

South Korean prisoners of conscience: ‘They are still warriors’

written by Scott Scheffer
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Peter Kim (center) visiting with South Korean prisoners of conscience.

Beginning in 1905, the Empire of Japan occupied Korea. Korean resistance fighters throughout the nation were highly organized. By the time World War II was

concluding, the guerilla army led by Kim Il Sung had driven the Japanese out of the northern half of the peninsula.

Resistance was also powerful in the South, and the occupiers killed and jailed thousands as they tried to hold on to power. When Japan was defeated, the United States moved into what is now South Korea. They continued the brutal occupation that Koreans had suffered since 1905.

The heroic resistance in the south delayed the U.S. attack on North Korea for five years as the U.S. and quisling Koreans who had collaborated with Japan barely held onto power. In the process, they murdered thousands of peasants, students, communist fighters, and unionists. They jailed tens of thousands.

Just before the 1950-53 Korean War, the U.S. oversaw mass executions of political prisoners carried out by their comprador South Korean puppets. Many who were spared execution spent the rest of their days in prison, refusing to renounce their desire for socialism, liberation, and reunification with the North.

Korea's National Security Law remains in place today. Arrests have continued. Those refusing to renounce their desire for reunification and socialism serve some of the world's longest sentences for political prisoners.

Struggle-La Lucha spoke with Peter Kim, a Los Angeles activist with the Support Committee for Korean Prisoners of Conscience.

SLL: You visited with some of the Prisoners of Conscience in South Korean prisons. Can you explain briefly what a prisoner of conscience is?

Peter Kim: A Prisoner of Conscience is a person imprisoned for holding political or religious views that are not tolerated by their own government. In Korea, prisoners of conscience are unconverted long-term prisoners. Who are unconverted prisoners? They are POWs from the Korean War. They were in the People's Army to be returned

under the cease-fire treaty but were sent to prison instead. This is a violation of the cease-fire treaty and the Geneva Convention. It's a war crime.

SLL: What did it mean to be converted or unconverted?

Peter Kim: People living in the south who opposed the U.S. invasion supported the People's Army. After the Korean War, they were victims of the KCIA's fabricated spy allegations. What is conversion? When the Japanese occupied Korea, they tried to eliminate the national liberation movement. Koreans who fought for liberation were jailed, tortured, and eventually executed if they refused to pledge their loyalty to the Japanese. To prove loyalty, the prisoners had to write about their regretful behavior and sign their loyalty to the Japanese. People who did this received lighter sentences, and were pardoned and freed. Even the Nazis did not have a conversion program for dissenters. Japanese imperialism still has not apologized for its sexual slavery, forced labor, and occupation of neighboring countries.

SLL: What was the treatment of people, particularly the unconverted prisoners, after the U.S. moved in?

Peter Kim: After liberation from Japan, Americans used the same National Security Law that the Japanese used in the colonial era to put down their political enemies, those who resisted the government and were socialists. It's shameful to say that unconverted long-term prisoners are going through a conversion course much worse than what the Japanese did to the Koreans. Many of them were killed in the conversion process. How can you change someone's ideology or thought? Being able to think and speak freely is a basic human right!

SLL: That same National Security Law is still in place, and speaking out for reunification or visiting North Korea still gets people arrested in South Korea. Are there still long prison sentences?

Peter Kim: Yes. Nelson Mandela was a long-term prisoner. He was in prison for 27 years. Korean unconverted long-term prisoners' average prison time is 33 years; the longest is 43 years and ten months. As a result of the North-South Korea summit in 2000, some 63 unconverted long-term prisoners, excluding those who wanted to remain in the south, returned to their motherland in September 2000.

They got a warm welcome and were treated as national heroes. Back then, the distinction between conversion and non-conversion mattered. So the few converted long-term prisoners didn't go back. After the first repatriation, 46 people waited for the second repatriation. We are constantly asking the authorities for a second repatriation for those who were left out. After 23 years, most of them passed away without being able to return to their motherland and family. Only nine remain.

On my visit to Korea, I met 4 of the remaining 9. Two of them just underwent surgery, even though they are in their 90s. It is not easy to decide on surgery, and they may die during the operation. However, their tenacity to return to their motherland and report to the Workers Party of Korea seems to have led them to such determination. They recovered faster than expected and worked hard for rehabilitation. They are still warriors!

