

Separated Families Meet in North Korea for a Rare Reunion

Welcome to As It Is from VOA Learning English. I'm Mario Ritter in Washington.

Today, we hear about a group of Koreans who recently were reunited with family members for the first time in more than half a century. The meetings took place at Mount Kumgang in North Korea.

Later, we hear North Korea's detention of a Christian missionary from Australia. Reports say the North is holding John Short, possibly because he was carrying religious materials. Long-separated Korean families and the arrest of an Australian man are our subjects today on As It Is.

North and South Korea Permit Reunion of Separated Families

Last week, a group of older South Koreans met their North Korean family members for the first time. The Korean War has separated these families for sixty years. Christopher Cruise has this VOA story.

Eighty-two South Koreans and 180 North Koreans met at a resort named Mount Kumgang, on North Korea's east coast. The event was carefully guarded. But it also was filled with emotion.

Many of the South Korean families were filled with joy at the long-awaited reunions. They exchanged gifts and family photos. They shared stories. But the joy was colored with sadness. They know this may be the last time they will ever see or even talk to their relatives again. Both government ban phone calls and even letters between the two Koreas.

Lee Sang Chul is a representative of the South Korean Association of Divided Families. He has called for regular reunions of families separated since the Korean War.

He said, "We are running out of time. Right now, only about 100 people from each side are allowed to come to the family reunions. Divided families want both governments (North and South Korea) to increase the number of people able to join."

Millions of Koreans were separated in the 1950s conflict. Most have died without ever seeing their relatives again. Since 2000, about 130,000 South Koreans have put their names on a reunion waiting list. Just over half are still alive. Many of these people are in their 80s. They have given up hope of seeing their loved ones.

These are the first family reunions held since 2010. And they almost did not happen. North and South Korea are officially still at war. Bad feelings between the two sides have recently been increasing.

For weeks, North Korea threatened to cancel the reunions if South Korea went forward with joint military exercises with the U.S.

North Korea agreed to the reunion last week. The agreement comes after a high-level meeting that many people hope can serve as a first step towards improving relations.

Troy Stangarone is a Senior Director at the Washington-based Korean Economic Institute. He tells VOA that these reunions are especially important because relations between the North and South have recently weakened.

"Over the last year we've had a lot of tension between North and South Korea as we've transitioned into Kim Jong Un('s rule). And this is sort of the first real step of progress between the two Koreas in that period."

Others are not so sure. They do not feel that the reunions reflect any major change in North Korea's policy towards the South. Lee Sung-Yoon is a Korea Studies professor at Tufts University.

Professor Lee says the reunions are important to the families involved. He does not believe, however, that they have helped relations between North and South Korea.

A second meeting involving 82 South Koreans and 180 North Koreans took place last weekend.

It is not clear when or if other reunions will follow.

I'm Christopher Cruise.

North Korea Detains an Australian Religious Worker

North Korea detained a 75-year old Australian man last week. John Short was visiting North Korea's capital, Pyongyang. Karen Leggett has more on story.

John Short and his wife Karen Short are Christian religious workers, or missionaries. They have lived in Hong Kong for more than 50 years. VOA reporters spoke to Ms. Short by telephone at the couple's home in Hong Kong. They asked about her husband's recent detainment.

Karen Short says her husband has no political goals for visiting North Korea. She added that her husband was most likely seized for having religious material written in the Korean-language.

"He believed it was the right thing to go, and he cares about the situation there and the people there and [he] wanted to go and make a difference, be there, see the people and let them see him."

Short says her husband "is not political, and never has been." But, she says they were aware of the dangers in visiting North Korea. They know that North Korea severely restricts organized religion. And Christian missionaries are accused of foreign interference.

Ms. Short said her husband was able to pass on religious material to the people of North Korea on an earlier trip to the country. But, she said, he did so carefully. She said government officials were assigned to stay with him and were always watching him.

She says this time he must have done something to draw attention to himself or anger government officials. But she said she does not know what that could have been. Ms. Short also explained that she and her husband know the risks that go along with being missionaries.

"This is obviously not the outcome that you think would happen. But we also realize that it's not a free country. It's a closed country. And there are risks involved in going. But that didn't hold back my husband to go."

John Short is at least the second Christian missionary to be detained in North Korea. Forty-five year-old Korean-American Kenneth Bae was arrested in 2012. He was found guilty of trying to overthrow the government. Mr. Bae is currently serving a 15-year sentence of hard labor.

The Australian government has said that it will do all it can to get Short out of prison. But Australia and North Korea do not have diplomatic relations. Australian officials then must work with others countries that do have diplomatic relations with North Korea, such as Sweden.

I'm Karen Leggett.

Thank you for joining us today. For the latest world news, be sure to listen to VOA at the top of every hour, Universal Time.