# WOMEN'S RIGHTS UNDER THE DIVISION SYSTEM IN KOREA

WOMEN CROSS DMZ

# Women’s Rights Under the Division System in Korea

How unended war impacts women through

1 Unexploded Landmines
the story of Ms. Kim

2 Gendered and Sexual Violence
the story of Park Young-ja

3 Land Expropriation
the story of Cho Seon-rye

4 Separated Families
the story of Park Kyung Soon

*Please note: this zine covers sensitive issues of militarism-driven violence, sexual and gendered violence, and related violence and harm born out of U.S. military occupation and imperialist warfare. Please take care when reading.

The ongoing security crisis on the Korean Peninsula, set against the backdrop of the intensifying U.S.—China rivalry, has led to the increasing militarization of the region and the deepening of inter-Korean tensions. These dynamics are shaping a broader “new Cold War” in East Asia, further complicating efforts toward peace and reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula.

The Korean Peninsula’s unresolved division system has a profound impact on human rights, especially for women, who are disproportionately affected by both the geopolitical tensions and the enduring legacies of war.

Women Cross DMZ, a leading organization in the global movement for lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula, produced “Women’s Rights Under the Division System in Korea,” a report shedding light on the urgent and often overlooked impact of Korea’s division on women, including lasting trauma caused by the Korean War, the presence of U.S. military bases, and other challenges born out of persistent geopolitical tensions. The report highlights the historical and ongoing consequences of Korea’s division system, focusing on the lives of women who have been directly affected by the division and the militarization of the peninsula, including: the stories of Ms. Kim, Park Young-ja, Cho Seon-rye, and Park Kyung Soon.

This accompanying zine highlights the women whose stories form the heart of this report, as well as their critical experiences of Korea’s ongoing militarized division.

# 1. UNEXPLODED LANDMINES


One of the most violent legacies of the unended Korean War is the unresolved issue of landmines and unexploded ordnance. During the war, all parties to the conflict laid landmines along the front lines in the area that is now the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) separating the two Koreas. According to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, the DMZ has the highest concentration of landmines in the world, with an estimated 2 million mines buried there.

Planned minefields are those intentionally created by the military, with records and information on the number, location, and type of mines in the area. But unidentified minefields lack such information and records. More than half of the minefields, or 58 percent, are located less than a mile from residential areas.

To date, 6,428 people have been victims of landmines and unexploded ordnance in South Korea, 63 percent of whom are children. In North Korea, authorities report that more than 16,215 people have been victims of explosive remnants since the end of the Korean War. Women are disproportionately affected by landmines and unexploded ordnance in both Koreas because they are often responsible for small-scale farming, which takes them into areas where such devices are commonly buried.

## The Story of Ms. Kim

### The Human Impact of Landmines and Unexploded Ordnances

**Ms. Kim (pseudonym) lives in Yeoncheon County, Gyeonggi Province, located near the DMZ. When she was 12 years old, she was injured by an unexploded ordnance and has lived with pain ever since.**

Due to poverty, Ms. Kim's family was forced to live near a military base. She would often pick up shell casings after school to earn money. One day, her neighbor picked up ammunition that exploded, injuring her and her mother and killing her brother instantly.

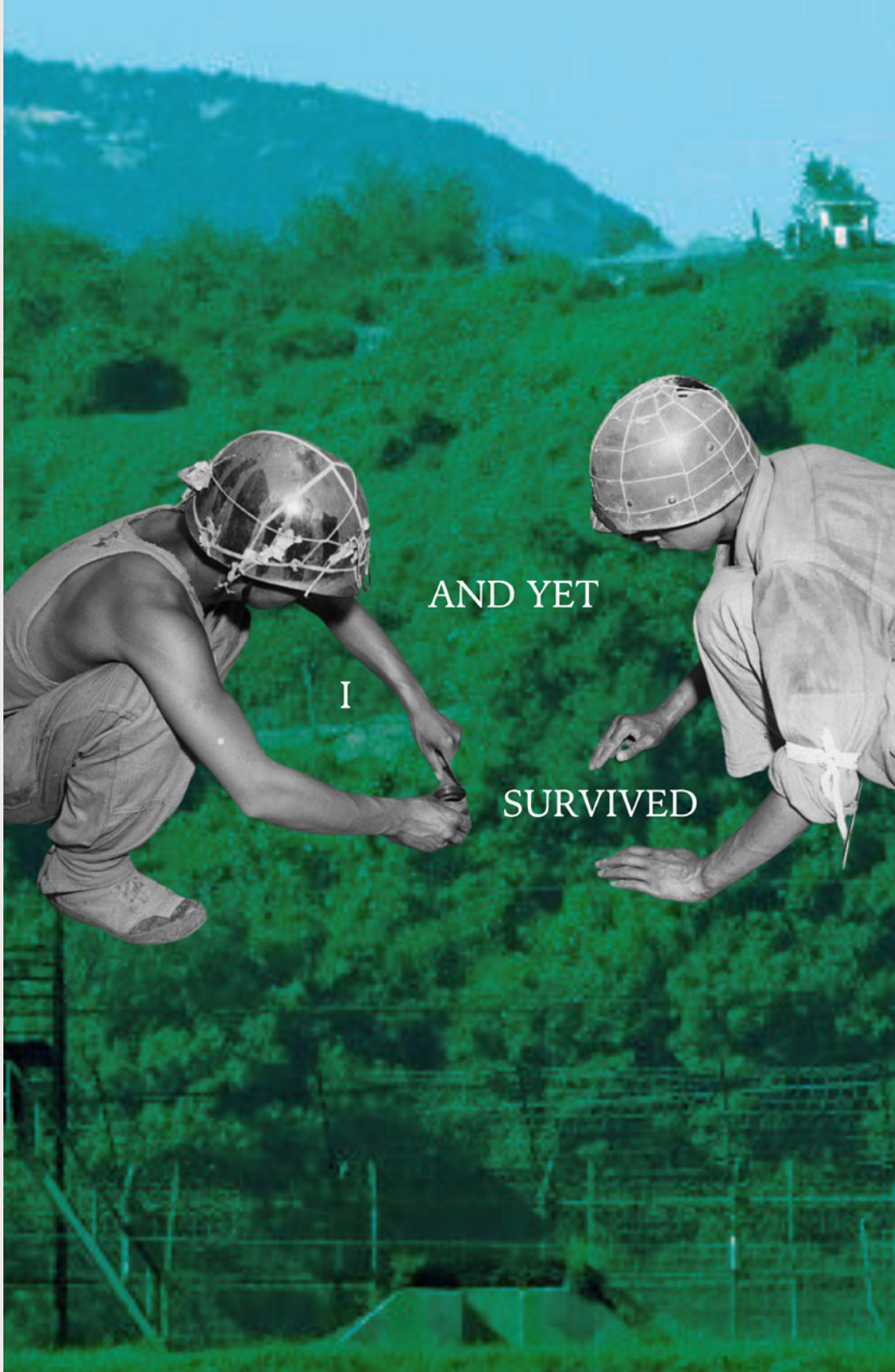
She and her mother were given first aid at the army medical unit and then rushed to the hospital for treatment. However, her father was left mentally traumatized and lived in shock until his death. After the accident, no one paid for her and her mother's treatment. At the hospital, doctors arbitrarily amputated her leg, which she later learned was done to shorten the treatment period. The shrapnel that pierced her abdomen could have been fatal, but she was discharged after receiving minimal care.

Her dream was to become a teacher, but the thought of going to school with an amputated leg was unthinkable, so she dropped out. During her adolescence, she attempted suicide twice out of desperation. She had to rely on crutches to do farm work.

Eventually, she got married and had three children: two boys and a girl. But when her daughter developed a fever, no help arrived as Yeoncheon was in a restricted area near the DMZ, and the child died. Like her, Ms. Kim's remaining children also picked up shell casings after firing drills from a nearby military unit. In 1989, her eldest son, then 13, and his 11-year-old brother picked up an unexploded ordnance that detonated, leaving them with disabilities as well.

The remnants of war engulfed the family for generations, from her father who lost his sanity, to her mother who was similarly affected, to herself and her sons. The unended war continues to leave scars that are still felt today under the division system.

**"I had a very difficult adolescence; I made two suicide attempts. My toes, blown off 55 years ago, are still painful. My balance has long since been compromised by leaning on prosthetic limbs, and spinal stenosis is no joke; it's a total mess. And yet, I survived."**



# 2. SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND THE U.S. MILITARY OCCUPATION OF KOREA

On July 27, 1953, two months after the Korean War Armistice was signed, the U.S. and South Korea agreed on a Mutual Defense Treaty, which established the legal basis for U.S. military presence in South Korea. The division system, sustained by the ongoing state of war, has created a heavily militarized environment where U.S. troops have committed crimes against Korean civilians with impunity. Korean women have been particularly exposed to sexual harassment and violence due to the proliferation of U.S. military bases.

During the war, military camptowns called kijichon were established around U.S. military bases in South Korea that included clubs, bars, and dance halls providing various forms of sexual services to U.S. soldiers. Women were exploited to facilitate the U.S.-R.O.K. alliance under the pretext of national security, and the system became a source of foreign revenue through sex tourism.

To support these arrangements, the South Korean government and the U.S. military instituted draconian policies that strictly controlled women's bodies to prevent U.S. soldiers from contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STD). While the USFK imposed severe and extreme regulations, discipline, and punishment on South Korean women, it imposed few such controls over its own servicemen.

## The Story of Park Young-ja

### The Human Impact of U.S. Military Bases

**From 1971 to 1995, Park Young-ja lived as a "comfort woman" near U.S. military bases in Dongducheon and Uijeongbu. When she was 15, she went to a human resources agency to find a job, but was placed at a coffee shop in Yeoncheon County and sold for 15,000 Won (~$10.6 USD)**

After being subjected to sexual abuse, Young-ja tried to escape, only to be sold again to bars in the military camptowns of Dongducheon and later Uijeongbu. She became trapped in this trafficking system due to an endless cycle of debt.

Park was forcibly subjected to mandatory STD testing twice a week at the local public health center, a measure primarily intended to protect U.S. servicemen, with no regard for her own health. She was required to carry her health card at all times, and when she tested positive, she was forcibly detained for treatment in medical detention centers, euphemistically called the “monkey house.” If she was caught without her card, or if her test was not up to date during random inspections by the authorities, she was also detained and forcibly treated without further testing.

According to a survey conducted by the Gyeonggi Province Women and Family Foundation, an average of 10,000 women in the military camptowns of Gyeonggi Province were registered and managed by the government for STDs in the 1960s and 1970s.

Park later connected with Durebang, a non-governmental organization founded in 1986 to support women in camptowns, where she participated in programs to heal from her traumatic experiences. There, she realized that the South Korean government and the U.S. military had cooperated in creating this system of violence against women.

In September 2022, the Supreme Court ruled that it was illegal for the South Korean government to coordinate, manage, and operate military camptowns for the U.S. military, actively facilitating prostitution and thereby violating women’s human rights.

Women’s groups now argue that the government must offer an official apology, gather data, and provide systematic support for the surviving women. They argue that the U.S. military and the U.S. government should also be held accountable for the violation of women’s rights.

In September 2025, a group of South Korean women filed a historic lawsuit against the ROK government for gender-based human rights abuses inflicted by U.S. forces stationed in Korea (U.S.F.K.). The 117 plaintiffs seek a formal apology from the U.S. military and financial compensation for the sex trafficking, sexual abuse, and human rights violations suffered at the hands of U.S. soldiers at military base camptowns.

This lawsuit builds upon the 2022 ruling and intends to hold the US military accountable for its role in managing and perpetuating the spread of exploitative prostitution economies around US military bases in South Korea.

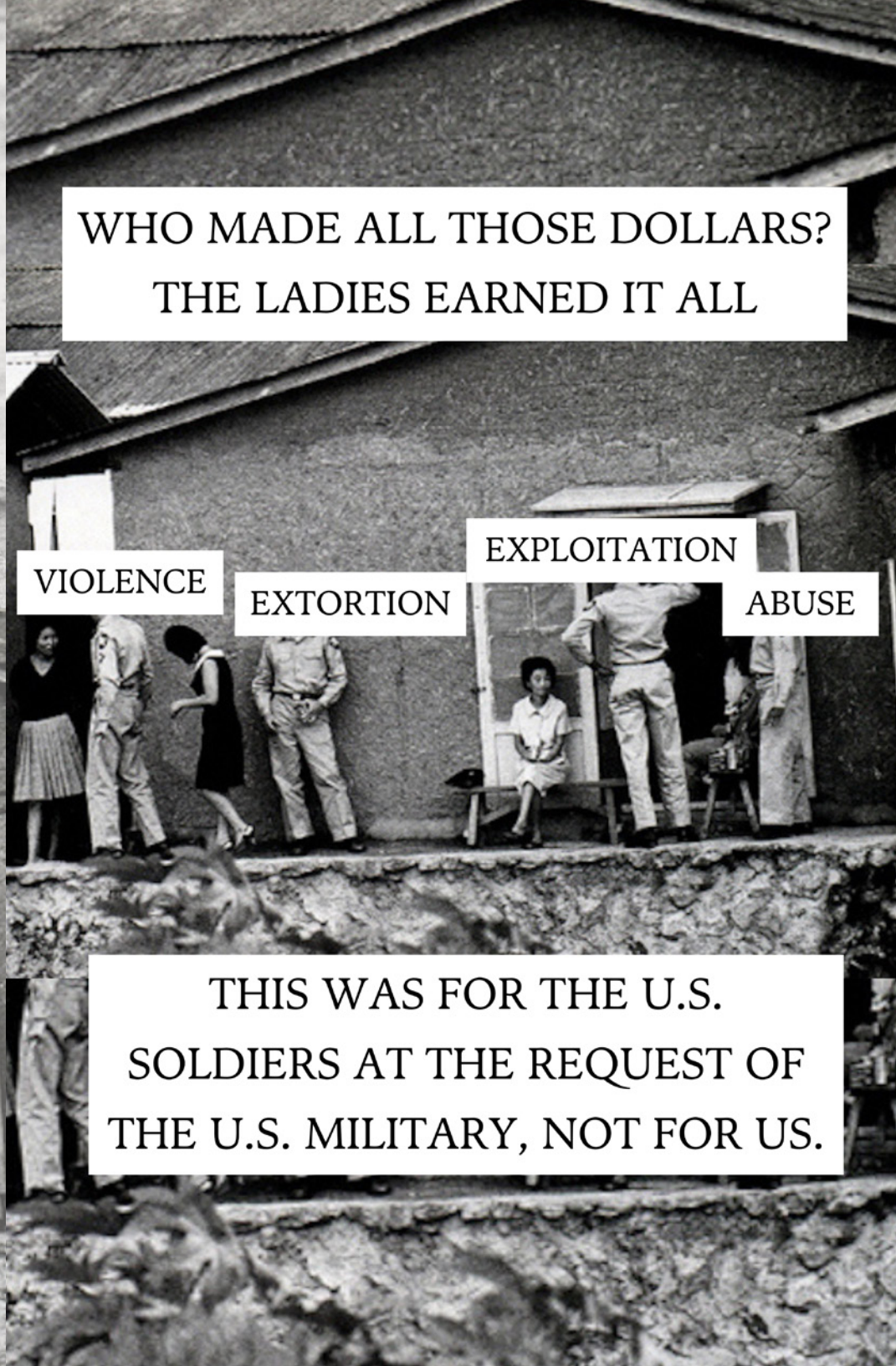
In June 2014, with the support of women's organizations and lawyers, Park Young-ja joined 121 women who had worked in the military camptowns and filed a lawsuit to hold the state accountable. Park courageously testified in court about the difficult life she had endured:

**"We were abandoned in this country where we were born. In the kijichons, we were only subjected to violence and extortion. Nobody cared about us. The state turned a blind eye to all the job agencies and pimps that forced us into the kijichons. The money we made there would be more than we could imagine...**

**Who made all those dollars? The ladies earned it all, but even if we died in pain, we couldn't afford a doctor's visit and could only do a STD check-up.**

**This was for the U.S. soldiers at the request of the U.S. military, not for us. Due to the indifference of our country, our bodies were sick, unable to make a living, and only used.**

**That's why the country should take responsibility."**



# 3. LAND EXPROPRATION

The proliferation and expansion of U.S. military bases have not only impacted the lives of camptown women but also those of women farmers.

In 2004, South Korea and the United States agreed to restructure several U.S. military bases, including tripling the size of U.S. Army Base Camp Humphreys in Pyeongtaek to nearly 3,500 acres, making it the largest military base in the world. To accommodate the expansion, the South Korean government forcibly expropriated 2,300 acres of adjoining land from rice farmers in the villages of Daechu-ri and Dodu-ri.

## The Story of Cho Seon-rye

### The Human Impact of U.S. Military Base Expansion

Cho Seon-rye lived in Daechu-ri for 73 years, where she farmed and raised her three sons. Despite the villagers' efforts to save their land, village, and way of life, the South Korean Ministry of National Defense notified them in 2004 that their village and farmland would be expropriated and given to the U.S. military to expand Camp Humphreys.

**Twice in her lifetime, Cho was forced to leave her home and village, which were destroyed to accommodate the U.S. military.**

The U.S. military base expansion in Pyeongtaek had a profound impact on the daily lives of many women, including Cho Seon-rye, an elderly rice farmer and grandmother from Daechu-ri. For nearly 1,000 days, Cho and hundreds of other residents from Daechu-ri and Dodu-ri held daily protests and candlelight vigils against the expansion.

However, by the end of 2005, the South Korean government had forcibly expropriated their land.

Born in 1918, Cho moved to Daechu-ri in the 1930s, where her husband's family lived. In 1945, shortly after Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule, her husband died, leaving her to raise their three young sons as a rice farmer.

During the Korean War, in late autumn of 1952, rumors circulated that the U.S. military would build its runway through her village of Daechu-ri.

One day, approximately ten U.S. bulldozers appeared and destroyed her home. She and other villagers suddenly lost their homes and village; they were forced to spend the harsh winter in makeshift huts. Cho recalled that many young children and elderly people died that winter.

The following spring, they set out to rebuild Daechu-ri along the fence line of the nearby U.S. military base. On the other side of Daechu-ri was the West Sea.

Along with other displaced villagers, Cho and the residents built up the bank to block seawater and prepare rice paddies for cultivation. For generations after, Daechu-ri became known as one of the most fertile areas in the region.

On May 4, 2006, the South Korean government mobilized thousands of troops and police to erect barbed wire around the rice fields of Daechu-ri, blocking access to the residents. In defiance of the government's ban on planting, the villagers, under the banner "Let's farm again this year," proceeded with their annual planting on the paddies they had cultivated for generations.

**"We sowed rice seeds but I'm not sure if the buds will sprout through the barbed wire," Cho recalled. In 2007, Cho, along with other displaced residents, was forced to move as bulldozers destroyed every home and building in Daechu-ri to clear the way for the expansion of Camp Humphreys.**

Two years later, Cho died after her health rapidly deteriorated once she was no longer able to enjoy her pastoral life among her rice paddies.

Camp Humphreys is now the largest U.S. overseas military base.

Yi Soon Gum protests the expansion of Camp Humphreys and forced expropriation of her village's farmland. Her sign reads,

"Dear Daechu-ri,
I pray for our health and the
health of our descendants."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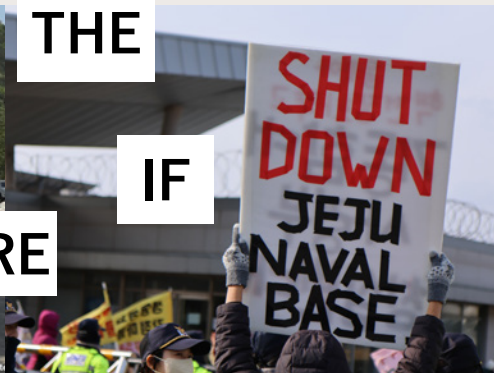


# 4. FAMILY SEPARATION

One of the tragic consequences of the division system is the inability of millions of people to learn the fates of their family members on the other side, following countless unexpected and unintended separations before, during, and after the Korean War.

When the 1953 Armistice was signed, approximately 1.7 million Koreans were estimated to have been separated from their regions of origin. Without a mechanism to track missing persons, families were left without any means to contact or learn the fates of loved ones — let alone reunite.

This separation has persisted for over 70 years, affecting all generations, with particular impacts on women.

In South Korea, women have borne the brunt of the emotional, social, and economic burdens of separation. They have shouldered the emotional toll of losing contact with parents, children, and siblings, while also becoming sole caregivers for remaining children, elderly relatives, and orphaned family members.

The involuntary separation from family members also left millions of Koreans with enduring psychological trauma. While this trauma was not specific to women, women had to cope with the grief and uncertainty of not knowing the fate of their loved ones while cultural norms placed expectations on them to maintain family cohesion.

Among the generation that remembers the Korean War as a living memory, precious little time remains for separated family members to locate their kin on the other side of the divide. Thousands pass away each year without having realized their hope to locate or meet their family members lost to involuntary separation. By 2025, it is projected that fewer than 30 percent of these individuals will still be alive.

# The Story of Park Kyung Soon

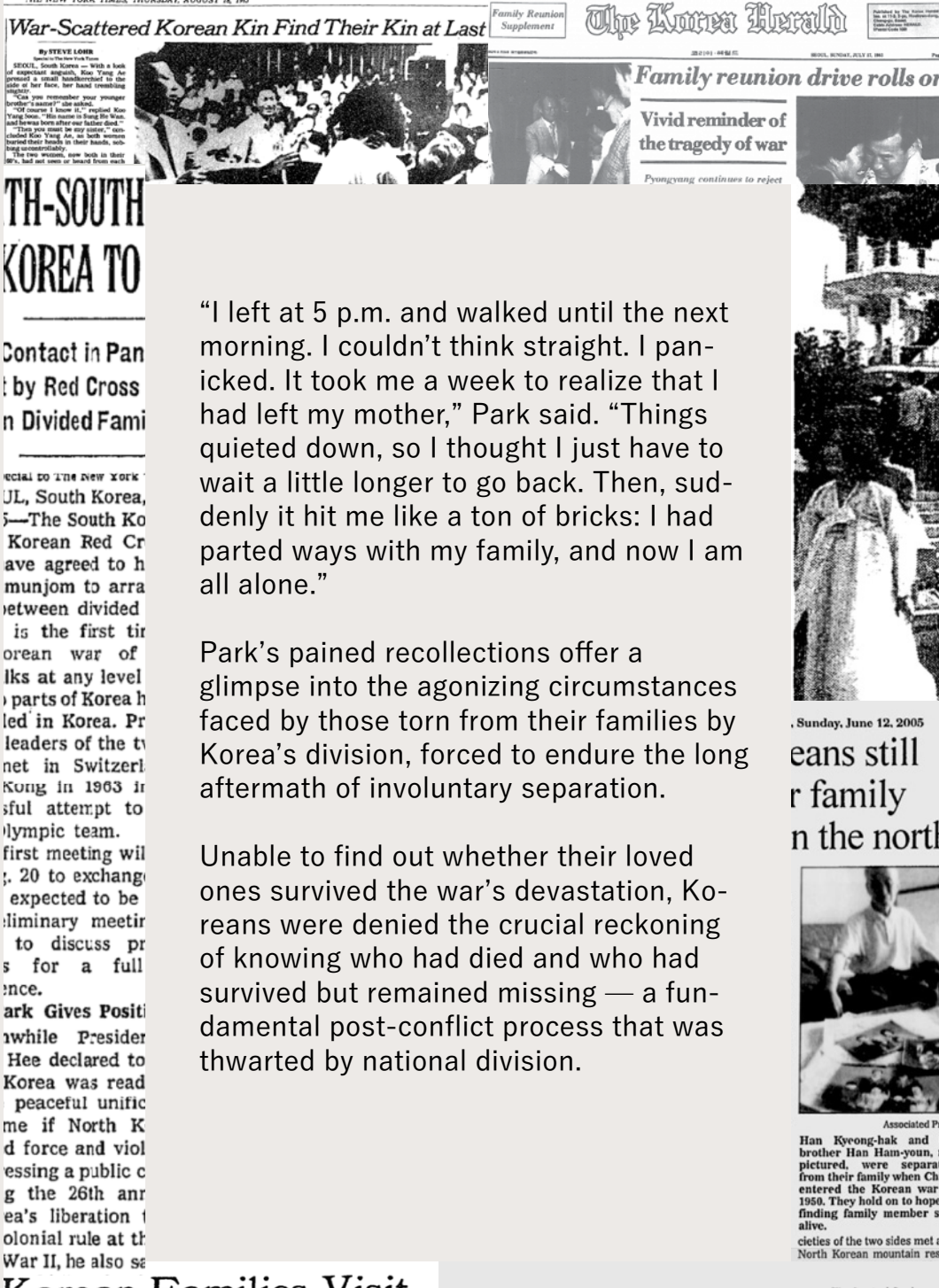
## The Human Impact of Separated Families

**A young teenager from Kaesong at the time of the 1953 armistice, Park Kyung Soon never expected to permanently leave behind her mother and siblings. However, alarm over the newly drawn Military Demarcation Line prompted her mother to urge her to flee south to what seemed like a safer place. Park left hurriedly, thinking it would only be a temporary departure.**

"I left at 5 p.m. and walked until the next morning. I couldn't think straight. I panicked. It took me a week to realize that I had left my mother," Park said. "Things quieted down, so I thought I just have to wait a little longer to go back. Then, suddenly it hit me like a ton of bricks: I had parted ways with my family, and now I am all alone."

Park's pained recollections offer a glimpse into the agonizing circumstances faced by those torn from their families by Korea's division, forced to endure the long aftermath of involuntary separation.

Unable to find out whether their loved ones survived the war's devastation, Koreans were denied the crucial reckoning of knowing who had died and who had survived but remained missing — a fundamental post-conflict process that was thwarted by national division.



War-Scattered Korean Kin Find Their Kin at Last

Family Reunion Supplement

The Korea Herald

Family reunion drive rolls on

Vivid reminder of the tragedy of war

Pyongyang continues to reject

Sunday, June 12, 2005

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Korean Families Visit After Border Is Opened

By CLYDE HABERMAN
Special to The New York Times

Koreas agree to family


War-Scattered Korean Kin Find Their Kin at Last

By STEVE LOHR

SEOUL, South Korea — With a look of expectant anguish, Kim Yong Ae pressed a small handkerchief to the side of her face, her hand trembling slightly.

"Can you remember your younger brother's name?" she asked.

"Of course I know it," replied Kim Yang Soon. "His name is Sung Ho Wan, and he was born after our father died."

"Then you must be my sister," cancheled Kim Yang Ae, as both women burised their heads in their hands, sobbing uncontrollably.

The two women, now both in their 40's, had not seen or heard from each


Family Reunion Supplement

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To Park's family, she became a missing person, and the same was true for countless others whose whereabouts became unknown and untraceable with the sealing of the division.

**While it's estimated that roughly five million people lost family members — parents, siblings, and others — during the Korean War, it remains impossible to determine how many of these losses were due to war deaths and how many were due to people going missing.**


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Han Kyeong-hak and
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pictured, were separa
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Korean Families Visit
After Border Is Opened

By CLYDE HABERMAN
Special to The New York Times

SEOUL, South Korea, Saturday, Sept. 21 — For the first time since the end of the Korean war 32 years ago,

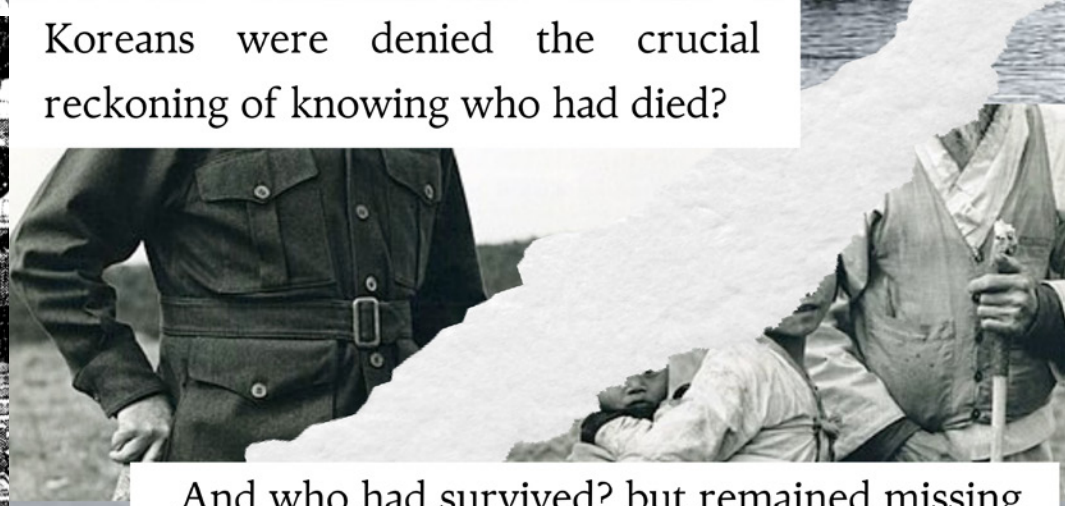
jected three South Koreans on the Seo
Government's original list, and Sou
Korea agreed to replace them after


The Sentinel, Rochester
Koreas agree to family
EOUL, South Korea (AP) –
h and South Korea signed a
Friday to reunite aging fami-
members separated by the
an War half a century ago
to repatriate dozens of North
ian spies held in the South.
The deal,
signed by Red
Cross officials
from both sides
in a scenic
North Korean
mountain
resort, also

Each country will send 100 separated family members to the other side on Aug. 15.

emotional
among a host
of thorny
issues dividing
the two Koreas
The two states
fought the
1950 53

Koreans were denied the crucial reckoning of knowing who had died?



And who had survived? but remained missing

a fundamental post-conflict process thwarted by national division

This report concludes that addressing the human rights situation on the Korean Peninsula requires a comprehensive approach that integrates women's voices and experiences into all aspects of policy, particularly in the realms of demining, human security, and reconciliation. This report provides the following 4 recommendations:

1. A Comprehensive and Pragmatic Approach to Human Rights

The UNHRC must adopt a pragmatic and inclusive approach to human rights in Korea, centering the Korean people as rights-holders and the Korean governments as primary duty-bearers.

2. Legislation that Addresses the Gendered Impact of Landmines

The North and South Korean governments should adopt the recommendations made by UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which recognizes the crucial role of women in conflict prevention, management, and resolution, and emphasizes the need for mine clearance and mine awareness programs to consider the special needs of women and girls.

3. Accountability Processes for Survivors of Militarized Violence

The U.S. and South Korean militaries and governments must be held accountable for the systematic sexual violence and exploitation created by as well as the expropriation of land due to military base establishment and expansion. Both governments must offer an official apology, gather data, and provide systematic support for the surviving women who experienced sexual violence from the military camptowns.

4. Reunions of Separated Families and Lifting of Travel Restrictions

The two Korean governments must urgently renew efforts to reunite separated families. The North and South Korean governments must improve relations and diplomacy between the two states in order to establish conditions that make repeated and sustained family reunions possible, including citizen-to-citizen reunions without mandatory government facilitation. Both governments must also bolster protections for individuals to meet and reunite freely without fear of state punishment.


1090
1017

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## The full report can be found at bit.ly/wrdreport as well as the launch webinar featuring key contributors.

## Photo captions and credits:

### 1. Unexploded Landmines
### 2. Gendered and Sexual Violence

• First photo: Camp town near US base in South Korea, c. 1965. Photo by Green Bee Publishing
• Second photo: U.S. military camptown in South Korea, 1965. Military camptowns, called kijichon, were established during the Korean War to provide entertainment and sexual services to U.S. soldiers, exposing women to violence and exploitation in the name of national security. Photo by Kuwabara Shisei

### 3 Land Expropriation

• First photo: Yi Soon Gum protesting the expansion of Camp Humphreys and forced expropriation of her village's farmland crouches next to a sign that reads, "Dear Daechu-ri, I pray for our health and the health of our descendants. – Yi Soon Gum." Photo by PEACE WIND
• Second photo: A mural protesting the U.S. military occupation of Korea in Daechu-ri, Pyeongtaek South Korea. Photo by hgreen
• Collage photos (left to right):
1: Protestors at a sit-in protesting the expansion of Camp Humphreys, the largest overseas U.S. military base in Pyeongtaek, South Korea. Source
2: Protests against the U.S. military stationing of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system in Seonju County, South Korea. Photo by Voice of the People
3: Protests against the U.S. military stationing of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system in Seonju County, South Korea. Photo by Voice of the People
4: South Koreans protest a new naval command center in front of the Jeju Naval Base in South Korea on February 2, 2025. Officials said the purpose of the command center, which includes ten destroyers and four support ships, is to defend against North Korean missile threats, but protesters see it as part of the broader U.S. effort to contain China. Photo by Park Han-sol

### 4. Separated Families

• First photo: Elderly Koreans, long separated by the Korean War, say goodbye to their relatives — likely for the last time — during a family reunion held at the Mount Kumgang resort in North Korea in 2018. The reunion took place following the historic inter-Korean summit earlier that year, in which the leaders of the two Koreas declared, "there will be no more war on the Korean Peninsula."
• Second photo: Photos of Koreans who fled their hometowns in present-day North Korea to the south during the Korean War and have been unable to return ever since. Photo by Hannah Yoon

### Report Conclusion

• First photo: South Koreans protest a new naval command center in front of the Jeju Naval Base in South Korea on February 2, 2025. Officials said the purpose of the command center, which includes ten destroyers and four support ships, is to defend against North Korean missile threats, but protesters see it as part of the broader U.S. effort to contain China. Photo by Park Han-sol
• Second photo: A delegation of international women gathered with thousands of South Korean women at the DMZ in 2015 to call for an official end to the Korean War, the reunion of separated families, and women's participation in the peace process. Photo by David Guttenfelder

**Women Cross DMZ is a global movement of women mobilizing for peace on the Korean Peninsula.**


We are a leading voice in the movement calling for a formal end to the Korean War and the replacement of the armistice with a peace agreement through organzing, education, and advocacy.

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