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By Matsubara Hiroshi and Tokita Mayuko

Introduction by John Feffer

The Asahi Shinbun and the International Herald Tribune recently published a five-part series on Korean residents in Japan. Many of these zainichi *– the word literally means "residing in Japan" – have lived in the country for two, three and even four generations. Having been deprived of the Japanese citizenship that they obtained under colonial rule in the years 1910-1945, the 600,000* zainichi *are those Korean residents who have not become naturalized Japanese citizens. The series shows that they now find themselves in a crossfire between the North Korean and Japanese governments. The zainichi are the largest ethnic minority in a country that often prides itself, mistakenly, on being homogenous.*

The Asahi series, which uses as a news peg the impact of North Korea's nuclear test on the Korean community, is fascinating as much for what it reveals as for what it leaves out. It does bravely delve into some sensitive historical questions: the repatriation of zainichi *to North Korea beginning in 1959, including the Japanese government role in promoting repatriation, the role of the North Korea-affiliated organization Chosen Soren (Chongryon) in Japan, and the oft-ignored tale of Korean atom bomb victims, including hundreds who returned to North or South Korea and have been ineligible for Japanese government health care and other support.*

The Washington Post

On other controversial matters, particularly the entrenched discrimination that the zainichi *have faced, the series is, at best, glancing in its coverage. For many decades, the path to Japanese citizenship was a difficult one. Those* zainichi *who did not, or could not, adopt Japanese nationality, a process which earlier had required changing their Korean name to a Japanese one, not only face discrimination but lack citizenship rights despite having been born and educated in Japan and speaking fluent Japanese. Even today, while certain prefectures have extended certain local citizenship rights to long-term residents,* zainichi, *many of whom are stateless, continue to face discrimination.*

Not all ethnic Koreans living in Japan feel the same way about how to redress these wrongs. Two main organizations – one affiliated with North Korea

(Chosen Soren) and the other with South Korea (Mindan) – have taken very different positions toward domestic politics. Chosen Soren has by and large opposed assimilation into Japanese society, emphasizing the preservation of Korean traditions with an eye toward eventual repatriation to Korea, while Mindan has supported the goal of obtaining full citizenship rights.

This history of second-class status helps to explain why some 93,000 Koreans and their Japanese spouses seized the opportunity to go to their North Korea "homeland" between 1959 and 1984, and also why the Japanese government actively promoted this venture behind the scenes. It also helps explain why Chosen Soren has chosen to build a "society within a society" to meet the needs of its members, with separate schools, business associations, banks, and so on.

The series shows that Soren and the pro-North Korea community have fallen on hard times in the wake of revelations about North Korean kidnapping and the rising pressure on North Korea from Japan and the US. It also introduces the experience of the approximately 100 people who fled North Korea to return to Japan, and recent Japanese government efforts to encourage flight from North Korea. It does not, however, provide much insight into how Japanese politicians exploited the issue of North Korea for their own agenda of pushing through changes in Japan's foreign and military policy. Latent hostility toward Koreans in Japan and especially toward North Korea in the Japanese population made it relatively easy to fan the flames of anti-North Korean sentiment after North Korea's 1998 Taepodong rocket test that passed over Japan. Likewise, the anger and resentment over North Korea's abduction of Japanese citizens, which became so prominent an issue after Prime Minister Koizumi's 2002 visit to Pyongyang, was able to grow rapidly, fueled by ambitious politicians such as the current prime minister Abe Shinzo. The problem is that neither of these unsettling events can be comprehended without reference to the Korean colonial experience under Japanese rule or Japan's support for the US in the Korean War, which, after five decades, has not yet ended with a peace treaty.

In the wake of North Korea's missile launches in July and nuclear test in October, 2006, the Japanese government has eagerly pushed ahead with its campaign to isolate North Korea by shutting down all economic transactions and making it difficult and costly for zainichi *to visit the country. Indeed, Tokyo's anti-North Korean passions are even stronger than Washington's.*

Victims of cold war politics, the zainichi *are still pushed and pulled by contradictory forces in Japan and Korea. The Asahi Shinbun articles chronicle the pain, and point to a number of intractable issues, that remain unresolved. That the series was published only in English suggests that Japanese readers may still not be ready to empathize, or that the Asahi may be unwilling to risk the backlash.*

Part 1: Korean residents in anguish: Nuclear fallout

By Matsubara Hiroshi

Life just got a lot harder for Korean residents of Japan who have relatives in North Korea. For that, they can thank Pyongyang--and Tokyo, too.

They are caught in the diplomatic cross-fire that erupted after North Korea conducted its first nuclear weapons test on Oct. 9.

In protest over the test and a flurry of earlier missile launches, Japan imposed a range of sanctions aimed at further isolating the reclusive and impoverished state.

Until recently, Koreans could periodically take a ferry from Niigata back to their homeland. But Tokyo banned its entry in July in response to the missile launches.

For a group of 200 senior students of Tokyo Korean High School planning to visit their ancestral homeland, it meant a sudden adjustment to travel plans in late November and early December.

The Korean high school, Tokyo.

The first group of 80 students flew to Dalian Zhoushuizi International Airport in China in late November to switch to a chartered Air Koryo flight to Pyongyang.

Wearing their school's blue athletic tracksuits, many students cut a pathetic sight with luggage weighed down with food items and clothing. The gifts probably would have been especially welcome, given reports that North Korea this winter could fall into the grip of famine.

The school, located in Tokyo's Kita Ward, canceled a planned sea voyage for 200 students in July after the Japanese government banned port visits by the North Korean passenger ferry Man Gyong Bong-92, which used to call in at Niigata Port every few weeks or so.

With no easy means of traveling to North Korea, the school launched a fund-raiser to cover the cost of chartering two medium-sized aircraft to fly in from China.

It was a tense moment as the Japanese government was moving to impose harsher sanctions, including a ban on re-entry by Koreans who visit North Korea.

Recalling the moment of their departure from Pyongyang, an 18-year-old male student said, "We all were overwhelmed by emotion and in tears, wondering if we would ever have the chance to visit our homeland again."

Sanctions taken by Japan that fall outside of those imposed by the United Nations and the United States are unlikely to have a major impact on North Korea, other than to deprive the regime of various luxuries. But it's another story for Korean residents in Japan.

Suddenly, they are having to be more ingenious about making travel plans to North Korea and finding new ways to send food, money and clothing parcels to relatives.

In recent years, as sentiment against North Korea worsened in Japan over the abduction issue, Korean schools run by the pro-Pyongyang Chongryon (General Association of Korean Residents in Japan) tried to distance themselves from the regime by removing portraits of Kim Jong Il and his father, the late Kim Il Sung, from classrooms.

Students of the Tokyo Korean High School said their recent trip helped strengthen their affinity and solidarity with their homeland.

School officials said the hastily arranged flights cost 20 million yen more, but many parents, school graduates and local Korean residents donated money to cover the additional cost.

"Many parents initially opposed the school trip due to the worsening image of North Korea, even among Koreans here, after the nuclear test," said an 18-year-

old student. "Still, I'm grateful for having seen that the people who live there (North Korea) are leading normal lives."

Japan's relationship with North Korea was already very shaky when Pyongyang test-fired seven missiles in the Sea of Japan in July. When it followed up with its first underground nuclear test in October, Tokyo flexed its diplomatic muscles and announced a series of sanctions.

With the tightening of the economic screw, the operator of a Korean restaurant in Saitama Prefecture approached the school about allowing the students to carry five cartons of fresh food, along with cash, for delivery to a Pyongyang eatery that had fallen on hard times.

Since the ban on port calls by the Man Gyong Bong-92, the second-generation Korean resident has entrusted fellow Koreans visiting the North to deliver supplies from Japan.

The shipment made it as far as Dalian Zhoushuizi International Airport. There, customs officials said domestic regulations did not allow the party to bring frozen food items, mainly mackerel fillets, salmon roe and Chinese dumplings.

The school officials had to abandon the cartons, which resulted in a loss of about 200,000 yen to the restaurant operator.

"After Pyongyang's nuclear test, it has become even harder to find people who are visiting North Korea. I had no option but to ask even the students," said the woman.

The restaurant, Ariran Shokudo (dining), opened inside a Pyongyang hotel two months after Japan and North Korea signed their Joint Declaration in September 2002.

Shortly before the first North-South presidential summit in 2000, senior officials of North Korean Workers' Party asked her to open a restaurant that would cater to foreign visitors, whose numbers were expected to increase in the seemingly growing era of detente, and help North Korea earn foreign currency, she said.

The woman explained that she invested about 50 million yen in the venture, bringing kitchen equipment, karaoke machines and furniture from Japan aboard the Man Gyong Bong-92.

She also procured beef, fresh seafood and seasonings in Japan before the sanctions, she added.

With tensions rising, it became increasingly difficult to send supplies to the restaurant. The imposition of sanctions virtually sounded the death knell for the venture.

"Whether I can retrieve my investment now is anyone's guess," the woman said. "Japan's sanctions by themselves won't cause much a problem to ordinary North Koreans, given Pyongyang's growing trade ties with China and South Korea. But they certainly hurt Korean residents here who are trying to maintain ties with their homeland.

"I have already become disillusioned with the current (Pyongyang) regime to some extent, but it seems wrong to cut all existing ties as long as there is hope for an improved relationship between the two countries."

According to a senior Chongryon official, 2,380 Korean residents in Japan visited relatives in North Korea in 2005, half the 4,729 who went in 2002.

From January to October, 2,106 Koreans visited North Korea, including 883 aboard the Man Gyong Bong-92.

The sanctions forced the 58-year-old operator of a trading firm in Fukuoka, which specializes in auto exports to North Korea, to suspend her business.

In the peak year of 1998, the company sold about 300 cars and trucks worth 170 million yen. Since September last year, it has not exported a single vehicle, the operator said.

"Our business partners are relatives who immigrated to North Korea," she said. "Despite various hardships stemming from the lack of normalized diplomatic ties, we had managed to maintain the business to help them earn a living."

Several escapees from North Korea have voiced concern that more severe sanctions by the international community will make life even harder for families that are already struggling in North Korea.

A resident of Chiba Prefecture who fled from North Korea in December 2005 said a day does not go by when she doesn't think about the four children she left behind.

The woman, who is in her 50s, said that shortly after Japan imposed more sanctions in October, she received a phone call from her son, who said his family was in desperate need of money as the harsh winter approached.

She said her son had no idea that North Korea had conducted a nuclear test.

"Poverty, discrimination and persecution are what face those who emigrated from Japan," the woman said. "When I think of my children, I feel I have no choice but to wish for a more friendly Japan-North Korea relationship."

Part 2: Money Game

By Matsubara Hiroshi

Chon Wol Son

For soprano Chon Wol Son, it was to be the performance of a lifetime: She was invited to her ancestral homeland to sing in Pyongyang before North Korea's Great Leader, Kim Il Sung.

The now 49-year-old Son, recalling the envy of fellow artists from the Korean community in Japan, says that in spite of the honor bestowed on her she found it difficult to concentrate on the task at hand.

Coming face to face with Kim in 1985, Chon was unable to banish memories of her four brothers, who settled in the reclusive state between the ages of 10 and 17 in 1960.

Chon, a second-generation Korean in Japan, harbored a terrible secret that she had dared not to share until after her mother's death in February 2005.

All four brothers vanished in North Korea. Three died after years of persecution and poverty. Chon does not know what happened to her youngest brother.

"My mother died in anguish with a strong sense of guilt about the fate of my brothers," she adds.

The boys accompanied relatives to North Korea, lured by Pyongyang's promise that they would find "paradise on Earth." Before long, Chon's mother began receiving numerous letters in which her sons complained bitterly about their lives. Every letter contained a request to send food and money.

Chon's mother finally visited North Korea in 1980 and was reunited with three of her sons.

It was then she learned that they were sent to a labor camp in 1969, accused of spying for Japan. The second-oldest son was tortured repeatedly and died a year later. The other three were released in 1978. The oldest and second-youngest died in 1990 and 2001, respectively, of unknown causes.

After the 1985 performance in front of Kim, Chon met her surviving three siblings in her hotel room. They shied away from talking about their lives for fear the room was bugged, Chon says.

Since then, she has refused Pyongyang's overtures to return.

Mourning the death of her mother, and frantic to learn more about her brothers, Chon published her memoirs in December. The book is titled "Kaikyo no aria" (Aria over the strait), the word aria referring to an expressive solo in an opera.

"Her death convinced me it is time to speak out about the true tragedy of Korean residents in Japan, whose agony is no less grave than that of families of Japanese nationals who were abducted by North Korea," she says.

Chon's book is testimony to the cold-hearted manner in which Japan encouraged tens of thousands of ethnic Koreans to take advantage of a repatriation program to North Korea. Those who survived have given harrowing tales of human rights abuses and deprivation.

The repatriation program was based on an agreement between the Red Cross societies of Japan and North Korea and financially backed by the Japanese government. More than 93,000 Koreans and their Japanese spouses settled in North Korea between 1959 and 1984. The pro-Pyongyang General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryon) also encouraged Koreans to leave.

Since 1996, about 100 have returned. Of the rest, many are believed to have died or are barely able to survive. Likely, many still dream of being able to return to Japan one day.

Through the program, Koreans in Japan became bound to North Korea in what Chon calls an "endless love-hate relationship."

"We know better than anybody that the Pyongyang regime is wicked," she says. "But like my mother, we are still tied to the country through desperate affection for our families."

Like Chon's mother, families of returnees send money and food parcels to relatives in North Korea. Chongryon, North Korea's de facto embassy in Japan, also asks for donations on a "voluntary basis" from time to time.

Until Tokyo slapped a ban on port visits by the North Korean passenger ferry Man Gyong Bong-92 last July, donations typically were sent by sea.

According to the Finance Ministry in Tokyo, 16.8 billion yen was officially registered under the Foreign Exchange and Foreign Trade Control Law in remittances to North Korea between 2001 and 2005.

More than 90 percent of the funds was carried in cash by travelers.

Chongryon, working in tandem with North Korean agents in Japan, is believed to be actively engaged in arranging money transfers to the North.

A North Korean who joined the repatriation program in 1972 and fled to Japan in 2002 offered an insight into the way funds are raised.

He said that when his mother in Japan was invited to attend family weddings in North Korea in 1981 and 1982, respectively, she was forced to pay 1 million yen for each trip.

Inviting returnees to make brief visits to Japan is even more costly. A resident of Saitama Prefecture said her family invited a relative from North Korea when Pyongyang authorized temporary visits to Japan in the 1980s.

The woman said the family "donated" 100 million yen to Chongryon to cover "costs" of the one-week visit.

In 2005, 10 relatives visited Japan. This time around, Chongryon lowered the mandatory donation to several million yen per person, the woman said.

"The discount is believed to have resulted from North Korea's decision to set new monetary targets for 'donations.' North Korea is now trying to make returnees bring cash from Japan, especially when they have inherited property and through negotiations with other families, since their parents' generation is dying off," she said. "Returnees are no more than hostages for North Korea to earn precious foreign currency."

A former official of a Chongryon-affiliated organization said that after he quit, North Korean agents he had previously never seen contacted him repeatedly to request millions of yen in donations to the ruling (North) Korean Workers' Party.

A typical gambit is to show the person letters and photographs of his or her family in North Korea. In such cases, no threatening words need to be uttered. On other occasions, he said they promise the money will be spent to transfer family members from labor camps or help them move to Pyongyang, where living

conditions are much better than in the countryside.

Former Chongryon officials involved in the repatriation project acknowledge deep feelings of guilt.

Kim Gyu Il, the 68-year-old former chairman of Chongryon's student union, had a direct hand in making arrangements for about 400 young Koreans to settle in North Korea during the first three years of the repatriation program.

"I was ordered to send as many students as possible," Kim says. "But I didn't need to persuade them because young Koreans at the time had no career prospects in Japanese society."

Before long, Kim said that he, too, began receiving letters of protest from the students.

In one, a graduate of a topnotch Japanese university complained that he and his fellow students were forced to do forestry work.

In another, a college graduate claimed that some returnees had no choice but to live in caves.

The letters stopped coming after a few years, leading Kim to suspect they were all dead or held in labor camps.

Kim tried to persuade Chongryon leaders to suspend the project, but they refused. Kim left the organization in 1966.

And still the heartache continues.

In 2002, a 54-year-old Tokyo resident was stunned to get a phone call from a former classmate who settled in North Korea in 1972. The friend said she was visiting Japan for the first time in 30 years and wanted to look her up.

The friend was among a group of bright Korean students who were selected to go to North Korea in 1971 as part of celebrations to mark the 60th birthday of Kim Il Sung in 1972, the woman said.

Meeting for the first time in three decades, the women fought back tears as they reminisced.

Still, the woman said, things got awkward because of her friend's reluctance to speak about her experiences in North Korea.

"She did not say and I could not ask, but her silence eloquently spoke of what her life is like," the woman said.

Later, she learned from the friend's family that they had to hand over 3 million yen to Chongryon for the two-week trip to Japan.

Kim Gyu Il said the system of donations had helped keep the regime in Pyongyang solvent.

"North Korea could not have survived to date without decades of donations from Koreans in Japan," Kim says. "And Chongryon would have lost its raison d'etre a long time ago without the repatriation program."

Part 3: Korean residents in anguish/ Broken dreams

By Matsubara Hiroshi

Leaders of the pro-Pyongyang General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryon) celebrate the organization's 50th anniversary in Tokyo in May 2005.

Kim Chin Yong was once a wealthy businessman with a chain of yakitori restaurants in Kawasaki. These days, however, he barely gets by on 120,000 yen he receives each month from the government in public livelihood assistance.

For decades, Kim gave generously to the pro-Pyongyang General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryon), which serves as North Korea's de facto embassy in Japan and acts as a catalyst in funneling funds to prop up the tottering regime across the Sea of Japan.

The 82-year-old routinely handed over tens of millions of yen each year. Eventually, he lost everything to the cause.

Amazingly, Kim doesn't begrudge Pyongyang for his current impoverished state.

"I have no regrets about donating all my assets to my homeland," says Kim wistfully. "After all, it beckoned to us like a dream."

Still, Kim does not hide his shock at Pyongyang's announcement that it conducted its first nuclear test on Oct. 9.

"I wanted to do my bit to help North Korea develop a diplomatic relationship with Japan on an equal footing," he says. "I felt that if we could achieve that, it would strengthen the position of Korean residents in Japanese society.

"But in its desperation, the Pyongyang regime now seems to believe that its only diplomatic option is to pose as a military threat to the rest of the world. Contrary to all my expectations, Pyongyang is making things much more difficult for Koreans living in Japan."

Kim is a first-generation Korean resident, or issei. Now, in the twilight of his life, Kim has begun to reflect on his decades-long efforts to help his ancestral

land, one that is so reclusive it has been dubbed the Hermit Kingdom.

Chongryon says it has tried to pursue benefits for both Pyongyang and Korean residents in Japan on an equal basis.

While there undoubtedly is much truth to this, most Korean residents here are skeptical of the group's motives.

As such, they regard Chongryon as little more than a money collecting machine that exploited a yearning among older Koreans for more contact with their isolated homeland, now generally regarded as an international pariah and rogue state.

Another Korean, 71-year-old Tokyo resident Shim Gwang Seop, recalled that when his grandmother, So Kum An, died in 1977 at the age of 82, hundreds of Korean residents in Japan mourned her passing. So was a legendary figure who personified selflessness, he said.

As the founder of a much-admired Korean restaurant in Tokyo's Shinjuku Ward called Meigetsukan, So was known as halmoni (grandmother) among members of the Korean community. Up until her death, she used to invite poor college students and others down on their luck to eat at her restaurant for free. She cashed in almost all of her earnings to Chongryon.

After she fell ill in the mid-1970s, Chongryon officials started harassing her by making repeated visits to the restaurant to demand she hand over her property to the organization.

Shim, her grandson, was working for Chongryon's Chamber of Commerce Federation at the time.

He became so disgusted at Chongryon's avarice that he decided to quit. The last straw, he said, was when Chongryon tried to solicit donations at his grandmother's funeral.

For Shim, 1972 marked a turning point in Chongryon's activities in Japan. North Korea was celebrating the 60th birthday of the Great Leader, Kim Il Sung.

He said Chongryon's affiliate organizations went on a donation spree, confiscating even cars and other assets from Koreans who were unable to pay.

"The birthday project was such a success that Pyongyang began to make demands for more monetary gifts by using one auspicious occasion after the other.

"In the end, the reputation of individual Chongryon officials came to be judged by the amount of the money they collected," Shim said. "In that way, Chongryon gradually became the instrument in Japan for Pyongyang to get its hands on hard foreign currency."

Kim Chan Jung, a former reporter with a magazine published by Chongryon, estimates that Chongryon collected more than 5 billion yen from Korean residents in Japan for Kim Il Sung's 60th birthday bash. He said gifts ranged from industrial machines and construction vehicles to computers and bundles of cash.

By the early 1970s, Chongryon effectively was Pyongyang's puppet, Kim said. This was accomplished through intra-organization manipulation by a pro-Pyongyang faction within Chongryon. Pyongyang created what is known as the ideological study group shortly after Chongryon's founding in 1955.

As testimony to this, Kim said senior Chongryon officials were left in no doubt that they had to toe the line when they were forced to educate their children in North Korea under a repatriation program set up in 1959.

In effect, the children were hostages, he said.

Against this backdrop, Pyongyang's demands for even more cash reached a new level in the mid-1980s, when it ordered Chongryon to set up businesses so profits could be remitted to Pyongyang, according to former Chongryon officials.

Pyongyang also tapped the operators of Korean businesses in Japan to invest in joint ventures in North Korea.

Chongryon, ever-eager to meet the requests of its master in Pyongyang, seized on Japan's asset-inflated bubble economy in the late 1980s to set up pachinko parlors and real-estate businesses, journalist Kim said.

Chongryon's affiliated credit unions eventually suffered huge losses when the economic bubble burst in 1991 and they went belly up in quick succession.

As for the joint ventures in North Korea, they usually failed miserably, according to a former official of a Chongryon-related trading company.

"Pyongyang basically sucked Chongryon dry, to the point it now finds it difficult to even pay salaries to its officials and for teachers at related ethnic schools," said another former Chongryon official in his 30s.

"Pyongyang's acknowledgment that it abducted Japanese nationals gravely damaged Chongryon's credibility in Japan," he said. "A more fundamental problem is that it has lost the trust of the Korean community here."

Public security authorities estimate that the number of Chongryon supporters and their family members now totals no more than 90,000, a far cry from around 250,000 in the early 1990s.

Furthermore, public security sources say that 28 parcels of land owned by about 70 Korean-run schools around Japan had been put up as collateral to obtain loans by the end of 2004. This generated funds in excess of 63 billion yen that went to Chongryon-related companies or individuals, he said.

A substantial portion of the money was swallowed up to support Chongryon's business activities here or was sent to North Korea as donations.

Several schools have closed since then, he added.

The land formerly occupied by Choson Sinbo, Chongryon's official newspaper, in Tokyo's Shinjuku Ward is now a construction site. Work has been under way since 2005 to put up a multistory apartment building there.

The 1,192-square-meter land area was put up as collateral for a 4.4-billion-yen loan. A large portion of that amount was spent on Chongryon-related pachinko businesses, public security sources said.

Unable to repay the loan, the newspaper sold the land for 1.7 billion yen to a real-estate developer in August 2005, ending nearly a half-century of printing and publishing on the site.

"It was really painful when we moved out in the fall of 2005," recalled a Choson Sinbo employee. "It pains me that we are losing properties that were built with the blood and sweat of our ancestors in the immediate postwar years when life was a constant financial struggle.

"Chongryon will never be forgiven if it continues to lose these precious assets, especially those of Korean ethnic schools that represent our ancestors' hope

for future generations."

Part 4: Korean residents in anguish: In exile

By Matsubara Hiroshi

The setting was a hot spring spa in Tokyo, but the bathers were anything but run-of-the-mill patrons.

The group of 36 that gathered for a soak and a chat in mid-December comprised people who had fled deprivation in North Korea and their supporters.

The event was organized by the pro-Seoul Korean Residents Union in Japan (Mindan) to help the defectors adjust to living in Japan.

For one of the participants, a Tokyo resident in his late 40s, it was his first opportunity to introduce his two sons to fellow escapees.

The man, who asked not to be named, was reunited with his wife and children in July after the three fled North Korea and were granted asylum at the Japanese consulate-general in Shenyang, China.

"I am one of the lucky few who were successfully reunited with family members in Japan," the man said. "Many people congratulated me on my success, after years of effort, in being re-united with my family."

Since 1996, at least 100 former Korean residents of Japan and their Japanese spouses have made their way back to Japan, according to Mindan.

The man's reunion with his wife, a native North Korean, would not have been possible just a few years ago. It only happened because the Foreign Ministry in Tokyo changed its stance on accepting escapees from North Korea.

In the late 1990s, the Japanese government only accepted Japanese spouses of Koreans who had once lived in Japan. Now, it accepts former Korean residents of Japan and native North Koreans who married returnees from Japan.

Having faced a barrage of criticism for standing by while Chinese police forcibly removed a group of North Korean asylum-seekers from the entrance of the Japanese consulate-general in Shenyang in 2002, Tokyo has taken a more humanitarian approach in dealing with the issue.

However, it is forced to tread delicately so as not to upset relations between North Korea and China, its longtime ally, which, in principle, maintains a policy of returning North Korean escapees to their homeland.

Born in Tokyo to a Korean father and a Japanese mother, the man settled in North Korea with two siblings in 1972.

Under the government-approved repatriation program between 1959 and 1984, 93,000 Koreans and their Japanese spouses went to North Korea in hopes of better opportunities.

Chronic poverty and discrimination against Japanese who settled in North Korea were a way of life for many people. And when a severe famine hit in 1996 and 1997, many of them began to reconsider their options.

The man said he worked at a factory in North Korea that made machine tools. When famine struck, there was no work and the man's family scraped by selling medicines illegally imported from China and occasionally panning for gold.

"I felt desperate at not being able to feed my own children," the man said.

It was then that he made the decision to risk his life by fleeing to Japan. After promising his family he would send for them when he was settled, the man crossed a river that serves as a natural border with China in November 2001.

After 10 months in China, he managed to reach Japan in September 2002. However, the Foreign Ministry turned a deaf ear to his request for help in bringing his wife and sons out of North Korea, the man said.

Then early in 2005, ministry officials unexpectedly promised to make every effort to resettle his family members in Japan.

In February last year, his wife and sons crossed the border into China. Within three weeks, they were granted asylum at Japan's consulate-general in Shenyang.

They spent three months as guests of the Japanese diplomatic mission until officials obtained departure permits from the Chinese government, one of the sons said.

"As we were about to depart, Japanese officials encouraged me to study and work hard in Japan so that our family can live happily here," said the son, a man in his early 20s.

"My first four years in Japan were lonely and miserable," the father said, adding that he became homeless at one point as he struggled to send about 300,000 yen annually to his wife and sons. To pay for their escape last year, he said he sent 1 million yen.

"But now my family is here, I feel we can finally make a fresh start," he said.

Family reunions are now becoming more common.

Clearly, the consulate-general in Shenyang has played a key role in the process. But when escapees were about to embark on the final stage of their journey to Japan, they were made to promise not to speak to the media about how they made their getaway, several sources said.

Even now, the ministry does not divulge crucial information on this area of Japanese foreign policy. It refuses to say how many North Korean defectors have been taken in, or explain the criteria for acceptance.

A ministry official said disclosing such information could inflame tensions with "relevant countries," a veiled reference to China, which is the main exit point for escapees.

A ministry spokesman noted that in each instance of asylum, Japanese officials need to hold intense discussions with China and other "third countries."

Pyongyang's seemingly inexhaustible attempts at exacerbating its diplomatic isolation are a reason for Japan to start bracing for a massive inflow of refugees

from North Korea, say many experts, citing the possibility of regime collapse in Pyongyang.

For this reason, Tokyo should urgently set up a support framework for escapees, said Sakanaka Hidenori, head of the Tokyo-based nonprofit organization Japan Aid Association for North Korean Returnees.

Sakanaka, a former chief of the Justice Ministry's Tokyo Regional Immigration Bureau, said the Cabinet Secretariat compiled unofficial internal guidelines on Japan's policy regarding North Korean refugees as early as 1994 because it feared North Korea's nuclear standoff could spell the end of the regime.

The document, titled "Preparing for a mass inflow of refugees," adopted Sakanaka's premise as a Justice Ministry official in charge of immigration policy that at least 100,000, mainly those who settled in North Korea from Japan along with their spouses, would seek refuge in Japan.

"The desperate exile of more than 100 people to Japan appears to prove that many of those who moved from Japan, along with their spouses, still view Japan as their homeland," said Sakanaka.

He said his prediction of a massive refugee influx is still part of the government's working scenario.

"Japan used the repatriation project as an opportunity to get rid of a lot of Koreans without giving much consideration to what would happen to them," he said. "As a result, it has a responsibility now to provide protection and assistance to help them resettle in Japan."

According to a Mindan survey of about 60 refugees early last year, 63 percent of respondents had not found employment in Japan. Furthermore, 43 percent said they survived on about 120,000 yen in monthly public livelihood assistance.

In addition to language and cultural difficulties, many defectors remain basically stateless. That makes it difficult for them to find work, said a Mindan official, noting that 52 percent of respondents were not registered as citizens of either country.

In April 2005, Hirashima Fudeko, a 68-year-old Japanese woman who returned from North Korea to Japan in 2003, stunned friends and supporters by returning to the North.

Not everybody was surprised, though. A close friend, a resident of Chiba Prefecture in her 50s who also fled North Korea in 2003, said Hirashima had been torn by anxiety about the family members she left behind in North Korea.

The friend said Hirashima's despair escalated after she learned that her only remaining child, a daughter, was suffering from mental illness and living as a homeless person at a train station.

Hirashima and the friend both lived on monthly public livelihood assistance of about 120,000 yen. Even so, they managed to save a little to send money and gift boxes to their families in North Korea.

"I completely sympathize with her desperate plight," the woman said.

"The fact is that there is little public support for our situation and the future prospects for family reunions. So many of us live in solitude, feeling ambivalent about our decision to come to Japan."

Part 5: Korean residents in anguish: Lost lives

By Tokita Mayuko

Lee Sil Gun talks about North Korean hibakusha.

HIROSHIMA--Lee Sil Gun pulls no punches when he describes the devastation wrought by the Aug. 6, 1945, atomic bombing of this western city.

"I saw badly charred bodies all jumbled together close to a riverbank where reeds were growing. The internal organs of one body had spilled out. Another had no head. My knees were literally knocking together as I took in the scene. It looked like hell on Earth."

Lee, a second-generation Korean resident of Japan, was speaking here in late November to dozens of students visiting from the Chiba Korean Elementary and Middle School in Chiba about the day a nuclear weapon was first used in war.

Every year since the mid-1990s, Lee, 77, has spoken to students about his experiences as a hibakusha atomic-bomb survivor.

But the point he wants to drive home is that 30,000 Koreans in Hiroshima and 10,000 in Nagasaki are believed to have died in the two atomic attacks.

While Lee tries to convey the tragedy to younger Koreans so they never encounter the horrors of nuclear warfare, he has spent decades pushing the central government to provide financial and medical assistance to hundreds of Korean hibakusha who left Japan after the war to live in North Korea.

As yet, none of them has received any relief from Japan to cover the costs of medical treatment.

And just as Lee was beginning to harbor hopes that things may yet turn around, North Korea announced Oct. 9 it had conducted its first underground nuclear test.

It was a setback he had never anticipated.

Now, he says, Japanese politicians--given the new strain on relations--seem more unwilling than ever to consider initiating programs to alleviate the suffering of hibakusha in North Korea.

On Aug. 6, 2006, then health minister Kawasaki Jiro attended a meeting in Hiroshima organized by various groups seeking relief for A-bomb survivors.

Asked if the government would consider granting relief to survivors in North Korea, Kawasaki replied that while the topic was a vexing one, Japan should concentrate on other priorities.

He cited Tokyo's determination to resolve the thorny issue of abductions of Japanese nationals by Pyongyang and moves to encourage North Korea to abandon its missile and nuclear programs. Lee would not be discouraged, though. He is used to hearing what can't be done.

Instead, he started making plans for his 18th visit to North Korea to get the latest information on survivors there.

And so it was on Oct. 3 that Lee, staying at a hotel near the Kansai International Airport for departure the following day to Pyongyang, received a phone call from a TV reporter in Hiroshima to inform him that North Korea had given notice of its intention to conduct a nuclear test.

"No way! You're kidding," a flustered Lee responded.

Concerned that North Korea's announcement would escalate military tensions, Lee decided to delay his trip.

Now, he regrets having done so.

"It could have been a good chance to check on how survivors are doing. My intention was to return to Japan to present the government with those facts," he says.

Hibakusha in Japan currently number about 260,000, of whom 4,300 are Koreans, according to Lee.

When Lee realized that the pro-Pyongyang General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryon) was not interested in pursuing the matter, he decided to establish the Council of Atom-bombed Koreans in Hiroshima in 1975 to prod the government into providing appropriate relief measures.

In 1989, he was invited to Pyongyang to talk about his experiences.

It was during this trip that 10 A-bomb survivors contacted him at his hotel.

Since then, he has been trying to grasp the scope of the problem, causing him to make 17 trips to North Korea and interview more than 200 victims in Pyongyang and other cities.

As a result of his efforts, North Korea established an A-bomb victims association in 1995. According to the association, North Korea had 928 hibakusha as of 2001.

"Without proper care from specialists on radiation, many victims appeared listless. It was almost as if they were waiting for death," Lee says.

In 2002, Lee met a hibakusha in his 80s in Pyongyang who said he burned sulfur in a closed room as treatment for skin burns caused by the atomic blast.

"When I met the survivors, they gave me a glimmer of hope," Lee says. "But I couldn't do anything except give them a tiny amount of food and medicines I had with me. Whenever I am on my way back from the North, I find myself wiping away my tears on the flight home."

The former Health and Welfare Ministry issued a bureau chief directive in 1974 that excluded overseas A-bomb survivors from coverage under the A-Bomb Victims Relief Law.

This directive remained in effect for nearly 30 years until 2003, when it became possible for overseas survivors to receive allowances for medical care. This stemmed from the Osaka High Court ordering the government to pay allowances to survivors in South Korea in 2002.

To qualify for medical allowances, hibakusha must first obtain a hibakusha kenko techo that officially designates a person as an A-bomb victim. But that can only be done by coming to Japan and turning up in person at government offices, which effectively bars North Koreans from taking advantage of the legislation because travel between the two countries is restricted.

Lee, though, managed to invite a total of eight North Korean hibakusha to Japan from 1990 to 2000 to receive medical treatment and to publicize their plight.

In 2000, a North Korean hibakusha and two North Korean doctors accompanied by Lee made a courtesy call on then Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo.

As a result, the Japanese government dispatched a fact-finding mission to North Korea in 2001. The delegation of foreign and health ministry officials and medical experts visited medical institutions in Pyongyang, where they reported the situation as being "very severe."

But when North Korea admitted in 2002 that it had abducted Japanese nationals, the government basically dropped the relief program.

"Survivors in North Korea are growing old," Lee says. "Few people have a chance to come to Japan for treatment. So, what I am requesting now is that a hospital be built over there to provide specialized treatment for them as a humanitarian gesture."

On Aug. 7, 1945, the day after Hiroshima was leveled in the atomic bombing, Lee was traveling with his father and sister on the Sanyo Honsen line to his home in Yamaguchi Prefecture after selling black-market rice in Kobe.

About 20 kilometers east of Hiroshima, the train could go no further and they had no choice but to walk westward. Before long, they encountered terrible devastation.

Lee says he was so shocked by what he saw he could barely speak.

He kept walking, clasping the hands of his father and sister tightly. He eventually got home around midnight.

Not long after, Lee developed a high fever and diarrhea. A doctor was called. He cut open Lee's abdomen to remove pus from inside--without anesthetic.

It took Lee months to recover. Since then, Lee has often suffered problems with his stomach, liver and prostate gland, likely the effects of his exposure to radiation.

Each year, Lee talks to students from five Korean schools on average in addition to giving speeches to Japanese.

O Pae Kun, the principal of the school in Chiba, said, "I want students to study the value of peace through Hiroshima, instead of simply denouncing the United States and Japan."

Speaking to the Korean students from the Chiba school in late November, Lee said: "Four of us were walking hand in hand. One stumbled over something, and we all looked to the ground. There were charred bodies everywhere. We all screamed. There was a water tank nearby. I believe the victims were thirsty and trying to get water."

As yet, a government relief program for North Korean hibakusha is nowhere in sight.

Still, Lee believes his efforts to convey the extent of the tragedy to succeeding generations are bearing fruit little by little.

One of the students from the Korean school in Chiba said, "His experiences were far more terrible than I had expected. I now realize the horrors that nuclear weapons bring and that they should never be used again."(IHT/Asahi: January 6,2007)

For an earlier article on Korean refugees in China see James Seymour, North Korean Refugees in China: A Human Rights Perspective

The five-part series was published exclusively in English on Jan. 2-6, 2007 in International Herald Tribune/Asahi Shinbun. Matsubara Hiroshi and Tokita Mayuko are staff writers of Asahi Shinbun. John Feffer is the co-director of Foreign Policy In Focus and a Japan Focus associate. He is the editor of The Future of US-Korean Relations: The Imbalance of Power. Posted on Japan Focus on Jan. 20, 2007.

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