North Korea: Ending the killings of babies of pregnant women extradited from China (2003)



In 2000 and 2001, China massively deported North Korean refugees back to North Korea, with many ending up in prison camps. People who later managed to escape to South Korea disclosed that female prisoners in those camps who had become pregnant while in China were routinely forced to have abortions in awful conditions. If it was too late for an abortion and a baby was born, they were killed at birth.

Earlier defectors from North Korea said that the prohibition on pregnancy in prisons dates back to the 1980's, and so forced abortions or infanticide were methods of enforcing it. However, instances of this rule being implemented in prisons were rare at that time.

In the early 2000s, there was an increasing number of defectors to South Korea which brought more testimonies and thus more visibility to this horrific phenomenon. During an interview, Lee Soon Ok, who worked as an accountant for six years at Kaechon political prison in North Korea, disclosed that she saw prison doctors kill new-born babies on two occasions, sometimes by stepping on their necks.

Lee, the widow of a North Korean general who defected to South Korea, also testified to the New York Times that she had seen a prison doctor give injections to eight pregnant women to induce labour. Afterwards, this doctor killed their babies.

In 2002, HRWF's correspondent in Seoul invited Willy Fautré, the director of HRWF, to meet some of the defectors who had witnessed these atrocities. The South Korean media were deliberately ignoring this issue, and so HRWF was asked to report on it. Looking back, Fautré shares that these were the worst stories he ever heard as an interviewer, as they included: torture to provoke abortion; forced early abortion; babies being suffocated; the burial of babies in frozen ground during the winter and the shredding of their corpses by dogs in the spring, and more. HRWF published a report shortly after this fact-finding mission.

Willy Fautré was interviewed by the International Herald Tribune / New York Times (https://nyti.ms/2XzM2ug) in June 2002. Of course, Pyongyang denied accusations of this systemic practice. The issue made the headlines in the United States and other countries. In March 2003, these claims were included for the first time in the U.S. State Department's annual human rights report on North Korea. The issue was also raised in April 2003 by EU delegates to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Year after year, HRWF's report was referenced in UN reports about the state of human rights in North Korea.

Now, there have been no recent reports of forced abortions or infanticide in prisons in North Korea. Although it is unclear when this practice ended, HRWF's advocacy and the brave individuals who shared their stories were the catalyst for the international criticism and pressure that led to the end of these egregious human rights violations in North Korea.