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In South Korea, Anguish Over Deaths Of North Korean Defectors Who May Have Starved

By Anthony Kuhn • Sep 17, 2019 NPR

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  A man sets up portraits of North Korean defector Han Seong-ok and her 6-year-old son, who are believed to have died from starvation, at a makeshift shrine in downtown Seoul on Aug. 28. Jung Yeon-Je / AFP/Getty Images

Audio version of the story is available at the link above.

"My hometown, where I once lived, is a mountain village with blossoming flowers."

The lyrics to this folk song, which is sung in both Koreas, evoke nostalgia for a time and a place to which one can never return.

On a recent day, it is playing at a makeshift shrine in downtown Seoul. There's an altar with flowers, alongside photos of 42-year-old North Korean defector Han Seong-ok and her 6-year-old son, Kim Dong-jin.

In late July, the management staff for the apartment building where Han lived went looking for her, to see about months of unpaid utility bills. Smelling a foul odor from her apartment, they broke in and found both mother and son on the floor. They had been dead for two months. The bodies were so decomposed, authorities say they couldn't determine the cause of death.

There was no food in the apartment except a bag of chili pepper flakes. Han's bank account was empty. Police found no evidence of foul play, so many people assume Han and her child starved to death.

The case has shocked South Koreans and refocused attention on the roughly 33,000 North Korean defectors living in the South. Some say inadequate government policies and South Korean society's indifference are what killed Han and her boy.

Choi Jung-hun, the head of a defectors' group called the Union to Safeguard Freedom, who is maintaining the shrine to Han, blames South Korean President Moon Jae-in's policy of diplomatic engagement with Pyongyang, by which Moon hopes to end the North's isolation and pursuit of nuclear weapons.

"The Moon Jae-in government is walking on eggshells to look good to [North Korean leader] Kim Jong Un," he argues. "That takes away defectors' freedom. We are always in a blind spot, treated as immigrants and not citizens of the Republic of Korea" — though defectors are eligible for citizenship and do become citizens.

People walk past flowers and a makeshift shrine in Seoul commemorating North Korean defector Han Seong-ok and her 6-year-old son, who were found dead in late July. Evidence suggesting they may have starved to death has ignited a controversy over government policies toward defectors. Anthony Kuhn/NPR

Kim Eun-han, a deputy spokesperson for the government's Ministry of Unification, which oversees relations with North Korea, says that the government had repeatedly expressed condolences for Han's death, but that it is "inappropriate" to link it with inter-Korean relations.

The ministry has reviewed and announced fixes to its policies to support defectors, including expanding community outreach programs and extending welfare benefits. But defectors say they're inadequate.

Groups that help defectors say they are often traumatized by their experiences escaping from North Korea and the difficulties of adapting to life in the South. Many lack the skills to thrive in a capitalist economy. Defectors are required to undergo three months of training in basic life skills, such as opening a bank account and taking the subway, before they can permanently settle in South Korea. But Choi says it's a useless formality.

Kim Yong-hwa, chairman of the North Korea Refugees Human Rights Association of Korea, a defectors group, says South Korea should either take better care of defectors or not take them in at all.

Kim met Han Seong-ok in China in 2009, after Han had been trafficked from North Korea as a bride to a man in China. It's not clear when exactly she was sold to the man. Kim helped Han get from China to South Korea that year. He says her hard life was visible in her rough and calloused hands.

"She looked at least 15 or 20 years older than her actual age," he recalls. "She was growing corn and potatoes in a rural town in China. And unlike here, farming there is not mechanized."

Han returned to China last year, divorced her husband, and returned to Seoul with her son.

Kim says Han applied to the government for welfare benefits last winter, but was rejected because she didn't have proof of her divorce. Defectors are eligible for benefits, but only for five years. Kim tried to persuade government administrators to help her, but to no avail.

"I think that's when she gave up on seeking help," he says.

According to a survey last year by the government-funded Korea Hana Foundation, which helps defectors, the unemployment rate for defectors was 6.9% — 2.9% higher than the national average. They are concentrated in manual labor and service industries, and on average, work 8.8 hours a week more than the national average but are paid about a third less than South Koreans.

Kim says defectors' poverty in South Korea and the accompanying sense of shame often contribute to their isolation.

"Imagine how you'd feel as a parent when you can't afford to feed your child or to give them anything other than used clothes," he says. "You start to hate the society and shun people."

Han's death anguished Kim and made him doubt himself. "I thought, 'Why did I bring her here?' " he says. Of course, he says, he brought her here to help her find freedom — but what was the point, he wonders, if she just starved to death in a land of plenty.

A fellow defector surnamed Lee, who did not want NPR to use her full name for fear that her family would face discrimination, was one of the few people who knew Han Seong-ok. Both were from Hamhung, North Korea's second-largest city. In 2009, they were in the same class at a government-funded training center, which all defectors to the South must attend.

"I was really glad and grateful to know that she's from my hometown," Lee remembers. "I liked her so much that we promised to remain friends and move to the same district together."

Lee remembers that Han seemed bright, but says she often had a "shadow" or sad look on her face and often walked on the street with her face tilted down, obscured by the brim of her hat.

Two symbolic caskets in downtown Seoul commemorate North Korean defector Han Seong-ok and her 6-year-old son, who were found dead in late July. The banner advertises a memorial service for them. Anthony Kuhn/NPR

She believes Han was distraught about a husband and child she left in China.

"Almost every female North Korean defector feels torn between the family they already have," she says, "and the possibility of a new spouse and a new family in South Korea."

Lee says that if Han had stayed in North Korea, she would not have died unknown there. That would require a kind of privacy and anonymity that doesn't exist there.

In North Korea, "You even know how many spoons your neighbor has," Lee says. "Even during the famine of the 1990s, we would know the morning after if someone had died overnight, so we could take out the body for burial right away."