

Disabled in North Korea Confined to Homes, Expelled From Capital

Original reporting in Korean by Lee Aeran, Sung Woo Park, Naeri Kim, Changyoon Lee, Sookyung Lee, and Myeong Hwa Jang. RFA Korean service director: Jaehoon Ahn. Translated and researched by Greg Scarlatou. Written for the Web in English by Luissetta Mudie and edited by Sarah Jackson-Han, Radio Free Asia

June 13, 2007

SEOUL—Rejected and marginalized by a regime that has only recently begun to acknowledge their existence, disabled North Koreans live under effective house arrest and are routinely expelled from the capital, Pyongyang, defectors and aid groups say.

Defectors now living overseas have described a society that routinely uses derogatory language about the disabled, and an almost total lack of rehabilitation facilities or social services for them.

“In the North, disabled persons are looked down upon and contemptuously called ‘cripples’ or ‘freaks,’” North Korean defector Lee Aeran said. “This is unacceptable and unthinkable in the South, where the use of such terms could even have serious legal repercussions.”

In an opinion piece aired April 20, which is National Disabled Person’s Day in South Korea, Lee said: “In North Korea, such a day does not exist.”

Showcase city

Disabled babies are seen as *persona non grata* in Pyongyang and their families are banished from the capital city and forced to relocate in rural areas.

“If a child is born with a disability to parents living in Pyongyang, the whole family is expelled from the capital city,” she said.

Lee said the isolated Stalinist state wants to promote the image of Pyongyang as an immaculate showcase city.

“Disabled babies are seen as *persona non grata* in Pyongyang, and their families are banished from the capital city and forced to relocate in rural areas,” she said.

“The disabled are thus forced to live in a difficult environment that does not provide for their special needs, and that makes North Korea a terrible place to live for persons living with a disability,” she said. Disabled military veterans are honored, she said, while those who are born disabled or become disabled through accidents or malnutrition are despised.

Lee’s story is borne out by international aid agencies such as Handicap International and the Geneva-based International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Lack of awareness

These groups work to provide prosthetic limbs and mobility aids, and supporting local capacity to produce such devices by training ortho-prosthetic technicians and increasing local direct project management.

But Pyongyang ordered all but a handful of foreign aid workers to leave the country at the end of 2005, and their work hasn’t resumed.

Jeong Taek Jeong, head of the Washington, D.C. chapter of the disabled aid agency World Association of Milal, has visited North Korea twice and said he was shocked to find that North Korea has no system of physical rehabilitation.

“North Korea does not have a grip on the disabled or their needs, and there are no rehabilitation clinics,” Jeong told RFA.

“North Korea simply lacks a system of physical rehabilitation medicine. Neither does it produce disability products or aids for the disabled, such as canes for the visually impaired, wheelchairs, or any other kind of mobility aids.”

Jeong asked his North Korean hosts how the disabled manage without such basic necessities.

Disabled defectors

“I was told that the disabled, the visually impaired in particular, live confined to their homes. I encountered a complete lack of awareness regarding the necessity of training or rehabilitation programs for the disabled,” he said.

In 2003, the North Korean government passed a law in principle at protecting disabled people, but legislation to implement that law hasn’t been passed.

In its 2006 human rights report issued March 6, the U.S. State Department said traditional social norms condone discrimination against the disabled in North Korea. It quoted defectors as saying the

disabled are indeed routinely expelled from Pyongyang "into internal exile."

In South Korea, the income of households of people with disabilities is around half that of households comprising able-bodied people, and unemployment among the disabled is three times higher than for their nondisabled counterparts.

But defectors say South Korea has been working on improving disability policy and disability welfare policy, while the situation in the North differs dramatically.

Kim Mo, a North Korean defector who arrived in South Korea in 2004, lost the use of one eye in a childhood accident. He said: "South Korea is light-years ahead of the North in terms of disabled access facilities or the interest the government takes in the disabled."

Special schools needed

But he said disabled defectors in the South still face huge problems.

"Finding a job or earning a living is not easy for the disabled in South Korea ... The situation of the disabled North Korean defectors in the South is even more difficult, as we face a double challenge," Kim said.

Officials of the South Korean National Assembly who deal with social welfare policy, contacted for comment, said the dual challenge faced by disabled North Korean defectors is an issue that "hadn't been thought of" previously in the South.

In March, a North Korean defector in her 40s who lost both legs as a result of torture and frostbite in both a North Korean concentration camp and a Chinese detention center, received free prosthetic limbs in the United States.

Park Mo's case received widespread coverage in the South Korean media, which highlighted her defection journey to South Korea with her son, despite her disability.

According to North Korea's Federation for the Protection of the Disabled, about 3.4 percent of Koreans in the North are disabled. But Kwon Hyun Chul, a professor at South Korea's College of Rehabilitation Sciences, said that estimate is unrealistic.

Prosthetics, mobility aids produced

"In developed countries, the percentage of people living with disabilities is anywhere between 10 and 20 percent, and it is very likely that the number of disabled people in North Korea is higher than the 3.4 percent estimate," he said.

Kwon said there are eight special deaf-mute schools in North Korea and three special schools for the blind. But the schools are in a pitiable state financially, and far more schools are needed, he said.

He also called for greater North-South cooperation on the issue.

"We need to establish a unified service desk for South and North Korean disability experts to share relevant information and exchange opinions on relevant issues, and understand how they can put together the available human and material resources to improve the situation of people living with disabilities in South and North Korea," he said.

"It's insufficient to simply establish a 'Joint Inter-Korean Service Center for Disability Welfare and Rehabilitation.' This should be just a first step. Cooperation and exchanges should take place continuously through this center that we envision," he said.

Kwon said that Taegu University has collaborated with a multitude of agencies and organizations to seek ways to improve disability welfare and rehabilitation, and that such partnerships would be key factors in helping persons living with disabilities in the two Koreas, and in North Korea in particular.

Children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable, experts say.

Kim Yong Wook, director general of the Korea Institute for Special Education (KISE) said many North Korean children afflicted with various degrees of developmental disability, including mental retardation, are currently excluded from education and experience severe neglect.

He called for special education to be a top priority in any work addressing the needs of North Korea's disabled.