

The End of Silence: Korea's A-bomb victims seek redress

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By Andreas Hippin

When Shin Jin Tae's first daughter died, her mother was still breast-feeding her.

"She became thinner and thinner until she passed away," the 62-year-old farmer says. When more mysterious diseases and inexplicable deaths occurred in Hapcheon county where he lives, Shin started to think that all this might be related to the past.

Shin was born in Hiroshima. When the atomic bomb was dropped on August 6, 1945, he was two years old.

"More than 70 percent of the Korean victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki came from Hapcheon," he says. Most of the survivors returned. Shin is one of 598 atomic bomb victims still living there.

Hapcheon county is an otherworldly place in South Korea's Gyeongsangnamdo Province. With its rice paddies and mixed deciduous and coniferous forests, the poor mountainous region north of Pusan is a paradise for romantics.

Haeinsa, a UNESCO world heritage temple boasting a collection of more than 80,000 beautifully carved woodblocks with Buddhist scriptures, is hidden in its mountains.

But these mountains also keep darker secrets from a more recent past.

Hapcheon is also called "the Korean

Hiroshima."

"Ten percent of the hundreds of thousands of victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were Korean. Most of them were forced laborers making guns and ammunition in the factories of the Japanese military. Others were landless farmers, mostly from Hapcheon, looking for employment in Japanese cities," says Kang Je Suk.

As secretary general of a group called Peace Project Network, her main aim is to achieve compensation for former forced laborers.

"That the victims of Hiroshima were not only Japanese is widely unknown in Japan and Korea. Japan sees itself as the only nation that was ever attacked with an atomic weapon. But Koreans and other Asians have also been hit," Kang says.

Many Koreans returned to Korea between 1945 and 1950.

"Those people were ignored by the Japanese and by the Korean government. Korean people were not welcoming them either," says Professor Han Hong Koo, a teacher of modern Korean history at Sungkonghoe University in Seoul.

"Some were accused of being pro-Japanese. At least they had been there."

Young people like Shin faced discrimination because their Korean was not so good. Of the 50,000 Korean survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki 43,000 went back to the Korean peninsula.

"There were rumors that the Japanese would kill those who wanted to stay in Japan," says Kim Il Jo. She was born in Kyoto, but had to move to Hiroshima. After being conscripted to work for the military she had married quickly to avoid being transferred to another city. When the bomb fell she was 18 years old.

"It was very hard for us to make a living in Hapcheon," she remembers. "We did not have our own land and we had no idea of agriculture. But my husband's mother wanted to go back to Hapcheon."

Kim tried to re-enter Japan illegally with her husband in June 1946 but was caught and deported.

A-bomb victims who could not hide their scars were mistaken for victims of Hansen's disease and excluded from society. Most of them ended up begging in the streets.

"Their scars were gleaming in the sun. They were easy to recognize," Shin remembers. Those who were not recognized, tried to stay undercover. "If you went public, you could not marry," Shin said. "I had to remain silent."

"There was no support from the government, so why should people admit they were atomic bomb victims? There was no reason to tell it loudly," Professor Han explains.

According to him there were many reasons for the victims to remain silent. "Japan capitulated after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Many people believe that the nuclear bombs liberated Korea," he says.

During the Korean War, the United States was thinking about the use of atomic bombs against the North. And between 1957 and 1991 South Korea was under the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Between 600 and 1,200 U.S. nuclear weapons were deployed in the country.

"In this situation the victims could not speak out," Han says.

"Ninety percent of those who returned to South Korea died because there was no medical treatment and no support for them," claims Kwak Kwi Hoon, president of the Korean Atomic Bomb Victim Association.

A-bomb victims and their descendants are still unable to lead a normal life in South Korea.

"People do not hire private detectives to investigate the background of wedding candidates as in Japan, but they are very afraid of genetic diseases," Professor Han says.

For this reason Kim Il Jo waited until 1993 before she registered as a victim. At that time her son and her three daughters were married. She is one of the 79 residents of the Hapcheon Welfare Center for Atomic Bomb Victims.

Young offenders sentenced to some hours of community work here respectfully call her "halmeoni" (grandmother).

The Welfare Center was built with Japanese money. In 1993, Japan paid South Korea 4 billion yen in humanitarian assistance to help the Korean A-bomb survivors.

The money was handed over to the Red Cross and used to build and run the center and to pay the survivors a small pension of 100,000 Won a month (approximately \$100). Since the money from Japan ran out last year, the Korean government has funded the Welfare Center. A lot of the equipment was donated by Japanese NGOs like Kakkin (National Council for Peace and Against Nuclear Weapons).

That Japan never compensated Korean A-bomb victims has caused much bitterness.

"We want compensation, not humanitarian gestures," says 72-year-old Kim Jae Man. "The Japanese government is simply waiting for us to die. When I saw Koizumi on TV during his visit to Seoul I thought: 'How can he treat me like this?' "

Kim was born in Hiroshima. When the bomb exploded he was in elementary school.

Koreans were deprived of Japanese citizenship following Japan's defeat. Those who were hibakusha suffered a double blow, as they were also deprived of access to Japanese-funded health benefits for atomic survivors, whether they remained in Japan or returned to Korea. The Korean victims fought for decades to receive compensation and medical treatment from Japan.

In a landmark decision the Japanese Supreme Court decided in 1978 that Son Jin Doo, a South Korean A-bomb victim who had entered Japan to get medical treatment in Saga, had to be treated equally regardless of the fact that he was an illegal immigrant.

However the health administration drafted a rule that turned Son's success into a Pyrrhic victory. It limited medical treatment and pension payments to victims living in Japan. In October 1998, Kwak Kwi Hoon sued to overturn this rule. He demanded that the Japanese government pay for his follow-up treatment in South Korea.



"We want to be treated like the Japanese victims. I am an A-bomb victim regardless whether I am in Korea or Japan. I have to be compensated, wherever I am," he argues. Four years later he won in the Supreme Court.

"The Japanese government has been taken to court more than 80 times by former forced laborers, women forced into prostitution by the Japanese military (the "comfort women") and other victims from Korea. All were turned down," Kwak says.

"Only I won and only I got money from Japan in the end. In my case the statute of limitations had not expired and it was not about people just following orders. The court simply decided whether an administrative rule was legally binding or not."

As a result A-bomb victims living abroad were able to get the official victim passbook ("hibakusha techo") providing medical assistance after March 1, 2003.

Approximately 3,000 survivors in Korea

received it.

According to Kwak it is still difficult for victims to obtain it, because they have to bring two witnesses testifying that they were in Hiroshima or Nagasaki at the time of the bombings.

Because of her good Japanese language skills Kim Il Jo has often accompanied other victims as an interpreter when went to Japan.

"Under my Japanese name Matsumoto Kimiyo I worked three years as a bus attendant for Dentetsu in Hiroshima," she remembers. "They took me for a Japanese."

About 600 victims in South Korea still have not been able to get the passbook entitling them to medical treatment and pension payments, Kwak says.

Even after death, discrimination continues. While Japanese atomic victims receive 198,000 yen for their funeral, the Korean victims get nothing.

But it was not Mr. Kwak who put the issue on the political agenda this spring. Sixty years after the bombing, the descendants of the victims captured the attention of the South Korean public by proposing a law to support the victims.

"Before that only progressive people from the medical sector did something about it," Professor Han said.

Kim Hyeon Gyul was the leader of a group of 50 second-generation victims who no longer

wanted to remain silent.

"Frankly speaking, as a historian I did not know that so many Koreans had been killed until a year ago," admits Professor Han. "I heard about it from Kim Hyeon Gyul. Our schools do not tell much about the dangers and horrors of nuclear weapons. In Hiroshima and Nagasaki about 50,000 Koreans were killed in a day and there is nothing about it in the school books."

"We do not know how many second generation victims there are," he says. "At that time people had four or five children each. That would make about 80,000 to 120,000 second generation victims in South Korea."

The second generation issue is a ticking bomb, not only in South Korea. Kwak estimates that there may be hundreds of thousands of second generation victims in Japan. The law proposed in South Korea addresses this issue for the first time.

The public discussion encouraged NGOs like the Korea Youth Corps (KYC) to get engaged.

"In contrast to former forced laborers or the so called comfort women these people were excluded from our history and abandoned," says Kim Dong Lyul. He is the KYC office head in Taegu. "We might not be able to help them get compensated, but we can keep their history."

This is a slightly edited version of an article that appeared in The Japan Times, August 2, 2005. It was posted at Japan Focus on August 3, 2005. Andreas Hippin is a freelance writer who is working on a PhD thesis on religious dimensions of the political thought of Japan's New Right. He is a Japan Focus associate.