

Moms Kill Children to Survive Inside North Korea's Prisons

Meet a woman who has witnessed unspeakable evil and lived to tell about it.

For 28 years, Kim Hye Sook languished as a prisoner inside North Korea's oldest concentration camp. She saw daily executions, mass starvation, and mothers killing their children to survive.

Kim granted CBN News the first American television news interview. We must warn you that the images and content of this report are not suitable for children.

Languishing in Prison

Kim is perhaps the longest serving prisoner ever to escape from North Korea.

"I went to the prison camp when I was only 13 years old and I got out when I was 41," she said.

The year was 1975. One morning North Korean government agents burst into her home and dragged away all the members of her family.

"My entire family went to prison," she recalled. "Some were taken to the mountains; others were put in different labor camps all because of my grandfather's one mistake: he escaped to South Korea during the Korean War."

Re-Education Center No. 18

Kim and some of her family were sent to Re-Education Center No. 18, also known as "Bukchang."

"I lost seven members of my family, including my grandmother,

mother, brother, and my husband,” Kim said.

Today she wears dark glasses to conceal her identity.

“I wear these glasses because I have family in the camp,” she said. “Two of my sisters and brother are still in there.”

Bukchang holds some 50,000 prisoners. It’s one of six political prison camps operated by the North Korean government.

Human rights groups estimate some 200,000 North Koreans are languishing behind the walls of these secret internment camps.

“I attended indoctrination classes in the morning,” Kims said. “In the afternoon the children were sent to push trolleys in the coal mines, often without any safety gear.”

Treated Like Slaves

Kim said she was forced to work 16 to 18 hour work days with no rest.

“People were dying in the mines. There were numerous mine collapses, so many injuries, people who lost their legs, many who were buried alive,” she recalled. “It was horrible.”

“I was treated like a slave and worse. I hardly slept. It was inhuman,” she said. “But I never complained. I just followed all the rules. I had to find a way to survive.”

Prisoners didn’t have enough food to eat. Kim said a family of seven was usually given just 10 pounds of corn a month.

Widespread Famine

“1996 was horrible. That year many people died of starvation. There was nothing to eat. There was no grass, no plants were growing,” Kim said.

“You looked around and there were bodies littered throughout

the camp," she said. "At first I was shocked but then you become numb to it all."

CBN News asked Kim if there were days when she felt that perhaps it was not worth living. Perhaps she thought of killing herself.

"Yes, I thought of committing suicide hundreds of thousands of times in those 28 years," she admitted. "But the way the camp is set up there is always someone watching you."

"Each prisoner is assigned to watch four or five other prisoners," she said. "So if anything happens, the other prisoners would alert the guards because they didn't want to get into trouble themselves."

Public Executions

Kim told CBN News that she witnessed countless public executions.

"Often these prisoners were killed over petty things like stealing food," she explained.

"The guards would always gather other prisoners to watch the execution. It was a form of intimidation," she said. "The command was then given to fire at the prisoners."

Perhaps most chilling is Kim's account of fellow prisoners killing their own children to stave off hunger.

Mothers Killing Children

"One time a mother put her 9-year-old daughter in this big cast iron pot and boiled her," she said. "She was a too big for the pot so the mother had to chop her legs and head to fit the body in the pot."

"On another occasion, a lady killed her 16-year-old son, chopped him into pieces and took him to a butcher shop to get

some corn in exchange,” she said.

Kim said talking about these gruesome details isn’t easy.

“It is hard to talk about but I want the world to see these images and to hear my testimony,” she said.

Retold in Tears

She escaped from Bukchang in 2003. The details of which are being kept confidential for security reasons. Now she lives in South Korea.

This summer Kim released her memoir called, *A Concentration Camp Retold in Tears*. It includes images seen in this story that she drew from memory of the horrors witnessed.

“I’m thankful to be alive but I can’t get over the fact that I’ve lost half my life,” she said.

Tear Down These Walls

In September, Kim flew to Washington, D.C., to testify before a United States congressional panel about the beatings, starvation, and brutal executions that she witnessed in Bukchang camp.

“My message to the world is that we have to shut down these labor camps and set the prisoners free,” Kim testified.

“Every day people are dying. Every day people are killing each other,” she said. “I am living proof that there are no human rights in North Korea.”

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