

Report: The Starving Korean People's Army - the Current Status and Structure

<PART 1> A starving soldier captured on video

<PART 2> Death by starvation in military troops

* Parents are crying – Gu Gwang-ho

* An army that begs; female soldiers' menstrual periods are stopping - Kim Dong-cheol

<PART 3> Commentary: Why is the Korean People's Army starving? – ISHIMARU Jiro

Kim Jong-il's administration made the army a high priority running his regime centered on the army with his "Military-first policy". Under the regime of his successor, Kim Jong-un, and his similarly named new policy, "Military-first Policy", essential soldiers are struggling with starvation. There have been indications of malnutrition spreading in the since 20 years ago, and evidence and reports of this have become too numerous to report here. In North Korea, it has become common knowledge that "entering the army means starvation". Why is this? We will report on the current status and structure.

Reporters: Kim Dong-cheol, Gu Gwang-ho, Lee Jun
Editing/commentary: ISHIMARU Jiro

<PART 1>

A starving soldier captured on video

(1) A company of Army Engineers are sent home due to malnutrition. [South Pyongang Province]

Report: by Gu Gwang-ho

First, we would like to ask the reader to look at the photos of the Korean People's Army (photos 1-9). Hollow recessed eyes seem unable to focus clearly. Cheekbones are clearly visible and their heads seem to be almost too heavy to be held up by their thin

necks. The army uniforms fit loosely. Some members have collapsed, and hang their heads, unable to move (photos 2 and 3).



Photos 1-9 were taken July, 2011 in North Pyongang Province (photo: Captured image from video recording by Kim Dong-cheol)
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PHOTO 2



PHOTO 3

These photos were taken in a town in South Pyongang Province in

July, 2011. Gu Gwang-ho happened to pass by a plaza near the market where about a dozen soldiers were loafing around, and recorded a video of them with a small hidden camera. Around 30 minutes of video was recorded. Gu Gwang-ho reflected on the moment when he ran across the soldiers.

"Seeing soldiers who are just skin and bones is not unusual in North Korea, but this was the first time to see them in a group. The people around them were also surprised. To me they all seemed to be around their 20's, but the leading officer said, 'Many of them are young, but some are also older too.' Honestly, it made me shudder."

As Gu could not check through the camera's viewfinder, the video sometimes shakes violently and the soldiers are often out of view. However, the sound was recorded relatively clearly. Gu Gwang-ho asked the leading officer the name of the unit and where they were going, but the officer avoided the question. According to the answers other local residents had received, the soldiers were "troops from the Military Engineering Division" and were being sent back to be treated for severe malnutrition. The "Military Engineering Division" is used in the construction of important infrastructure and facility projects. The leader can be heard cautioning the soldiers to "hide from the Military Police".

The Military police supervise the officers and soldiers in the army. It is thought that this is because superior officers have commanded the emaciated soldiers to remain hidden from the civilian population. Gu Gwang-ho commented that "At this rate, they probably do not have long to live. The number of young soldiers who die from malnourishment is not small."

The following is a transcript of part of the recording.

* * *



PHOTO 4



PHOTO 5

A group of around 15 soldiers are gathered near the gate (PHOTO

1). At a glance, it is obvious that they are malnourished. In the photore, you can see a soldier coming out holding his stomach. The squad leader gives a punch and knees him, and he bends over, still holding his stomach (PHOTO 4 & 5: it seems the soldier was kicked in the stomach just before he appears on screen, and the video camera records the sound of his grunt.)

The commissioned officer cannot bear to see this and tries to restrain him. "Hey! Hey! Why did you punch him? Stop it!" He then turns to the malnourished soldiers and commands them, "Hey, you guys, just sit quietly."



PHOTO 6



PHOTO 7



PHOTO 8



PHOTO 9

Then to the squad leader, he said, "We will be arriving soon. Why did you punch him? Don't complicate things further. Even without punching him, he is not feeling well."

Gu Gwang-ho began speaking with one of the locals.

Gu: Where is this squad from?

Local A: I don't know.

Gu: They are not a familiar group...

Gu then asked the commissioned officer who just gave the command (PHOTO 6).

Gu: Are the soldiers sick? Is it tuberculosis?

Officer: ...No, that's not it.

As the officer seemed to be dodging the subject, Gu then approached the malnourished soldiers.

The video camera then records the officer saying, "The squad leader is <the next part is muffled>. Stay in this area without moving. If you wander around, the military police may find you. Stay hidden."

Gu Gwang-ho then squats down beside a local male and chats with him (PHOTO 7)

Local B: They seem sick.

Gu: Yeah, they sure seem that way... It's horrible. They seem malnourished, right?

Local B: And if they are with the Military Engineering Division...

Gu: The Military Engineering Division? Is that what their uniforms look like?

Local B: They are part of the "Target Construction". (This group constructs nationally important buildings and facilities).

Gu Gwang-ho leaves the scene, still recording.

PROFILE:

Gu Gwang-ho

Gu Gwang-ho is in his thirties and lives in Pyongyang. He started his journalistic activities in 2011 after having training several times as a reporter by ASIAPRESS North Korea Reporting Team. He has made series of reporting in Pyongyang and South Pyongan Province successfully so far.

His remarkable video report on starving People's Army soldier in 2011 was aired by many TV stations over the world.

(2) A commissioned student officer admits that the squad's meals are "ghastly" [North Pyongan Province]

Report: by Kim Dong-cheol

In March, 2011, in a town in North Pyongan Province, reporter Kim Dong-cheol found two soldiers and secretly video-taped a conversation with them (PHOTO 10). The soldiers commented that their meals were "ghastly" and asked for help from Kim Dong-cheol, a non-military person. They offered to help do work for him if he would share his food. In the recorded conversation, the soldiers expose the raw facts about their starvation, and it provides strong evidence about the situation.



photo10: Two officer school students are speaking and comment that, "In the spring, half of the squad will become malnourished." (March, 2011, North Pyongan Province. Photo by Kim Dong-cheol) (C)ASIAPRESS

The following is a transcript of the conversation between Kim Dong-cheol and the two soldiers. The soldiers were attending officer school in order to rise to the rank of petty officer. Typically, after

attending a few years of school, graduates are sent to join a new squad, but for some reason, these soldiers were sent from school to meet with a squad. They were still young.

Kim: Do you two have free time today?

Soldier 1: Today?

Kim: I am planning on doing some plumbing. (Do you want some work?)

Soldier 1: Is there a lot (of work)?

Kim: Not that much. How old are you?

Soldier 1: 26.

Kim: Which squad are you with?

Soldier 1: We are with <redacted>.

Kim: With that officer school there?

Soldier 1: Yeah.

Kim: you look really skinny. Are you having a tough time?

Soldier 1: It is rough.

Kim: Aren't there a lot who are becoming malnourished?

Soldier 1: Everyone is becoming weaker.

Kim: Everyone?

Soldier 1: The entire <redacted> squad is like this.

Kim: What year did you enter school?

Soldier 1: I entered school in 2004.

Kim (addressing the other soldier): And how old are you?

Soldier 2: 29.

Kim: You still look ok. (He chuckles. Kim turned to the first soldier.) You are about to be discharged, if you are 26.

Soldier 1: Not yet.

Kim: Didn't you join officer school after graduating from university?

Soldier 1: No.

Kim: You entered right after middle school?

Soldier 1: Yeah.

Kim: How many years has that been?

Soldier 1: This is my eighth year.

Kim: After 8 years, it should have gotten easier by now. Why are you so thin?

Soldier 2: You were saying you had some work?

Soldier 1: What should we do?

Kim: I would like to have someone help with water pipes.

Soldier 1: How many days will the work take?

Kim: It can be finished in a day. Do you have time?

Soldier 2: I can't promise. We are soldiers and students, so we must confirm with our platoon leader comrades. Do we have to decide the date?

Kim: I can match your schedule. It will take a full day. It is not like there is a lot of work - I just need you to dig a hole.

Soldier 1: Are you digging a well? Or is it for water pipes?

Kim: Water pipes. (The depth is) about 1.5 meters(4.9ft), and the length is about three or four meters. After digging the hole, I will get someone else to lay the pipe.

Soldier 2: Three meters? If two people work together, it can be finished in one morning. Is the ground good?

Kim: Ok. Then help me out. And let's have a smoke together.

Soldier 1: Ok. Let's help each other out.

Kim: I feel sorry for you guys, so (I am asking for you to work for me). Keep your chin up!

Soldier 2: Thank you.

Soldier 1: Do you have any side dishes (food) in your place?

Kim: Why (are you asking?)

Soldier 1: We need some side dishes food.

Kim: Side dishes? How about something pickled? Now?

Soldier 1: Yeah.

Kim: I'll get my wife to prepare it.

Kim: Why are you walking around with a *homi* (a short farming implement)?

Soldier 1: We secretly left our squad to harvest some shepherd's-purse. The officers say they don't have any side dishes...

Kim: I will give you some pickled foods. Then you won't need to take any eggplants, right? You need to get what the officers will eat?

Soldier 1: There are no side dishes.

Kim: Even for the officers?

Soldier 1: They are buying and eating artificial meat (see note 1) a little at a time, but it is not enough.

Kim: Ok. The army doesn't have any pickled vegetables?

Soldier 2: There are some, but they are pickling it in cloth bags, so it gets moldy.

Kim: So how much are you eating?

Soldier 1: ... I am not sure if I can say... It is so miserable that I can't tell you.

Soldier 2: It is dreadful...

Kim: Why? Too miserable? Do you get corn?

Soldier 1: If only I could eat a belly full of corn...

Soldier 2: It would be good if we could eat corn too.

Soldier 1: If we talk about this, then we are betraying the commander, but now we are asked to be self-sufficient. We look after our own food and everything else.

Soldier 2: It is so pitiful; it is hard to talk about it.

Kim: As this is the real situation, you must overcome this. In terms of eating, is officer school better? Or is being with a squad better?

Soldier 1: Being in officer school is physically easier, but (when I am in the squad,) my parents send money and come to visit, so there is more to eat. In my case, to get here (from my home province of) Kangwon Province, you have to go over (Choelryun) pass. So I can't even contact my parents and they don't come. It is tough to be here.

Soldier 2: My parents don't even know that I am here. Over the last few days I have been really hungry.

Kim: How many people are there in your company?

Soldier 1: About 100 people.

Kim: About 30% of them are malnourished?

Soldier 1: By spring, about 50% will be.

Kim: Since when has it been like this? It wasn't that bad before, right?

Soldier 2: It is about to become worse. When it becomes potato season (in June), we only eat potatoes. 7 per person.

Kim: Only 7? You will become malnourished even if you just stay still.

Soldier 2: If we go outside and work, we are occupied and forget the hunger, but if we sit inside studying...

Kim: If you feel hungry, I am sure a lot of things come to mind.

Soldier 1: That's right. I think about out a lot of things.

Kim: Which squad's uniform did you originally wear?

Soldier 1: Sangwon County squad.

Kim: Sangwon? That is in Pyongyang so it must be ok, right? (See note 2)

Soldier 1: If the roads (to the city area) are convenient, then army life is easier. But as I lived in the mountains, it was very difficult.

Soldier 2: Soldiers are cutting and eating grass from the mountains.

Kim: Do the officers receive rations?

Soldier 2: At the company level they do, but at the battalion level they don't. (See note 3)

Kim: The battalion level doesn't receive them? But individually they receive some?

Soldier 1: Individuals do, but for their families ... the rations are a few months late. If food comes in, there are rations, but if it doesn't, then there are none.



Soldiers bag brown seaweed at the edge of the market in order to sell it to merchants. They are careful about who is watching them. (August, 2006, Chongjin City, North Hamkyung Province. Photo by Paek Hyang) (C)ASIAPRESS

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From the above conversation between Kim Dong-cheol and the soldiers, we can make a few comments about the state of the army. Let's add some explanations.

1. When the two soldiers asked Kim Dong-cheol, a civilian, about work, they were asking him to let them do some part-time work. Soldiers receive their clothes, food and shelter from the government. But the rations from the government are insufficient, and are the cause of hardship. By offering their labor, they can get money or food to compensate for the shortages in what they receive. Civilians, who do not receive rations from the government, can go to the market and through business, make a living. In contrast, soldiers cannot go to the market. In this way, in order for the soldiers to do part-time work, it has become common for them to ask civilians if they have jobs to do.
2. That people are harvesting grass to eat as a side dish is a sorry state of affairs. Even in officer school, they do not seem to be getting side dishes. It seems it has become normal that subordinates, under the orders of their superiors, are required to supply additional food for them.
3. The soldiers are told to be "self-sufficient". In other words, superiors are not able to distribute food supplies. Squads (and the officer school) are unable to look after the soldiers' food supplies, so they tell the soldiers and students that they have to look after themselves. The problems they have to solve themselves are not just limited to food. Kim Dong-cheol had the following comments: "A company is made up of three squads and is about 100 people. Repairing and buying necessary materials for the squad facilities have also become the responsibility of the squad itself. Are regular soldiers asked to pay for these materials themselves? This is utterly impossible, so often the food distributions that are received from the company are sold for cash.
According to soldiers serving in Keasong, there is no coal there and so in the winter, they must cut down their own firewood. They are provided with a vehicle in order to transport the firewood, but the squad is told it must provide the gasoline for the vehicle. In order to get money for gas, they sell their food supplies at the market, as they have nothing else to sell.

The practice of selling what little food supplies they have at the market is like an octopus eating its own legs. This sort of tragic situation is spreading.

4. The soldier's comment that by spring, 50% of the members will be malnourished is shocking. The food harvested in the fall and distributed to the army has run out, in other words, the stored food has run out before the next crops are harvested. Until corn can be harvested at the beginning of autumn, they must cope with the spring potatoes; but they only get seven (likely per meal). Seven potatoes per meal sounds like a lot, but according to Kim Dong-cheol, "the potatoes the army gets during this season are only about as big as your thumb".
5. If the roads (and transportation) are inconvenient then the living situation is very rough. The reason for this is if you are stationed in the scarcely populated mountain areas, it is not possible to ask for part-time work, as these soldiers asked Kim Dong-cheol. Nor is it possible to steal any food. Stories are often heard that troops stationed in the scarcely populated mountainous Kangwong Province have the worst food situation, and it is possible that this is due to the above reason.
6. The soldiers admitted that proper food rations for soldiers' families are not distributed. Regular soldiers receive food rations for only themselves; families of career soldiers, such as officers, also are to receive regular food rations. If these rations are not properly delivered, it signals there are problems. There are many similar accounts about this situation. "Until the 1980s, brides were proud of being able to marry an officer. If you could marry an officer, people were jealous of you. Now only the lowest of people marry officers. Now it is popular to marry people with jobs where they can get bribes, like police officers or employees of trading companies. Now officers' wives must do some sort of business or they will starve to death. In addition to the rations being entirely insufficient, it is necessary to pay cash for side dishes, so officers' wives all do some sort of business. However, officers' wives are under the control of the army and prohibited from doing business at the market.

Instead, they raise pigs at home, or make alcohol or tofu and sell it wholesale to merchants, as their business must not be seen by other people." The above explanation was made by Kim Dong-cheol, demonstrating that officers are barely eking out a living.

Notes:

1. Artificial meat: This is made by pressing soya beans, hardening the grounds and drying them into an "artificial meat". The texture of the final product resembles meat.
2. Sangwon County: Sangwon was separated from Pyongyang and added to North Hwanghae Province.
3. Treatment: It is not clear why companies and battalions are treated differently.



Local residents gather at a send-off event for new army recruits. (Spring of 2006, Chongjin City. Photo by Lee Jun) (C)ASIAPRESS

PROFILE:

Kim Dong-cheol

Kim is in his thirties and lives in the northern region of North Korea.
He started his journalistic activities in 2009 while working as a company driver.

TO BE CONTINUED IN PART 2

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