

Korean Hibakusha on Their Own

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By Nakano Akira

[Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of South Korean atomic bomb victims, repatriated to South Korea and bereft of the Japanese citizenship they held under colonial rule, continue to be denied access to Japanese-government supported medical care and benefits, despite court victories that guaranteed these rights. Pressure rightly continues to be applied to the Japanese government to assure their rights. No one, however, seems to be asking another question: what is U.S. responsibility for the surviving victims of the atomic bombs, whether Koreans or Chinese, many of them taken to Korea against their will, or Japanese? Japan Focus]

SEOUL-The only traces that Yun Chom Pun, 66, has left of her brief time in Japan when she was 6 years old are the memory that she was called Fumiko, and a raised, shiny red scar that encircles her abdomen like a sash.

When Yun was pregnant for the first time, she suffered agonizing pain as her growing belly pulled the scar apart.

Growing up, her child would ask her, "Mom, what happened to your tummy?"

Yun did not know.

She would experience throbbing pain on rainy days, an ache which continues to this day.

Then about 10 years ago, Yun's dying father suddenly spoke out on his deathbed, and surprised her with the truth behind her injury: It was caused by the Aug. 6, 1945, atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

"I think he kept the information from me (until immediately before his death) because he wanted to prevent me from recalling painful memories," she said.

Under Japan's colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula between 1910 and 1945, many South Koreans were forcibly relocated to Japan and given Japanese names. After World War II, many returned to South Korea.

South Korean hibakusha are entitled to receive medical treatment in Japan under the atomic bomb survivors assistance law

But like more than 400 other A-bomb survivors in South Korea, Yun does not have the hibakusha kenko techo, a booklet that certifies its holder is a victim of the bombing.

She went to her father's hometown in search of a witness, but to no avail: all those who could remember the colonial days had already passed away.

Yun sighed deeply and told herself, "I'll just have to give up obtaining the certificate."

As of June 30, there were 2,361 hibakusha registered with the Red Cross Society of South Korea.

Of them, 431 did not have the hibakusha booklet, and thus remained ineligible for support.

Sixty years after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, many of these aging victims cannot prove that they are hibakusha because of insufficient evidence or memory loss. Others suffer from ill health and are unable to travel to Japan to apply for the certificate.



South Korean plaintiffs in a lawsuit over slave laborers' exposure to the 1945

A-bomb attack on Hiroshima enter the Hiroshima High Court on Jan. 20, 2005.

The court ordered the state to pay them damages.

Nearly 600 hibakusha live in the mountainous area of Hapchon, Kyongsangnamdo province, in southern South Korea. Under Japanese occupation, many residents crossed the Sea of Japan and landed in Hiroshima.

One of those who survived the atomic bomb attack is Kim Yun Yong, 85, now hospitalized in Hapchon. Her eldest son, also an A-bomb survivor, received a hibakusha booklet, but Kim is without one. She has spent so much time in and out of hospitals that she was unable to travel to Japan to apply for one.

Chong Oi Son, 65, is also a Hiroshima A-bomb survivor. Her leg still carries the scars from her burns, and now she complains of chest and stomach pains.

Sixty years ago, on that unforgettable day, she was climbing a hill in Ujina district in Hiroshima,

holding her mother's hand. The air-raid shelter was up the hillside.

Then came the blinding flash. Her entire family of six was exposed to radiation.

Soon after returning to her father's hometown in Kyongsangnamdo province, Chong's parents died. Chong lost whole clumps of her hair.

It was only three years ago that Chong heard that South Korean hibakusha seeking health-care allowances from the Japanese government had won a lawsuit.

It was the first time she had heard about the existence of the hibakusha kenko techo booklet.

Chong sought advice at the Atomic Bomb Victims Relief Association in Seoul. She was told she needed a witness who could vouch for her

status. So far, she has been unable to find anyone.

None of her siblings has received the booklet, either.

The Korean Atomic Bomb Victims Relief Association has been pushing Japan to allow A-bomb victims to apply for the hibakusha booklet from South Korea..

It is also asking the Japanese government to revise its screening standards, so that more South Korean A-bomb survivors can receive the certificate.

Nevertheless, Chong sounded bitter. "Obtaining the booklet is almost like reaching for the stars in the sky."

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