Open North Korea

Contemporary Form of Slavery, Dolgyeokdae in North Korea

This submission relates to articles 2, 24, 27, and 32 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is based on the sections of child labor extracted from “Sweatshop, North Korea,” written by Open North Korea, a Seoul-based NGO working for North Korean people’s human rights. “Sweatshop, North Korea” in Korean was released in October, 2016. A full version of the report, which contains extension information of child labor in different contexts in North Korea, can be provided upon request. Among several patterns of exploitation of child labor found in North Korea, the *dolgyeokdae* is the most unique one to North Korea. It is a military-style construction youth brigade, which engages in national construction projects.

After graduation of secondary school in North Korea, 16- or 17-year-old girls and boys are assigned to *dolgyeokdae*. Especially those who belong to the worst caste system classified by the authorities and have the worst family background are recommended as *dolgyeokdae* workers by schools. Those students who could not enter university are deployed to the military first, and then to general factories. The next group of students in the order of family background is deployed into the *dolgyeokdae*, considered the worst career.

The term of *dolgyeokdae* service is ten years long, the same as the military. A former worker who entered the *dolgyeodae,* when he was 17 years old, said that “Once you join *dolgyeokdae*, you have to work for ten years. You have to serve ten years in the North Korean military too, so it’s basically the same. You can’t be discharged early if you don’t have a special reason. But if you catch hepatitis or tuberculosis, you’ll be discharged.”

These practices could arise from a sense of deprivation for students who have a comparatively poor family background, because the students have fewer opportunities to go to college, join the People’s Army, or have a job when their parents don’t have economic and political strength, or have worse family background. Therefore, the authorities recruit new agents for the *“dolgyeokdae*” by offering rewards, providing those who work well in the unit with opportunities to become members of the Workers’ Party, which in theory is only achievable through the military service.

The typical feature of *dolgyeokdae* is no payment. In theory, employees of state-owned companies or factories in North Korea pay salaries worth, around 3,000 North Korean Won, which is worth half a kilogram of rice, permonth. However, *dolgyeokdae* workers receive almost no pay according to testimonies. Former dolgyeokdae workers stated that their salary was next to nothing and people consider the forced, compulsory, and heavy labor without salary the natural fate for *dolgyeokdae* workers.

Although regulations indicate that working hours ought to be eight hours a day, they often said they had to work throughout the day and night because the amount of work had been already allocated and determined for each work unit by the authorities. The only thing they have to do is achieving the allocated amount of tasks every day. During the period of the “200 day-battle[1],” a national intensive mobilization campaign, *the dolgyeokdae* work from the

[1] Kang Mi-jin, “Kim Jong Un using ‘200-Day Battle’ iteration to bolster North Korean regime” *Daily NK.* (Seoul, South Korea) 10, June 2016,

start of the workday at 7 AM until around 12 AM because they have an almost insurmountable number of tasks and duties that must be accomplished, even more than during ordinary periods.

Accidents happen frequently on construction sites where *dolgyeokdae* work because sufficient safety equipment is not provided, even while building power plants, railroads, apartment complexes, and other large-scale national projects. While constructing an apartment complex in Pyongyang, at least one person died each time a new floor was constructed, according to a former worker. The accidents he witnessed were mostly workers falling from high floors, electric shock accidents, or other such easily-preventable accidents on construction sites. After an accident, there is no compensation for victims or their families, but only an award certificate. The state-run Chosun Central TV tends to proudly report that *dolgyeokdae* worked in minus 20 or 30 Celsius degree weather, and eulogize it as loyalty to the "Supreme Leader."

Most of national and social infrastructure across the country have been built by the *dolgyeokdae* such as Mangyongdae Student Boys' Palace, the Grand People's Study House, the International Friendship Hall, fourteen Revolutionary Battlegrounds and Revolutionary Historical Sites, apartment complexes on Changgwang Street and Liberation Street in Pyongyang, Geumgangsan railway, North Korea Railway Corporation, Nampo Expressway, Baekdu Mountain Powerplant, and more than 200 national construction projects.

Most accounts of former *dolgyeokdae* workers show significant patterns of contemporary form of slavery, slavery-like practices or enslavement, some of which are crimes against humanity, have been found. The system of the *dolgyeokdae* is similar to the "debt bondage[2] of institutions and practices similar to slavery," according to the Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery[3]. The major difference between the *dolgyeokdae* and the practice of debt bondage is that there is no debt, which could be liquidated between the *dolgyeokdae* and the authorities. Rather, the *dolgyeokdae* is forced to carry out their work out of a forced sense of never-ending loyalty, which must be expressed by performing exploitive heavy labor for almost a decade.

Recommendations

✓ The authorities of North Korea should immediately dismantle the *dolgyeokdae*, the military-style construction brigade, which amounts to a contemporary form of slavery, or "enslavement."

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[2] "Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery" Section I states "The status or condition arising from a pledge by a debtor of his personal services or of those of a person under his control as security for a debt, if the value of those services as reasonably assessed is not applied towards the liquidation of the debt or the length and nature of those services are not respectively limited and defined."

[3] "Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery," *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner*, Section I. - Article 1 of Institutions and practices similar to slavery, 30 April 1957

to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child should press the North Korean government to provide accurate accounting of the situation of child exploitation, especially the reality of teenage *dolgyeokdae* workers. The authorities should abolish the practice of exploiting children and offer a detailed report that provides answers for change.

✓ The authorities should implement the recommendations of the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI), especially on ending "discrimination against citizens on the basis of their perceived political loyalty or the socio-political background of their families, including in matters of access to education and employment.[4]"

✓ The practice of massive group deployment targeting graduates of secondary schools must be eliminated and children must be allowed to have a choice to access to tertiary education.

✓ The North Korean authorities should join the International Labour Organization, which the COI recommends doing without delay.[5]

[4] The COI report para. 1220 (h) End discrimination against citizens on the basis of their perceived political loyalty or the socio-political background of their families, including in matters of access to education and employment.

[5] The COI report para. 1220 (r) Ratify without delay the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and the fundamental conventions of the International Labour Organization.

- **Appendix: Images captured from a South Korean KBS program showing the *dolgyeokdae*' working environment by using a video clip released by KCNA (Korean Central News Agency) TV.**

- It finds that young workers work with their bare hands, as shown in the images below.

These *dolgyeokdae* workers are carrying out repair work of the Baekdu mountain railway, according to the KBS news.

This image shows the tents where these *dolgyeokdae* workers sleep during the work because there is no residential neighborhood in this area. It is at the border with China.

This image shows how the *dolgyeokdae workers* work. North Korean authorities proudly show such a video clip in order to stimulate people's loyalty and spirit of "socialist revolution".