

Helping South Korea's foreign workers win fair treatment

Using a message of love, Kim Hae Sung provides legal counseling, language training, and schools to help foreigners fit into a tight knit society in South Korea.

By Ben Hancock, / Correspondent | NOVEMBER 22, 2010

Seoul, South Korea

Jin Yong-dao, an ethnic Korean born in China, lost his left forearm working at a shoe factory just a month after coming to South Korea, his father's homeland, in 2002. Mr. Jin was operating a machine that imprinted patterns on soles when it malfunctioned, crushing his arm.

Though he was given some financial compensation, the amount was much smaller than what he would have received as a legal South Korean worker.

Now, years after coming to the country to search for a job and his long-lost uncles, Jin says he wishes he had known about a man named Kim



Kim Hae Sung helps migrant workers and the urban poor, winning compensation and access to education and health care through his charitable group Global Sarang – 'love' in Korean – and his Korea Migrants' Center. (Seongjoon Cho/Special to the Christian Science Monitor)



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By SAS

Hae Sung a lot sooner.

The Reverend Kim, a Christian pastor, has been working to help migrant workers and the urban poor in this Asian economic powerhouse for nearly 30 years. In 2000 he founded the charitable group Global Sarang ("love" in Korean).

Kim has won compensation for foreign laborers even when no relevant laws existed by using his personal connections and by staging protests. He reckons he has been hospitalized more than a dozen times due to scuffles with police during demonstrations and immigration raids.

"Broken jaw, ruptured eardrum..." he recalls. "But all of that is in the past now."

Indeed, in many ways Kim has come a long way since he was counseling migrant workers at his church in a poor Seoul suburb in the 1980s. His Korea Migrants' Center, opened in 2004, now offers legal counseling and help with labor-related problems to hundreds of people each week in 18 languages, free of charge. It also produces weekly informational webcasts and gives free Korean language classes.

But in other ways, Kim, recently named by a local newspaper as among the 100 people who will change Korea most over the next decade, seems very much in touch with his roots. He takes his meals in Global Sarang's cafeteria, which serves three meals a day to migrant workers in need.

In another building, migrants without health insurance receive medical checkups or undergo surgery at the hands of qualified doctors, who volunteer their services.

Jin was able to get care here and take time to recover after suffering a stroke. If he hadn't been sent to Global Sarang by another clinic, Jin says, "I wouldn't have been able to eat."

This March, Kim's group will open a preschool and elementary school for children of migrants – the first of its kind – with about 180 students. It hopes to build junior and senior high schools later.

About 18,000 migrant children do not attend school in South Korea due to the language barrier and other reasons, Kim estimates. Government officials say they keep no figures because children are not allowed to accompany parents who have worker visas.

Some migrants are afraid to send their children to school because immigration officials have followed students home and arrested and deported entire families, Kim says. Other students are turned away at the principal's discretion, he says.

"Korean society is experiencing a big change," Kim says. "The number of foreigners living here has surpassed 1.2 million, according to the Justice Ministry. But the time is coming where this number will rise to 5 million, 10 million."

Kim says this inflow is good for a country with the lowest birthrate in the world. But he warns that if South Korea – which has long taken pride in its ethnic homogeneity – cannot create an environment that accepts many backgrounds and cultures, it risks facing racially charged violence.

South Korea took a large step toward protecting foreign workers' rights in 2004 when it set up the Employment Permit System – the legal framework for which Kim helped create and push through.

But according to Amnesty International, there are still wide gaps in its implementation. An October 2009 report by the London-based watchdog group says: "On average, [migrant workers] are paid less than South Korean workers in similar jobs and are at greater risk of industrial accidents with inadequate medical treatment or compensation."

The Migrants' Center, which receives some government money, has seen funding constricted since the conservative administration of President Lee Myung-bak took power two years ago, Kim says. The worldwide financial crisis that began in 2008 has diminished private donations, too.

But it's not all bad news. Global Sarang has established ties to Sri Lanka through Mahinda Rajapaksa, its president, whose nephew was a laborer in South Korea and visited Kim's center.

As a token of thanks for helping migrants from the island nation, two young Sri Lankan elephants – one male, one female – were donated to the Seoul zoo in October, along with about 150 other animals of 40 species.

For Kim, it is an example of the "return on investment" South Korea will see if it treats foreign workers humanely.

But the purpose behind his work goes deeper than self-interest. Kim acknowledges that, as a minister, his motivation is rooted in his faith.

"Human beings have human rights," he says, "and these rights are a gift from heaven. They cannot be repressed or denied."

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