

Elderly Koreans shut out of family reunions use backchannels

By Hyung-Jin Kim
The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — Kim Kyung-jae will probably never be chosen in the government lottery that would allow him to reunite one last time with his relatives in North Korea. But that's no problem, he said in an interview, even as a small group of the lucky South Koreans who won the lottery met with their loved ones in North Korea.

The 86-year-old Kim is one of a dwindling number of elderly South Koreans who, frustrated with North Korea's reluctance to allow more frequent reunions and by the small chance that they'll be selected before they die, found unofficial networks to communicate with their North Korean relatives. For three decades, Kim has been sending his North Korean sister letters and aid.

"It's absolutely regrettable that other South Koreans don't know about these communication channels," Kim said, showing a bunch of letters with North Korean stamps that his sister has sent to him over the years.

During August reunions, which were organized by the rival governments, hundreds of Koreans, many in their 70s or older, were reunited for the first time since the 1950-1953 Korean War. But they are just a tiny fraction of the separated families in the Koreas, where millions were split during the turmoil of the war. This is the 21st time the Koreas have had such reunions, but they don't occur regularly because of long periods of bad feelings between the rivals, and Pyongyang's reluctance to expose its people to the outside world.

So Kim and others turn to friends, brokers, and others in China, Japan, and elsewhere to try to find out whether their relatives in North Korea are still alive and to arrange exchanges of letters, photos, phone calls, and sometimes face-to-face meetings with them.

Officially, both Koreas ban their citizens from contacting each other without government approval. But South Korea



COVERT COMMUNICATION. Shim Goo-seob, 83, shows a photo of his family member during an interview at his office in Seoul, South Korea. Only a fraction of the elderly Koreans separated by the Korean War are able to attend the on-again off-again reunions organized by their rival governments, so some South Koreans turn to unofficial networks of brokers, friends, and others to correspond with their loved ones in the North. Shim said he has arranged face-to-face reunions in China among North and South Koreans via his own network of brokers and helpers. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joo)

His letter exchanges began in the early 1990s when he found the address of his sister, who years earlier sent him a photo of his parents and the news of their deaths via a former neighbor who'd acquired U.S. citizenship and visited the North. "After looking at the photo, I cried a lot, really a lot, because I had thought they were still alive," he said.

In 2002, when Kim lived in Japan, his sister made a collect call to him and they had an hour-long conversation. She repeatedly called him "Oppa," a term women use for their elder brothers. "I told her 'Don't cry; just say something,' but she could only weep and say 'Oppa' again," Kim said.

Kim now runs an organization with a fellow refugee to help others connect with their long-lost kin in North Korea. The organization receives a state subsidy.

His partner, Shim Goo-seob, 83, said he has arranged face-to-face reunions in China among North and South Koreans via his own network of brokers and helpers.

Shim said he was able to meet with his younger brother living in North Korea in the Chinese border town of Yanji in 1994 after a Chinese helper disguised himself as his brother's uncle and invited him to visit. Shim said he spent three days with his brother in Yanji, and they stayed up all night talking about their lives on the first day.

Shim tried to get his younger sister to come to China for another brief family reunion, too, but she couldn't get a Chinese visa so he had her come to a border river and watched her with binoculars in 2003.

Continued on page 5

allows and even quietly helps finance backchannel contacts among separated families on humanitarian grounds. It's likely that Seoul keeps the backchannel programs low-key because of worries about angering North Korea, which refuses South Korea's push to have more frequent official reunions because it uses them as political leverage. South Korean officials have occasionally told separated families of their support for unofficial exchanges, but they've stopped short of major publicity campaigns because of concerns about brokers swindling people.

According to a Seoul government tally on civilian-arranged exchanges between separated families, there have been about 11,610 cases of letter exchanges and 1,755 face-to-face encounters involving 3,416 Koreans since 1990. By comparison, before last month's reunions, government-sponsored programs saw 19,770 people reunited in person since 2000; none was given a second chance to reunite.

The backchannel exchanges flourished during a previous "Sunshine" era of inter-Korean detente, but the number has sharply decreased in recent years as many elderly refugees in South Korea have died and North Korea has tightened control on its once porous border with China.

Because thousands of separated family members die each year in South Korea without getting a chance to attend the on-again off-again government-organized reunions, these informal exchanges are often the only way for some to communicate with their relatives in the North.

Kim, who once ran a fisheries export business in Japan, said he has friends there who print out his e-mails and mail them to his younger sister and other relatives in North Korea. When they get replies from North Korea, they scan and e-mail them to Kim.

When he wants to give his relatives clothes, shoes, and other items, he uses brokers in China to send them by parcel post after paying them 200 yuan (\$30) for each 20-kilogram (44 pounds) box.

He said he's helped about 30 other South Koreans correspond with their relatives in North Korea or send them aid parcels. These South Koreans are mostly from where Kim grew up in North Korea, before the war, on the east coast.

Kim said his mail exchanges and aid shipments run smoothly, in part because he has never criticized the North Korean leadership in his letters and his sister, now in her mid-70s, used to start her letters by praising North Korea's ruling Kim family.

"Way too short" — A 93-year-old meets his North Korean brother

Continued from page 2

criticize North Korea's authoritarian leadership and broken economy and not to point at portraits of the three leaders of the Kim dynasty that has ruled the North since 1945.

"I couldn't sleep at all that night," Ham said.

Day 1: "Brother, it's me!"

On Monday morning, Ham's bus crossed into North Korea. Ham said he felt "spooky" when three North Korean soldiers, in olive-green uniforms and large round hats, came aboard his bus during a border check.

"They only asked me when I had crossed over to the South," Ham said. "I told them it was before the war."

After arriving at the Diamond Mountain resort, Ham marvelled at how the modern facility differed from the underdeveloped surroundings, where small, crude homes were scattered around fields and on hills. The resort was built by South Korea's Hyundai business group during a period of rapprochement in the 2000s. Analysts say North Korea, which has long rejected South Korean demands to increase the number of reunions and participants, keeps the meetings at Diamond Mountain to limit North Koreans' awareness of what's going on in the outside world.

Ham unpacked in room No. 512 at the Kumkangsan Hotel at the resort. It had nice beds, air conditioning, and hot water, but the bulky television did not work.

The first meetings took place at about

3:00pm. Ham's heart trembled as he walked with his wife and daughter toward the banquet hall where the North Korean relatives were waiting at white tables. As Ham approached a table marked with the number 90, a slim, deeply wrinkled man in a suit and tie sprung from his seat. The brothers embraced tightly, smiling widely, tears streaming down their faces.

"He yelled, 'Brother, it's me!'" Ham said. "I recognized him right away. He was still that skinny, quiet kid. Maybe our bloodlines pulled us together."

For four hours, Ham and his brother mostly talked about family, explaining to each other when their parents and brothers had died.

Day 2: From thrilled to devastated

Ham had another sleepless night after the meeting. He was thrilled to see his brother but devastated that one-third of their reunion was already over.

On day two, the brothers had deeper conversations over lunch in a room at a nearby hotel, away from North Korean government watchers and the dozens of South Korean reporters covering the event.

Dong Chan, who came to the meetings with his 72-year-old wife, had thought his oldest brother was dead. He did not know his mother had made it to the South, remarried there, and lived for decades.

Dong Chan said he had been hospitalized in Pyongyang to treat migraines when he received word from North Korean authorities that his brother in South Korea was looking for him.

"He told the authorities that it must be a different person with the same name because he was so convinced that I had died," Ham said. "When North Korean officials asked again, this time mentioning the names of our parents, he was shocked."

During those three hours of talks, workers brought Ham's bags of gifts. Ham also gave Dong Chan an album containing dozens of photos of him, his family, and their mother. Dong Chan gave Ham three bottles of liquor made from ginseng and a silk tablecloth.

Workers then delivered boxed meals of rice cakes, grilled chicken and octopus, stir-fried mushrooms, and pickled cucumbers.

"It didn't taste good; I couldn't finish it," Ham said.

Ham told his brother about how he overcame poverty in his younger days and how proud he was of his three U.S.-educated children. But because of the anti-American sentiment prevalent in the North, he left out that he worked at a U.S. military base in Dongducheon for nearly two decades as a civilian employee.

Ham said Dong Chan was equally proud of his life as a retired North Korean government worker. Dong Chan said he's living in an apartment in the capital of Pyongyang, which itself is a status symbol in North Korea. He also talked about a grandson who was studying at the prestigious Kim Il Sung University.

"Once I heard that he was living in Pyongyang, I was relieved," Ham said. "As

brothers, we had so much to talk about over so little time. But other South Korean relatives were meeting North Korean nephews they'd never seen — some of them told me it was hard to keep a conversation going after 30 minutes."

Day 3: "Exploded with tears"

Ham tried hard to be cheerful during his last lunch with Dong Chan on day three. He laughed, clinked glasses of beer with his brother, and shouted "good health is the best!"

Ham promised Dong Chan that he will be the first South Korean to apply for a North Korean visa if relations improve to the point where cross-border travels are allowed. Dong Chan told Ham that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's relationship with South Korean President Moon Jae-in was so close that the Koreas will be able to unify in three years.

But Ham's spirits sank as the clock ticked away. After organizers announced that the meeting had ended, Ham said goodbye and walked out of the banquet hall alone, sobbing all the way to the bus waiting to take him home. Ham's wife and daughter lingered a bit longer at the hall, tearfully embracing the North Korean relatives they were just getting to know.

Later, outside the hotel, Ham, still in tears, waved both hands from inside the bus as his brother came out to see him off. The bus slowly rolled out of the resort and headed back to South Korea.

"I had told myself, 'I won't cry, I won't cry,'" Ham said. "But I exploded with tears."