

The Meaning of North Korea's Participation in the Paralympics and North Korean Human Rights as well as the Future Challenges for the Development of Inter-Korean Relations

Kyu-Chang Lee

Research Fellow, KINU Center for North Korean Human Rights Studies

Online Series CO 12-38

At the London Paralympic Games, which opened on the 30th of last month, North Korea dispatched a 24-person team, consisting of 1 athlete to compete in the 50m freestyle swimming and 23 officials. It attracted interest from home and abroad because this was the first time that North Korea had participated in the Paralympics. From the perspective of human rights, this is the first instance in which tangible actions will have noteworthy ripple effects on North Korean human rights since this April's inauguration of the system that upheld Kim Jong-un as the First Secretary of the Worker's Party of Korea (WPK). Although it is difficult to accurately determine the scale of disabled North Koreans due to the obstructive nature of the North Korean regime, approximately 800,000 people with disabilities, including physical handicap, hearing impairment, visual impairment and mental disability, among others have been identified. However, based on the unpublished North Korea-related statistics, the economic hardships and food shortages, and the relatively narrow definition of a "disabled person," the scale of North Koreans with disabilities is believed to be much larger.¹⁾

North Korea's participation in the Paralympics suggests that changes in the North Korean authorities' policies regarding the disabled can be perceived as a positive sign. Generally, the disabled are treated unfairly due to their physical and mental defects, often living hidden under harsh

1) The South Korean Welfare of Disabled Persons Act classifies disabilities, such as physical and visual impairments, into 15 categories and rank the degree of severity from levels 1 to 6. On the other hand, the North Korean Protection of Disabled Persons Law greatly distinguishes physical and mental disabilities.

conditions. However, they have the right to be respected with human dignity and pursue happiness as well as live alongside with the general public. On December 9, 1975, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons, which proclaims that “Disabled persons have the inherent right to respect for their human dignity.” This can be understood within the context of the enactment of the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

In North Korea, a non-governmental organization called the “Chosun Association for the Support of the Disabled” was created in July 1998 in order to provide the protection of human rights for disabled persons. The organization expanded and renamed itself as the “Chosun Federation for the Protection of the Disabled” in July 2005. In addition, the Protection of Disabled Persons Act was enacted in 2003. According to several statements continuously asserted by recent defectors, the disabled are in fact free from oppression in regions outside of Pyongyang. However, the majority of North Korean people with disabilities are abused of their basic human rights. In a survey of North Korean defectors conducted by KINU in 2011, the results revealed that 77% of respondents claimed that discrimination against the handicapped is severe. People who have polio, blindness or speech impediments and are hunchbacks, crippled, dwarfs or amputees are negatively portrayed in North Korean society.²⁾ For this reason, North Korea’s participation in the Paralympics seeks to improve awareness among North Koreans and generate positive changes in government policy. Although the swimmer, Ju Song Rim, finished last in the 50m freestyle preliminary heat and failed to advance to the final, his participation in this year’s Paralympics by overcoming his handicap is enough to provide hopes and dreams to other people with disabilities in North Korea.

Given that North Korea demonstrated ambivalent approaches during that period of time, there is a need to consider the attitude of North Korean policy toward the disabled. Conscious of criticisms from the international community, North Korea has taken measures in the form of external propaganda to improve human rights. Typical examples of enacted human rights statutes include the Act for Guaranteeing Women’s Rights, Act for Guaranteeing the Rights of the Child, Elementary Education Act and the Labor Protection Act, among others. Despite these apparent measures to improve human rights, however, the situation for women and children as well as education and labor within the field of human rights remains substandard. Rather, the lives of North Korean women, who are responsible for the household economy, have become significantly more exhausting due to country’s overall economic crisis and food shortages, and it appears that the children’s educational rights have also been violated due to frequent interferences in their academics in favor of excessive labor practices. In addition, although the North is advocating for the construction of an economic powerhouse, the North Korean people are being driven out of the field of economic construction as well as land management while the assessments of labor rights continue to deteriorate.

The same applies to the assessment of North Korea’s participation in the Paralympics. Currently, it is

2) For more information, refer to Soo-Am Kim *et al.*, *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea 2012* (Seoul: KINU, 2012).

difficult to verify North Korea's true intentions for partaking in the Games. In other words, by observing North Korea's future policies and relations toward persons with disabilities, we will be able to determine whether the North Korean authorities truly intended to improve the human rights of the disabled or the Kim Jong-un regime used the Paralympics as a means to improve its image abroad. Despite its involvement in the Games, North Korea will face difficulties in avoiding criticisms that it participated for the latter reason should there be no visible changes in policy for its handicapped citizens. At the tip of the iceberg, critical analyses have asserted that in light of the economic crisis, the North Korean authorities partook in the Paralympics in order to garner external support.

North Korea's participation in the Paralympic Games should be followed by an improvement of every citizen's human rights and inter-Korean relations as a means of developing the human rights of disabled North Koreans.

First, there needs to be an additional step from the symbolic participation in the Paralympics to include other North Koreans and disabled persons alike in discussions regarding the improvement of human rights in North Korea. North Korea needs to demonstrate that it can be responsible and is willing to fulfill the provisions in relevant human rights acts. These acts, including the Protection of Disabled Persons Act, must not exist for merely decorative purposes. In addition, North Korea needs to sign and abide by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in order to ensure a long-term improvement in the lives of the handicapped in North Korea. The convention, which was adopted in 2006, strives to protect the rights of disabled persons through regulations and institutional means. However, North Korea has thus far not signed onto the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.³⁾

Second, there needs to be an expansion of non-political exchanges between South and North Korea. These types of exchanges can greatly contribute toward reducing political tensions between the two countries. Thus far, they have been engaged in intermittent non-political exchanges, such as their participation in international sporting events as a single Korean team and their march as a unified delegation into the stadium during the opening ceremony of the Olympics. It would be necessary to do the same in the Paralympics. Furthermore, there needs to be an expansion of non-political exchanges in the domains of culture and arts, since they can play a large role in improving the cultural rights of the North Korean people and more importantly, contribute toward the creation of a North-South Korean community that is focused on inter-Korean relations and unification policies.

Third, there should be an expansion of support for the improvement of human rights in regards to the North Koreans with disabilities. In North Korea, the goods and amenities for the disabled are found to absurdly deficient. The same applies to special schools, rehab centers and factories dedicated to the handicapped. According to the North Korean defectors, government support is only bestowed upon soldiers who have been injured either during service or in battle. Currently, it has been reported that aid projects for the disabled are under development, including support for rehab centers, construction of

3) As of September 5, 2102, 119 countries are listed as State Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Person with Disabilities. South Korea ratified it on December 11, 2008.

recovery centers, support for special schools, rationing of meals, and studies in arts and physical education. In comparison to that of North Korea, South Korea's education and work education programs for the disabled are rather systematic. We need to consider increasing our support for the disabled persons in North Korea by utilizing our advantages and knowledge to achieve North Korea's potential.

Furthermore, as a part of improving human rights in North Korea, there needs to be an increase in humanitarian aid toward the North Koreans who are part of the "vulnerable social groups," which include the disabled, children and women. In regards to humanitarian projects, there must be caution to prevent the misappropriation of aid supplies by the North Korean government as a means to maintain its power. This contradicts Article 4 of the South Korean Constitution, which stipulates the "principles of freedom and democracy." However, the humanitarian support sent to relieve the vulnerable social groups tends to appear in the form of indirect aid that can improve the North Koreans' quality of life rather than in the form of direct aid, such as food and expenses. The improvement of the North Koreans' quality of life is necessary for the betterment of their human rights. It is also necessary to develop inter-Korean relations and ultimately, progress toward unification. This is of the utmost importance in winning the hearts of the North Korean people. The humanitarian support for the vulnerable social groups in North Korea can strengthen the affinity between North and South Korea as well as contribute toward the creation of a favorable atmosphere for unification and the facilitation of social integration after unification. © KINU 2012

※ The views expressed in this paper are entirely that of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).