

South Koreans sue government over salt-farm slavery

By **Kim Tong-Hyung**
The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — Eight men who had been held as slaves at South Korean salt farms for several years are taking the government to court for alleged negligence and police inaction they say largely caused and prolonged their ordeal.

In the lawsuit filed at the Seoul Central District Court, lawyers are seeking compensation of 30 million won (\$25,860) for each of the men from the central government and two island counties, where the farms were located. The plaintiffs have different levels of disabilities, and were enslaved at the rural islands off South Korea's southwest coast for as many as 20 years.

More than 60 slaves, most of them mentally ill, were rescued from the islands following an investigation led by mainland police early last year. The slavery was revealed weeks earlier when two police officers from Seoul came to Sinui Island and rescued one of the slaves who had been reported by his family as missing.

Dozens of farm owners and job brokers were indicted, but no regional police or officials were punished despite multiple interviews in which the victims said some



SALT-FARM SLAVERY SUIT. A salt-farm owner walks around his salt farm on Sinui Island, South Korea, in this February 19, 2014 file photo. Eight men who were held as slaves at South Korean salt farms for several years have sued the government for alleged negligence and police inaction they say largely caused and prolonged their ordeal. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon, File)

knew about the slaves and even stopped escape attempts.

The disturbing cases of abuse, captivity, and human trafficking were highlighted in a months-long investigation by The Associated Press published earlier this year, which showed that slavery has long thrived in the islands and will likely continue to do so without stronger government attempts to stem it.

Choi Jung Kyu, one of several lawyers behind the lawsuit, said he was expecting

an uphill battle in court as compensation suits against the government in human-rights abuse cases are rarely successful in South Korea. This is mainly because, he said, the South Korean law puts the burden of proof entirely on the plaintiffs in non-criminal cases.

"It's difficult because we are mainly relying on what our plaintiffs told us, while the defendant, which is the government, holds all the information to prove it and can't be forced to give them up," Choi said.

Regardless of the outcome, the lawsuit is meaningful because it would raise awareness and put pressure on the government to do more to protect vulnerable people from human trafficking and slavery, he said.

Seoul's Justice Ministry, whose minister will legally represent the central government in the case, had no immediate comment.

The rescued slaves were mostly disabled and desperate people from mainland cities who were lured to the islands by "man hunters" and job brokers hired by salt-farm owners, who beat them into long hours of backbreaking labor and confined them at their houses for years while providing little or no pay.

Choi said there were strong reasons to believe that local police officers and administrative officials were closely connected with salt-farm owners and villages and helped them keep the victims enslaved.

Artist sucks up Beijing air to draw attention to air quality

By **Didi Tang**
The Associated Press

BEIJING — For four hours every day, for 100 days, Chinese artist Wang Renzheng held up the attachment of an industrial vacuum cleaner to suck in Beijing's notoriously polluted air at various landmarks.

Passers-by were intrigued, inquiring if he was an air sanitation worker, or if he was taking air samples, or if he could be hired to do air sweeps of their apartments, Wang recalled.

The 34-year-old artist hopes the performance art — dubbed the "Dust Project" — can sharpen the public's sense of China's air quality.

"Have you ever thought how much dust there is in the air, as Chinese cities are growing at high speeds?" Wang said.

Although the public has come to realize the severity of China's air pollution, Wang said he feels the change has been painfully slow.

"This is not an issue to be ignored, and I want to magnify it so much that you cannot



ignore it," he said.

Coincidentally, the project's 100-day phase of dust-collecting ended right in the middle of this year's worst pollution spell in Beijing, when its landmark buildings disappeared into thick smog and residents were asked to stay indoors. Monitoring

sites reported that the density of the tiny, poisonous PM2.5 particles had reached more than 40 times the safe level set by the World Health Organization.

Local media reports of Wang's performance art went viral with the headline that his efforts had gathered

POLLUTION SUCKS. Chinese artist Wang Renzheng demonstrates the use of an industrial shop-vac alongside a highway in Beijing. Wang spent four hours per day for 100 days vacuuming the Beijing air with his industrial shop-vac, then baked the accumulated dust and pollutants into a brick. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

enough dust to make a normal-size brick.

Wang said that his 400 hours of air-sucking had netted 3.5 ounces of dust, which has been added to a mixture to make a brick at a factory in the northern city of Tangshan.

The 100 grams were more than he expected when he first embarked on the project on July 24 with the \$1,100 vacuum cleaner.

Wang said that after three days, the machine collected little dust. "I checked again after 100 days, and the dirt was far more obvious. It was black and dirty, and it crumbled upon touch," he said.

The brick will be used in construction along with other bricks. "It should just disappear like a drop of water going into the sea," Wang said.

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