

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing on South Korean Refugee Policy and the New Administration
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[Good morning, Commissioners and all attendees. It is my great honor to join such a meaningful event today. My name is Moon Jun Sohn, working as a faculty neurosurgeon at a university hospital and live in Seoul.

Before I begin my testimony, I would like to confess today, unlike other excellent panels here, I had lived as an ordinary citizen who was indifferent to refugee policy and issue until July last year. I am humbled to say that this gathering has given me time to find reflection and insight into what I used to be.

In November 2009, South Korea has decided to join the OECD-Development Assistance Committee in Paris as the 24th member, becoming an advanced donor in the international community. Subsequently, in 2010, the Korean government's largest ODA project began in Afghanistan, and Inje University-Paik Medical Center signed a PMC contract with KOICA to take the lead in humanitarian medical aid projects. KOICA is a government-funded organization such as USAID in the United States. I also decided to participate in the PRT hospital project as the second sabbatical year of my life.

It was a coincidental motivation and gradually became the inevitable reality of today as a destiny. I happened to have a joining PRT mission in Afghanistan between 2010 and 2011 and connected with them, people in Afghanistan; coworkers, friends, patients and their families. After returning from the dispatch to daily life, it remained a special memory. Last year, however, all of the sudden Afghanistan was quickly being conquered by the Taliban again. The urgent voices of our Afghan friends who worked with us 12 years ago, the threats they faced, and the vivid violence reported in media broadcasts brought back vivid bad memories of the past about terrorism committed by Taliban during the dispatch period.

Meanwhile, the Afghan local staff contacted me, I raised their voice to the Korean government officials. Eventually, the evacuation mission has been done by the Korean government. The local staff was in contact with me during the entire process of the evacuation and the settlement for discussion and mentoring. The Korean government made a lot of efforts and provide opportunities for their settlement and initial adaptation to the new society.

Now, I started seeing refugees. In particular, from last year, I have come to realize the need for participation and inclusive roles of ordinary citizens. Now it has become an important challenge in my life. After all, I am working for We All Friends which NGO supporting the social settlement of refugees in Korea.

Criticism of Korea's refugee policy has long been raised by meaningful activists and pioneers. Only a few years ago, accepting Yemeni refugees on Jeju Island located in the southern part of Korea, was a hot issue in Korean society. At that time, media reports and public opinion presented a negative perception of refugees in our society.

Only now, from the perspective of human rights, a more objective and reasonable consensus on the issue of accepting refugees is actively forming in Korean society. In terms of South Korea's refugee policy and the new administration, I believe that our society is at an important turning point to develop into a multicultural immigrant society with a stance of accepting and welcoming refugees and also committed to international standards including the principle of non-refoulement and implementation of the 1951 refugee convention.

Korea's refugee policy is still in the stage of baby stepping, so there seems to be a lot to learn from foreign cases and a lot to supplement. I think we should find ways to communicate with civil society and the government. There are mixed feelings within civil society regarding the establishment of the immigration agency. We believe that the installation of the agency alone does not solve the problem, and what's more urgent is to take legislative measures and make an inclusive immigration policy. Measures to accept refugees in oppression and crisis as our members should be discussed and the culture and awareness of multicultural societies should also be promoted. This means that it is a need to make some legislative amendments for a better and more inclusive immigration policy and its acceptance.

I hope that today's meeting could encourage the Member States of the 1951 Refugee Convention to take appropriate steps to adopt and fulfill their obligations and to develop a national refugee policy for better compliance with the provisions of the convention. In addition, this gathering and efforts are expected to serve as an opportunity to take an important step toward the development of the new Korean government's refugee policy and improvement of the awareness of Korean civil society.

Thank you very much for your attention]