

Remarks by Kim Kyu Li

Good afternoon. Thank you for being here today.

Like many of you, I am a daughter, a mother, a wife and a sister. But unlike you, I cannot see or meet my beloved sister. My little sister, Kim Cheol-ok, was arrested by the Chinese authorities and deported to North Korea in October last year.

I have not heard anything about Cheol-ok for almost a year now. Her story—our family's story—is also the story of cruel, forced separation of families suffered by so many North Korean refugees in China.

I grew up in a family of six in North Korea. At the height of the famine in 1995, we lost our mother. At just 17, I was left to care for my father and Cheol-ok, 6 years apart from me. Every day, I walked 30 miles to sell bread. In the winter, I crossed the frozen river to China to beg or work for money.

Still, it became difficult to support my family. At 19, in 1997, I made the heart-wrenching decision to leave North Korea. I was sold to a Chinese man, but he was kind. Within a year, I was able to send money, clothes and food to my family back home.

But in 1998, I received a call from a broker saying that he had Cheol-ok in China. He said he would free her if I paid him. But when I reached him hours later, he denied everything. He had already sold Cheol-ok, then only 14, to a Chinese man, 30 years older than her, and had washed his hands.

I lost contact with Cheol-ok for the next 23 years, but I never gave up my hope of finding her.

Finally, in 2020, we connected. We cried and talked for hours over the phone. Cheol-ok was still my little sister, but much had changed over the years. She had forgotten her Korean so we spoke in Mandarin. I learned that I was an aunt to a niece born when Cheol-ok was only 16.

In early 2023, Cheol-ok barely survived COVID, but she could not go to the hospital. This was because of China's policy of forcing North Korean refugees to live invisibly as illegal migrants at home or face deportation to North Korea even though South Korea and other countries have offered to accept them.

Cheol-ok decided that she had to flee China. But just two hours after escaping from her village, she was arrested by the police. For 6 agonizing months, I desperately sought ways to set her free.

Then, on October 9, 2023, China forcibly repatriated over 500 North Korean refugees, including Cheol-ok.

Why condemn so many innocent people to torture, sexual violence, forced abortions, political prison camps and executions in North Korea? Why break the hearts of so many families by tearing them apart?

I only wish to see my little sister free, safe and reunited with her family. My fellow North Korean escapees wish the same for their loved ones.

I am sure that the families of abductees, detainees and unrepatriated POWs and other families forcibly separated by North Korea that are here today feel the same.

I ask governments to ask North Korea to clarify the fate and whereabouts of my sister and other repatriated North Korean refugees at the UPR in November.

And to end this atrocity, I ask the international community to hold Kim Jong Un and others accountable for their crimes against humanity.

Thank you.