



PERSPECTIVES

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It Is Time to Reunite Separated Korean Families

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Ever since the end of the Korean War in 1953, the issue of separated Korean families – while very painful for the affected people – has received only scant attention from the leaders of both Koreas. The time has come to solve this humanitarian problem and heal the suffering of these families before they pass away.

The Korean Peninsula has suffered the pain of separated families ever since the end of the Korean War. One of President Moon Jae-in's achievements during his April 2018 summit with Kim Jong-un was an agreement to conduct a family reunion by the end of August 2018, the first such event for several years. While the media focused mainly on the summit itself and the nuclear and missile issues, this agreement regarding separated families received only limited coverage.

For more than 100,000 South Koreans, the separated families issue is an open wound that has not healed in six decades. (Exact figures on how many separated families live today on both sides of the Korean border depend on the counting of first- or second-degree relatives.) South Koreans who wish to see their relatives across the border must enter a lottery. For every 50,000 or so applicants, one hundred or fewer are notified by the South Korean Ministry of Unification that they have been selected. If they are among those fortunate few, they must simply hope their relatives in North Korea are still alive and in good health.

In some cases in the past, South Korean applicants have learned that their relatives in North Korea passed away long ago. In other cases, the applicants themselves died before they had a chance to see their relatives. In some instances, South Koreans met their relatives in the North only to discover that those relatives suffered from dementia and could no longer recognize them.

Only a very limited number of South Koreans will be lucky enough to make the trip to reunite with their relatives for few days. Once the reunion ends, those South Koreans will return home without knowing if they will ever see their relatives again.

The separated families are running out of time. Most first-degree relatives are in their late 70s and 80s. They will not live forever. The time has come for the leaders of North and South Korea to make the political and humanitarian decision to deal with this issue. A family reunion every few years, or even once a year, is a hopeless prospect for the many who will not last until the next reunion.

The two leaders should solve this issue by authorizing monthly family reunions. This would allow all the separated families to see their relatives again before they pass away. This will not solve the nuclear or missile issues, but it might build confidence among the people. More importantly, it would be a step towards healing the six decades of suffering experienced by thousands of separated families in North and South Korea.

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