

Fractured Korean Dream

By Lee Chang-sup
Business Editor

Every Saturday, MBC TV has been running a midnight program featuring the fractured "Korean Dream" of foreign workers.

The Asia-Asia program invites family members of foreign workers for a reunion in Korea. Last Saturday, the death of an Indian worker before his family members arrived in Korea was quite emotional.

The Indian man came here in search of money to finance the living of his poor family members at home. He had worked day and night, without even knowing that he had a fatal illness. As he didn't have medical insurance, he was unable to go to hospital until his illness became quite serious. MBC TV arranged the visit of his family members to Korea but he died days before they arrived.

The program started as a good will gesture to inform the audience of the real life of as many as 340,000 legal and illegal foreign workers in Korea. Through the program, the television station seeks to make Koreans better informed of the plight and agony of these guest workers. It seeks to promote solidarity between Koreans and foreign workers as Asians, and to portray foreign workers as human beings not as strangers in Korea. It also urges Koreans not to look down on these workers as inferiors.

"Our purpose is to highlight the troubles and joys foreign workers encounter in Korea in an easy to view and emotional way. We want to draw society's attention to their current status in Korea," Lee Min-ho, the producer of the program, said.

The program highlights these Asian workers as elites in their poor countries. It teaches a lesson to Koreans. Feelings are mutual: Korea will be blamed in the international society and anti-Korean feeling will result in damage to trade. Like Koreans, they are warriors who are doing much to build the local economy.

Three decades ago, Korean miners and nurses went to Germany to earn money to feed their families back home. Now Korea has become the world's 13th-largest economy and many foreign workers came to Korea to work so-called 3D (dangerous, difficult and dirty) jobs Koreans shun.

Whether we like it or not, the time has come for Korea to make a serious review of its policy toward foreign workers. As is well known, the rights of foreign workers are not guaranteed. Many bad Korean managers deny even their underpaid wages and medical service is off-limits for foreign workers.

The Roh Moo-hyun administration is taking steps to introduce a new system of foreign labor management under which foreign workers will be employed as regular workers instead of the present system of industrial trainees. This is based on Roh's understanding that there have been various problems related with the present management system of foreign industrial trainees, including human rights problems, low wages and various irregularities.

In keeping with this idea, the Ministry of Labor is seeking to have a new bill passed at the National Assembly.

However, the bill faces strong opposition from lawmakers and the Korea Federation of Small Business (KFSB).

According to the National Human Rights Commission of Korea (KNHRC), Korea must scrap the "industrial trainee system" and introduce the work permit system in order to prevent further

Headlines

- Three-Way Meeting on Nukes to Precede Five-Way Talks
- Soldiers Exchange Fire at Border
- Domestic Banks Begin Downsizing
- 10 Products Account for 57% of Korean Exports

discrimination against migrant workers. It reported that human rights violations occur widely in their daily life and working environment. Foreign workers suffer from long working hours, low pay, poor working conditions, withheld wages, occupational diseases, accidents at the workplace and the seizure of their passports, it said.

The KNHRC advised the government to give foreign workers full labor rights, access to medical insurance and workers' compensation, and wages standards that are similar to Korean workers. In addition, the KNHRC has advised that the same law should apply to illegal workers, even when they are in the process of being arrested.

According to Timothy C. Lim, an assistant professor of political science at California State University in Los Angeles, in contrast to small business owners, who are reported to be exploiting foreign workers as easily replaceable cheap labor force, many non-governmental organizations are trying hard to "envision Korea as a socially just, rights-based country of immigration."

He said about 200 NGOs have not only been instrumental "as advocates of progressive change but have essentially taken over responsibilities and functions typically fulfilled by the government."

Lim said KFSB opposes scrapping the industrial trainee system because the project is a big cash cow. It collects fees through administering the system.

Small business managers also are worried the proposed work permit system will invite labor disputes from the non-Korean workers and hikes in wages.

The professor said, "Willingly or not, South Korea has become a land of immigration. And as a land of immigration, South Koreans face an admittedly difficult choice. On the one hand, they can continue to marginalize and/or criminalize the people who fill an important niche in the economy. They can, in other words, continue to deny basic labor and human rights to people who are simply trying to forge a better life for themselves and their families while, at the same time, filling an important niche in the economy. On the other hand, South Koreans can give to immigrant workers the same rights and protections that many, but not all, immigrants, including hundreds of thousands of Korean emigrants, have enjoyed in the U.S. and other lands of immigration.

"At the same time, Korea can go beyond what most other countries have done by eliminating inequities among different groups of immigrants. In short, Korea can ensure the protection of labor and human rights for all immigrants within its borders. Both choices are possible, although the latter is clearly preferable from a humanistic perspective. This does not mean, however, that South Korea should simply throw open its borders. Certainly, every country has the right to determine its own immigration policy, and to protect and promote rational social, economic and political development. However, the planned exploitation and subordination of peoples who contribute to the South Korean economy and society should not be tolerated. Many and perhaps most Koreans already feel this way; the problem is turning feelings into concrete change," Lim said.

In his view, taking the more humanistic path is not easy. It not only requires far-reaching legal and political change, but profound social and cultural change as well.

Professor Chang Se-moon of the University of South Alabama, a member of The Korea Times Economic Editorial Board, said he would be disappointed if President Roh, with his human rights background, does not try to improve the status of foreign workers in Korea.

"If we cannot treat them fairly, they should not be invited to work. If we do not want to provide foreign workers with minimal welfare provisions such as medical insurance, safe working conditions, and a decent pay, I don't see how we can expect many other nations to treat Korean workers and immigrants well," Chang said.

He even suggested that babies born in Korea to foreign workers be given the option of being a Korean citizens, especially if these babies start learning the language.

In his view, globalization should not mean just exports, it should also mean that Korea is ready for greater interaction in human relations with other advanced as well as less advanced nations.

“If any of these ideas sound unreasonable, just think of Japan and see how the Japanese have treated Koreans who were forced to work in Japan during its occupation of Korea, ’ ’ he said.

changsup@koreatimes.co.kr

04-23-2003 17:00

[About the Times](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Subscription](#) | [Media Kit](#)
Copyright© Hankooki.com All rights reserved. E-mail to [webmaster](#)