention to participate in projects of visiting their hometown.⁶⁾ Given that parents of those aged 80 or older are highly likely to have long passed away, a visit to hometown and graveyard can be tantamount to family reunion for them. In addition, leaders of the South and the North should open the door for separated families to visit their hometown within their lifetime considering that their last one remaining wish is to set a foot in their hometown. One option to consider is to have families visit their hometown in group around an area of famous sites since an individual visit might be difficult for the short term due to the transportation situation. According to the Integrated Information System for Separated Families of the Ministry of Unification, 21.9% of separated families came from North Hwanghae Province, 11.9% South Pyongan Province, and 10.3% South Hamgyong Province. Currently, 29.9%

5) Gallup Korea, 『2016 Report on the Current Status of Separated Families』 (in Korean) (Research Report Commissioned by the Ministry of Unification), p. 15.

6) Matrix, 『Full-scale Enumeration Survey on the Survival of Separated Families』 (in Korean) (Research Report Commissioned by the Ministry of Unification and Korean Red Cross), p. 12.

of separated families reside in Gyeonggi Province, 26.8% Seoul Special City, and 8.3% Incheon Metropolitan City. The local authorities should also actively put forth efforts to find a way to ease the pains of separated families. So far, works related to separated families have been considered to be handled by the Ministry of Unification and the Korean Red Cross. In fact, the Committee for the Five Northern Korean Provinces was established under the Ministry of the Interior and Safety (MOIS). However, they are not directly involved in the works of separated families. To that end, there should be active, region-wide involvement of separated families in the implementation process of inter-Korean exchange and cooperative projects of the local authorities. With such participation, those family members will be able to find their long-lost hometown. The central authorities and NGOs should also play a role of facilitating their participation in carrying out such projects. A project of visiting their hometown and graveyard will make the families directly and most effectively feel an impact of the peace settlement on the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, it will also be an opportunity to heal the wounds of the division and promote the reconciliation for families on both sides of the DMZ.

Community of Humanitarianism on the Korean Peninsula

Strengthening humanitarian cooperation, as stipulated in the Pyeongyang Joint Declaration, could mark the new beginning of shaping a community of humanitarianism on the Korean Peninsula in the long term. For the short term, it is required to create a framework, through which the Red Cross of both Koreas can cooperate on a regular basis to address the issue of family separation caused by the division of the nation. The Korea Red Cross, humanitarian organization, has an expertise in family separation, disaster management, and blood management medical projects. The Red Cross Society of North Korea set forth in Article 8, Paragraph 2 of the Korean Red Cross Act that its duty is to perform emergency medical services and health and sanitation projects for the prevention of outbreak of various diseases including communicable diseases. It is also stipulated that it is

obligated to be cooperative toward national health and medical authorities. To that end, it is necessary to institutionalize the issue of family separation and emergency medical projects as inter-Korean Red Cross cooperative projects proceeded on a regular and permanent basis. In that regard, efforts should be resumed to carry out exchange and cooperation projects between Red Cross of the South and the North, which were agreed upon in the past but failed to get implemented thereafter. ©KINU 2018

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