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WORLD

How South Korea Solved Its Acute Hospital-Bed Shortage

Lives were saved by reserving beds for most acutely ill Covid-19 patients and putting less sick in dorms

A camping site in Sejong, South Korea, functioning on March 12 as a makeshift clinic for patients with mild Covid-19 symptoms.

PHOTO: YONHAP NEWS/NEWSCOM/ZUMA PRESS

By *Dasl Yoon*

March 22, 2020 7:00 am ET

DAEGU, South Korea—During the darkest days of its coronavirus outbreak, South Korea didn't have enough doctors and nurses to treat the sick, and patients were dying while waiting for hospital beds.

The country managed to turn the rapidly deteriorating situation around quickly, however, by devising a system to reserve hospital beds for those most in need and creating extra space with help from its biggest companies.

South Korea divided confirmed patients into four categories. Only the sickest and elderly went to hospitals. The young and asymptomatic went to dormitories, which were lent by Samsung Life Insurance Co. , LG Display Co. and others, equipped with little more than beds, Wi-Fi and the occasional television.

The decision ensured that low-risk individuals remained quarantined under government watch. Thousands of South Korea's virus patients have ridden out the past several weeks living in buildings where companies typically put up workers for off-site, multiday training.

With Covid-19 cases skyrocketing daily, health officials around the globe fear their countries lack enough hospital beds, respirators, supplies and staffing to meet demand. Few, if any, can. But South Korea, where new infections have recently tapered off, offers an example of how the intense pressure on hospital beds and equipment can be alleviated.

South Korea, despite roughly 8,900 confirmed patients, has reported only 104 deaths. Just five died while waiting for a hospital bed, and everyone with severe symptoms is now hospitalized. Not a single South Korean doctor or nurse has died.

"We were fighting a war with very little time on our hands," said Min Pok-kee, who heads South Korea's Covid-19 response team in the city of Daegu, the center of the country's coronavirus outbreak. "If we had not secured these other facilities, our death rate would have resembled other countries'."

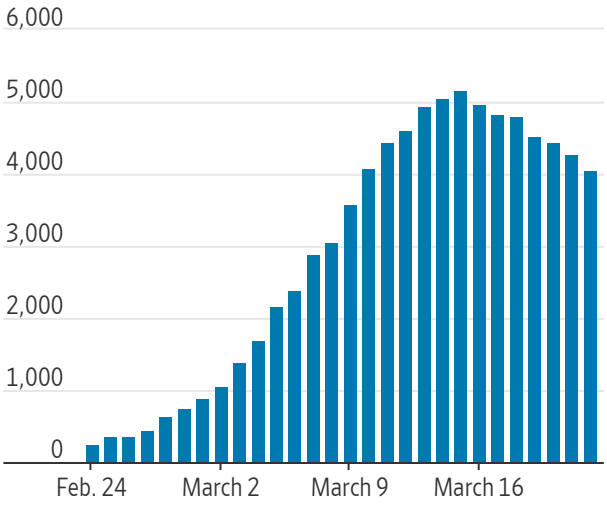
The coronavirus pandemic hasn't yet shown much stasis. In Italy, where deaths now outnumber those of China, where the outbreak began, hospitals are forced to choose which critically ill patients get admitted to intensive-care units. Some U.K. lawmakers are urging health officials to requisition beds from private hospitals. China addressed its bed shortage by building two makeshift hospitals in the hard-hit city of Wuhan.

And in the U.S., some large cities are contemplating converting entire hotels into hospitals, while the country's largest hospital group warns of respirator shortages.

Patients Hospitalized and Waiting

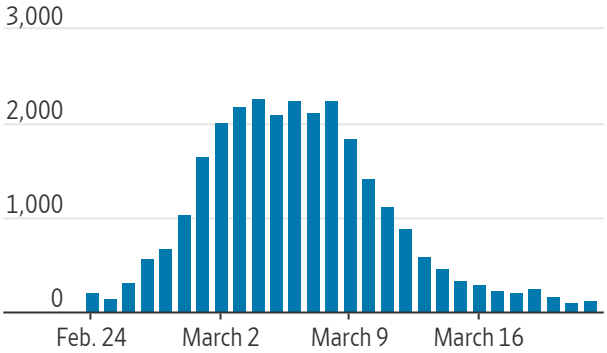
On March 15 roughly 5,000 patients in Daegu were hospitalized in 70 hospitals or residential facilities around the country...

Patients hospitalized in Daegu, South Korea



...while the number of patients waiting fell as dormitories turned into makeshift hospitals.

Patients waiting for a hospital bed



Source: South Korea's Daegu City Hall

South Korea had a decided advantage over the U.S., with far more hospital beds per capita. The country has more than 12 hospital beds per 1,000 people, compared with the U.S., which has less than 3 per 1,000, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Based on some modeling of virus spread, the U.S. could be about 100,000 ICU beds short, said Irwin Redlener, director of Columbia University's National Center for Disaster Preparedness.

A country of 52 million people, South Korea also benefited from having a single-payer health-care system that ensured testing—and treatment—was free or low-cost. Wide

screening detected the sick early on. The strategy succeeded at preventing a riptide of contagions forming outside the Daegu area. The pace of new infections has slowed.

Ambulances parked earlier this month in Daegu, South Korea, as they wait to transport patients with mild symptoms of the coronavirus.

PHOTO: LEE MOO-RYUL/NEWSIS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

In late February, South Korea confronted an increasingly familiar problem as infections exploded across Daegu. The task: quickly secure 5,000 hospital beds, locate 1,000 more medical staff and keep supplies plentiful.

The most profound shift occurred on March 1 when the country's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention stopped admitting every confirmed patient into a hospital. Instead, it divided everyone into four groups based on criteria set by South Korea's largest physicians group: asymptomatic, mild, severe and critical.

Only the latter two categories went to the hospital. Patients running fevers more than 100 degrees, having difficulty breathing or aged 50 or above were deemed severe or critical, according to guidelines from the Korean Medical Association.

Workers setting up containers as a makeshift medical facility to accommodate Covid-19 patients on the grounds of a hospital in Daegu, South Korea, on Feb. 28.

PHOTO: KIM HYUN-TAE/YONHAP NEWS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The approach bore some similarities to that in Wuhan, the city at the center of the pandemic in China, where officials also split up at-risk people into four categories. The Chinese city relied on the Communist Party's local residential committees to assess patients. In South Korea, doctors were the ones making the call.

The Seoul government's classification showed about 80% of the cases were mild, a similar ratio to that in Wuhan. But the grouping exercise also highlighted who should take priority: Just one of every 10 individuals needed medical treatment at a fully equipped hospital, said Son Young-rae, a senior South Korean health ministry official.

"We could focus on hospitalizing severe patients in intensive care units with round-the-clock treatment, which lowers the death rate," Mr. Son said.

The shift required some relatively healthy people already hospitalized to be discharged. In early March, roughly 3,000 people were moved to more than a dozen repurposed company dormitories that health officials labeled as "residential treatment facilities." The buildings include those owned by Samsung Life and LG.

LG Display, in a statement, said it provided its facility to "share in the community's difficulties." Samsung Life declined to comment. Until the virus hit, the facilities were used by company staff during training retreats. The South Korea government pays for staffing and utilities, though not rent.

Some of the makeshift medical facilities were hours away from Daegu. In one instance, a bus was chartered and left fully packed with infected patients.

The nonhospital venues dramatically reduced staffing shortages that looked bleak in the first week. Only about 10 medical staff are required for a 200-patient facility. Those whose condition worsens are transferred immediately to a nearby hospital.

To counter a shortage of medical staff, South Korea's health officials and medical groups called for volunteers. Eventually more than 1,000 people raised their hands.

A medical team from Seoul National University Hospital conducting an exercise on March 4 at a facility in Mungyeong, South Korea, set up to house and treat Covid-19 patients with mild symptoms.

PHOTO: RYU SEUNG-IL/ZUMA PRESS

The bed shortage has also dissipated. As recently as March 8, more than 2,200 confirmed patients—or roughly 40% of Daegu's total cases—awaited a hospital bed of any kind. Two weeks later, that number has dwindled to just 124, all of which are mild or asymptomatic cases.

Having learned from Daegu's experience, all districts in South Korea have been ordered to secure residential facilities before cases rise, said Mr. Son, the health ministry official.

With the nation's infections moderating, hospitals say they have enough government-provided protective suits, goggles and masks to last seven to 10 days, though initially supplies had been depleted. Doctors still may wear a single mask all day rather than switch out after the recommended eight hours. Volunteer nurses often wear protective suits longer than the recommended two hours. "Manageable but not ideal," a Korean Medical Association spokesman said.

Life inside the residential-treatment facilities can be calm. Kim Jin-sun, a 27-year-old nurse, volunteered earlier this month at the Samsung Life Insurance facility that holds around 170 relatively healthy coronavirus patients. She works 16-hour shifts. Small talk is scant as she monitors patients and hands out medicine.

One male patient, fearful of spreading infection, hides his face behind the door every time she shows up. He typically utters the same few words: “Thank you, thank you.”

CORONAVIRUS NEWSLETTER

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Write to Dasl Yoon at dasl.yoon@wsj.com

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ASIA

A Man of Two Faces: Leader of South Korean Church Tied to Outbreak

Shincheonji founder Lee Man-Hee led life at odds with public 'everyman' persona, former members say

Lee Man-hee, speaking during a press conference on Monday, founded Shincheonji Church of Jesus in 1984.

PHOTO: KIM JU-SUNG/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Dasl Yoon
March 6, 2020 12:34 pm ET

DAEGU, South Korea—Much of the blame for the rapid spread of coronavirus in South Korea has been directed at an 88-year-old church leader with a fondness for Hermès ties and lawsuits.

Lee Man-hee, founder of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, faces several lawsuits and widespread public scorn, as the group fends off accusations it is hiding information that could help contain the epidemic. The group is connected to three-fifths of the country's 6,593 confirmed cases.

On Thursday, South Korean prosecutors and public-health investigators searched Shincheonji's headquarters in Gwacheon, just south of Seoul, seeking a full list of members, facilities and attendance records. Without that information, officials say, containing contagion will be difficult.

Mr. Lee is the face of a controversial religious sect that the country's government calls a cult. Many members conceal their Shincheonji ties from their families. Seoul Mayor Park Won-soon has accused Mr. Lee of impeding the fight against the epidemic by providing only a partial list of church members and worship sites to authorities, arguing he should be charged with homicide by willful negligence.

THE LATEST ON THE CORONAVIRUS

- Johns Hopkins: 100,330 cases of infection world-wide, 3,408 deaths
- U.S. has 233 cases, 14 people have died
- South Korea reports 6,593 cases

"If Shincheonji had taken active measures, we could have prevented many people from dying," Mr. Park said.

Shincheonji and Mr. Lee, through a church spokeswoman, declined to comment for this article. The group is cooperating with health officials, the spokeswoman said. The church says it has provided information for about 310,000 members, trainees and foreign followers, as well as 1,100 facilities.

Former church followers and others who have met Mr. Lee say the affable public image he has cultivated doesn't align with the man they know from behind the church's closed doors.

A closed branch of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in Seoul on March 1.

PHOTO: JUNG YEON-JE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Mr. Lee, a self-proclaimed messiah, has described himself to followers as an everyman who urges others to shed their materialistic impulses. Followers refer to Mr. Lee as "the

Good Shepherd" and believe only his true followers will join him in heaven when the world comes to an end.

But some of the members of the church he founded more than three decades ago say they have seen a very different side of him—one that is mercurial and ostentatious.

In September 2018, Mr. Lee, wearing his trademark white suit, visited the Shincheonji Church in Daegu that is now at the center of South Korea's virus epidemic. He arrived in a Mercedes Maybach S600, the same model of luxury car favored by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Followers, dressed in traditional Korean outfits, formed a welcome line and bowed their heads. Bodyguards watched his every step.

"It was like a king had arrived," said Hee-jin Koh, a former Shincheonji member, who was at the Daegu church that day. She left the group in November after four years.

When in the same room with followers, Mr. Lee often berated them, former members say. He would criticize them for not recruiting enough new members. He supervised the periodic exams testing one's knowledge of Shincheonji doctrine. Those he accused of being cheaters were singled out in front of others, with their name, address, photo and phone number projected onto a large screen.

"You are put on probation!" Mr. Lee would shout.

Mr. Lee was born in 1931 to a poor family in Cheongdo, a town in South Korea's southeast now considered a pilgrimage destination for Shincheonji followers. Senior church officials lead the Cheongdo tour and explain that before Mr. Lee's birth his grandfather had a vision: the sky went dark, a divine light appeared and shined directly on Mr. Lee's pregnant mother.

As the sixth of 12 sons, Mr. Lee didn't receive a formal education growing up in rural South Korea. "But neither God nor Jesus learned at school," read Shincheonji's website in 2012. The webpage has since been removed.

Mr. Lee hasn't hesitated to take legal action against those questioning the legitimacy of the church he founded in 1984. Tak Ji-won, who runs a South Korean counseling clinic that helps individuals leave what he calls cultlike churches, said he has been sued by Mr. Lee or the church several times. The defamation lawsuits challenge Mr. Tak's remarks that Shincheonji is a cult whose teachings are false.

When they first met in the mid-2000s, Mr. Lee unabashedly described himself as a deity, Mr. Tak recalled. “I’m different from you all,” Mr. Lee said during the meeting. “I have eternal life.”

High-Speed Trains, International Flights: How the Coronavirus Spread

In formal Shincheonji orthodoxy, Mr. Lee presents a more magnanimous face. Church members are told Mr. Lee leads a simple life and encourages his followers to offer their earthly belongings to Shincheonji. Former members said they paid up to $1,300 a person to contribute to building new Shincheonji churches around South Korea. They are required to buy CDs of Mr. Lee’s lectures, even today.

On Monday, he adopted an even more humble tone when speaking to reporters at his mansion, located about 40 miles outside of Seoul, to defend the church’s response to the epidemic.

Sitting in front of tall wooden gates embroidered with Shincheonji’s logo, Mr. Lee mumbled throughout his 25 minutes of remarks. He twice dropped to his knees and bowed in apology. He wore a yellow tie from the luxury brand Hermès. He sported a gold watch bearing a former president’s signature that was later discredited as a replica.

“We did our best but were not able to stop the spread of the virus,” Mr. Lee said.

On Thursday, the group donated more than $10 million for virus-relief funds, with most of it earmarked for the city of Daegu. But at a Friday briefing, the city’s mayor refused to accept the funds.

“What Shincheonji Church should be doing is not providing money, but actively cooperating with our infection prevention measures,” Daegu Mayor Kwon Young-jin said.

In Daegu, where the pursuit of Shincheonji members has been most active, health officials have yet to track down all of those on the list. Many of those identified have refused to be hospitalized, although they are legally obliged to self-quarantine.

In addition to the city of Seoul's legal challenge, Daegu's government has sued Shincheonji to obtain open more details about local membership. The National Shincheonji Victims Coalition, a civic group, separately filed a suit on Feb. 27 alleging the Shincheonji Church provided false information to the government about its undisclosed facilities.

Government officials in the city of Goyang make phone calls to Shincheonji Church members to check whether they have symptoms of the Covid-19 illness on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AHN YOUNG-JOON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Prosecutors in Seoul are investigating the mayor's allegations, and the civic group's lawsuit has prompted an investigation by prosecutors in the city of Suwon, which oversees the region where Shincheonji Church has its headquarters.

Though Mr. Lee and Shincheonji face a series of legal challenges, none are likely to stick, said Sung Seung-hwan, an attorney at the Maeheon law firm in South Korea. Mr. Lee, as part of his Monday press conference, pledged to fully cooperate with the investigations.

"It will be difficult to argue that Shincheonji church purposefully omitted names of church members from the list," Mr. Sung said. To charge Mr. Lee with murder, as the Seoul mayor's office has proposed, he would have had to intentionally spread the virus, he added.

Mr. Lee is no stranger to the South Korean legal system. Jin Yong-shik, a pastor who has written books about fringe South Korean religious sects, has been sued by Shincheonji for defamation around 30 times. In a 2005 meeting, Mr. Lee tried to prove he wasn't a cult leader and hailed from royalty.

Mr. Jin wasn't persuaded. "He is very inarticulate and mumbles a lot, then will suddenly start yelling," Mr. Jin said.

MORE ON THE CORONAVIRUS

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Write to Dasl Yoon at dasl.yoon@wsj.com

https://www.wsj.com/articles/why-a-south-korean-church-was-the-perfect-petri-dish-for-coronavirus-11583082110

WORLD

Why a South Korean Church Was the Perfect Petri Dish for Coronavirus

Seoul had a technologically advanced plan against the infection, but a giant congregation with rituals demanding mass human contact—and secrecy—punched a hole in the defenses

By Dasl Yoon and Timothy W. Martin
Updated March 2, 2020 8:09 am ET

DAEGU, South Korea—To enter the nine-story Shincheonji Church of Jesus building Feb. 16, the 61-year-old woman needed to press her finger into a digital scanner.

She was nursing a sore throat and a fever, local health officials report, and any doctor would have advised her to stay home—especially as the new coronavirus lurked in South Korea. But skipping Sunday service wasn't an option: Church leaders take attendance by checking a follower's Shincheonji-issued photo ID, said current and former church members.

Pushing through the glass door, she would have walked by a first-floor museum dedicated to the group's founder, Lee Man-hee, who members believe immortal. She descended into a basement worship hall with no windows or furniture. She spent roughly two hours there, health officials determined, crammed shoulder-to-shoulder sitting on her knees on the floor with about 1,000 others. Hewing to the church's strict routine, she would have embraced others repeatedly, wailing "amen!"

The spiritual moment was a perfect incubator for disease, as was the church.

On Feb. 17, health officials diagnosed the 61-year-old as South Korea's 31st coronavirus patient, later declaring her Patient Zero for the wave of Shincheonji-linked cases. She had also attended services the Sunday before. Health officials trace about three-fifths of the country's 3,736 cases to her as of March 1.

"It was like they sprayed the virus within the church," said a city official in Daegu, which has about 2.4 million residents.

The Shincheonji outbreak represents a worst-case combination of factors seen in other coronavirus outbreaks—large gatherings, participants fanning out into public, delays in

identifying the threat, slow or hindered responses.

Days before the lockdown of Wuhan, China, where the virus spread originated, Wuhan officials held an annual residents banquet for more than 10,000 families. Passengers on a cruise ship docking in Japan mingled for days after its first confirmed case. In Singapore, it took 10 days for health authorities to realize a cluster of infections had formed at a sales conference there and spread abroad.

Religion complicated the recipe for disaster in South Korea, pitting the government against an enigmatic church that has an allergy to outsiders and teaches members they will live forever, according to former members.

The broader global crisis harks back to December, when China disclosed the outbreak after dozens fell ill in Wuhan. The virus spread in China, where 79,394 people had been sickened as of Feb. 29, according to the World Health Organization, and there have been 6,009 confirmed cases in 53 other countries, with South Korea at No. 2. The WHO says more than 2,900 people have died.

South Korea in early February had a technologically advanced, transparent, well-funded plan to confront the coronavirus. But the outbreak at the secretive church with its rituals that demand mass human contact punched a hole in the defenses.

Shincheonji members, pressured to recruit followers, travel across a country the geographic size of Indiana. Most acolytes hide their Shincheonji ties from their families. The government recently called Shincheonji a “Korean cult.”

“To Shincheonji members, their priority is not the safety issue,” said Ji-il Tark, a Busan Presbyterian University theology professor who studies the group, “but rather protecting their own organization.”

The group’s opacity stymies some fundamentals of outbreak prevention. Without a coronavirus vaccine, officials must bank on healthy individuals to avoid contact with the sick. When infections occur, institutions and individuals must quickly share information to locate the virus’ source and prevent further spread.

Spraying against the coronavirus in a Seoul market on Feb. 26.

PHOTO: CHUNG SUNG-JUN/GETTY IMAGES

“Failure to do so creates distrust, and distrust disrupts transparency,” said Tim Brown, an infectious-disease researcher at the East-West Center who has consulted with the WHO, “making containment even more challenging, if not impossible.”

Health officials say they don’t fully know who might be covertly carrying the illness because, they contend, Shincheonji is withholding information. Daegu’s mayor said at a Friday briefing he is taking legal action against Shincheonji’s leadership for lying about the number of followers and facilities. Gyeonggi-do province, near Seoul, has twice raided its headquarters to unearth more information.

“If we can prevent contact with Shincheonji-linked patients,” Daegu Mayor Kwon Young-jin said Wednesday, “we will be able to prevent the virus from spreading to other regions.”

Shincheonji in a Friday press conference said it is cooperating with the investigation, has shut its facilities and believes its members are the victims. It denied concealing information.

Baek In-yeop, a planning-department executive at the Daegu Shincheonji church, said in an interview he and 15 other followers rushed to get the city a list of the more than 1,000 people who attended the same two Sunday services as the 61-year-old. Any discrepancies, he said, were honest mistakes or a result of not having full information on certain members.

Government officials close a Shincheonji branch.

PHOTO: RYU HYUNG-GEUN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Mr. Baek said he didn't attend the same services but was in the building and saw followers wearing masks. Hand sanitizer had been placed around the building.

"It's a witch hunt against us," Mr. Baek said between coughs, noting that he was tested for coronavirus and expected the results soon. "They frame us as if we are a devil organization. We are Daegu citizens before being Shincheonji members."

South Korean officials said they haven't pinpointed how the 61-year-old, who hadn't traveled abroad recently, contracted coronavirus.

The government has pledged to test every Shincheonji member in the country, after receiving a list of 210,000 members on Wednesday. The group later released names of roughly 100,000 others, mostly including Shincheonji "trainees" who had yet to become full members by finishing six months of education and passing a written test, health officials said.

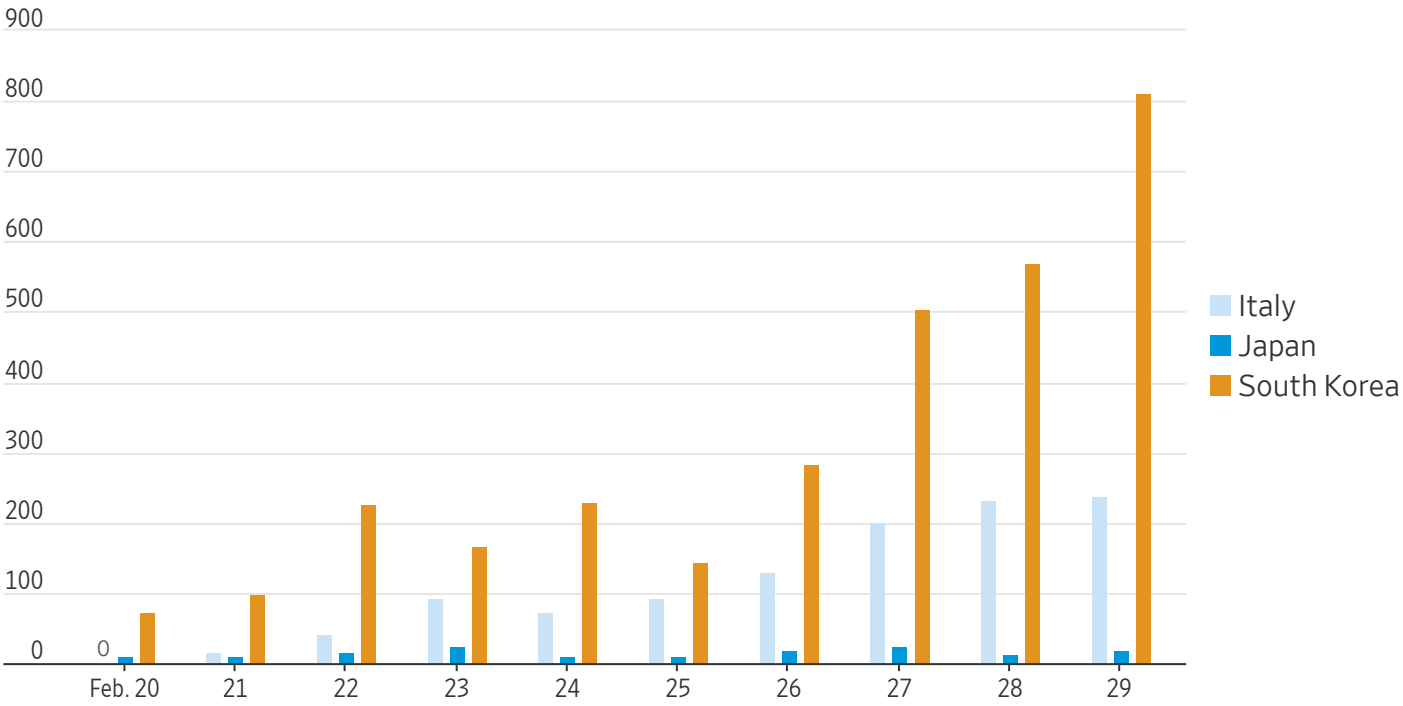
Over the past week, more than 1.1 million citizens had signed a petition to the presidential Blue House demanding Shincheonji be dismantled. Frustrated Koreans include Jeon In-sook, 47, a Daegu nurse. A co-worker contracted the virus and landed in a hospital room with several Shincheonji members who urged her to join the church. "There's no difference," she said, "between Shincheonji and North Korea."

South Korean health officials have said they expect the country's confirmed cases to keep rising. JPMorgan Chase & Co. said it anticipates infections for Daegu alone to reach 10,000 and peak around March 20.

Coronavirus Crisis

South Korea, the hardest-hit country apart from China, has had a bigger rise than the next largest outbreaks in Italy and Japan.

Daily new cases since Feb. 19



Sources: World Health Organization; John's Hopkins

Two weeks ago, the country had diagnosed only 30 patients, just before the tally began mushrooming after the virus hit Shincheonji. Since granting itself maximum authority on Feb. 23 to block the virus' spread, Seoul has struggled to free up hospital beds, doctors and key supplies. It has injected more than $13 billion of emergency funds into its paralyzed economy.

Uncertainty is seeding paranoia for people like Jeon So-young, 31, who lives near the Daegu Shincheonji church and believes a co-worker may have been a member after her office building closed for disinfection. "It feels like a game now," she said, "trying to figure out if people around me are Shincheonji members."

Fears appeared validated last week when an infection-prevention manager at a Daegu health center dealing with the outbreak had to step aside, said Mayor Kwon at a briefing, because he was a Shincheonji follower. The follower has since tested positive.

A drive-through coronavirus-screening clinic in Daegu on Feb. 27.

PHOTO: YONHAP/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

The news didn't surprise Kim Jin-sook, 49, who attended the Daegu Shincheonji church until late last year. For three years, Ms. Kim, a piano teacher, sneaked to services by telling her husband she had a Sunday tutoring session. Even when not at Shincheonji, she could open a secret phone app where she could watch the founder's sermons, she said; "I lived a double life."

Mr. Lee, 88, founded Shincheonji in 1984. Born near Daegu, he joined several cults before creating his own doctrine, said Shin Hyun-wook, a former senior Shincheonji official who manages a website about the church's history and tactics.

Mr. Lee is a self-proclaimed "savior," an embodiment of Christ with exclusive scriptural knowledge who presses members to recruit new followers, said current and former members. Shincheonji says global membership stands around 245,000 and it aspires to hit a million in three years.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

How should governments work with tightknit groups, such as the Shincheonji church, as they try to stem the spread of coronavirus? Join the conversation below.

The city of Seoul has sent prosecutors a legal complaint that accused Mr. Lee and other senior Shincheonji leaders of homicide, causing harm and violating the country's infectious-disease law, Seoul's mayor said in a Facebook post on Sunday. A formal probe could follow.

One concern about the spread of the virus is how well-traveled Shincheonji members must be to aid their recruitment push, targeting busy street corners and university

campuses, the Daegu official said. Active members target as many as 10 people a week, the official added.

One tactic is becoming a “reaper” by infiltrating another church to lure members. Reapers attract potential recruits—“fruit,” in Shincheonji parlance—by heaping them with praise and inviting them to Bible-study groups reserved for “exclusive” members, said former church members.

Seoul commuters on Feb. 27.

PHOTO: SEONGJOON CHO/BLOOMBERG NEWS

Shincheonji hasn’t disclosed all of the gathering places to which it invites prospects, said Lee Dong-heon, an anti-cult counselor in Daegu. Nearly all the venues have no formal association with Shincheonji, potentially keeping them off lists of areas for investigation.

He estimated there are 2,000 hidden venues and said Shincheonji has provided information on only a little over half. “Many trainees attending these places,” he said, “don’t even know they are being recruited into Shincheonji.”

Some members still don’t believe the virus threatens them, judging from the account of Kim Gwi-hui of Daegu, who said her 39-year-old daughter attended the same church on Feb. 16 that the 61-year-old did. Ms. Kim said her daughter joined Shincheonji to live the eternal life it promised her.

A closed Shincheonji branch in Seoul on Feb 26.

PHOTO: LEE JAE-WON/AFLO/ZUMA PRESS

Authorities called to check on the daughter's health. She didn't show symptoms but complained of a stomach ache, and the clinic sent her medication. She hasn't been tested for the virus but is under quarantine, said Ms. Kim, who is also under quarantine and calls her daughter daily to tell her of new cases and deaths.

"It's unbelievable to her," said Ms. Kim, "that Lee Man-hee's followers can die."

Corrections & Amplifications

Lee Man-hee, the founder of Shincheonji Church of Jesus, is 88 years old. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said he was 89. (March 2, 2020)

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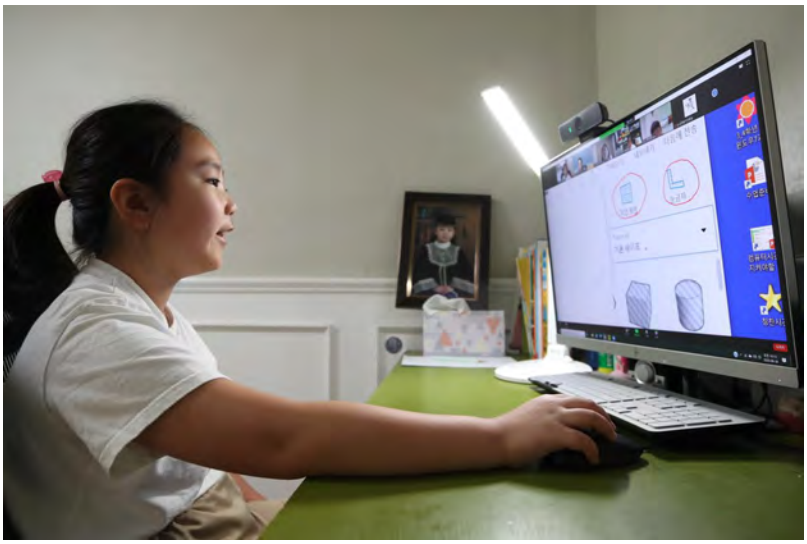
https://www.wsj.com/articles/remote-learning-in-south-korea-becomes-a-fixture-of-pandemic-life-11599668494

ASIA

South Korea's Coronavirus Lesson: School's Out for a While

A recent outbreak of Covid-19 pushed the country's teachers and students out of the classroom again



The South Korean education ministry recently earmarked more than $110 million for developing online textbooks and remodeling old schools.

PHOTO: YONHAP/SHUTTERSTOCK

By *Dasl Yoon*

Updated Sept. 9, 2020 11:46 pm ET

Listen to this article
7 minutes

SEOUL— Chun Hye-seung, a 37-year-old homemaker, stays up until 4 a.m. just to get time to herself after keeping pace with her second-grade son's homework and taking care of his younger brother who has yet to start school.

“It’s hard to know how long I have to adjust my entire life based on their schedule,” said Ms. Chun, who has been coping with remote learning since April. “It’s been very hard for me.”

South Korean parents and teachers and its education system have been dealing with remote learning for perhaps as long as anywhere else in the world because of the country’s two-term school year, which runs from March through February—and its cautious approach to in-class learning amid the pandemic. The country reopened schools for limited numbers of students for part of the school year before closing most of them again recently.

Now parents and teachers are adjusting to a new reality of life: Remote learning may be here to stay for the foreseeable future.

“We prepared for remote learning because of the Covid crisis, but now it will be a permanent part of the educational process,” said Choi Won-hwi, who works in the South Korean education ministry division that oversees teacher instruction.

The country is now making changes to its education system to prepare for the long haul of Covid-19 and any future pandemics.

Last week, the education ministry earmarked more than $110 million for developing online textbooks and remodeling old schools to make them more digital friendly over the next five years. The government plans to install Wi-Fi at four-fifths of schools that don’t have internet access, replace 200,000 old computers and provide 240,000 tablet PCs to schools shifting to online textbooks starting this year.

While South Korea’s aggressive use of testing and contact tracing during the pandemic has been seen as a model globally, it has been battling a steadily growing outbreak in recent weeks. The country’s 21,743 cases as of Thursday still pale in comparison to the infection numbers in the hardest-hit countries globally. But it was enough to prompt the country to close 70% of its 12,000 schools nationwide last month, even though students make up only about 2% of infections since schools reopened in May.

South Korea's aggressive use of testing and contact tracing during the pandemic has been seen as a model globally.

PHOTO: YONHAP/SHUTTERSTOCK

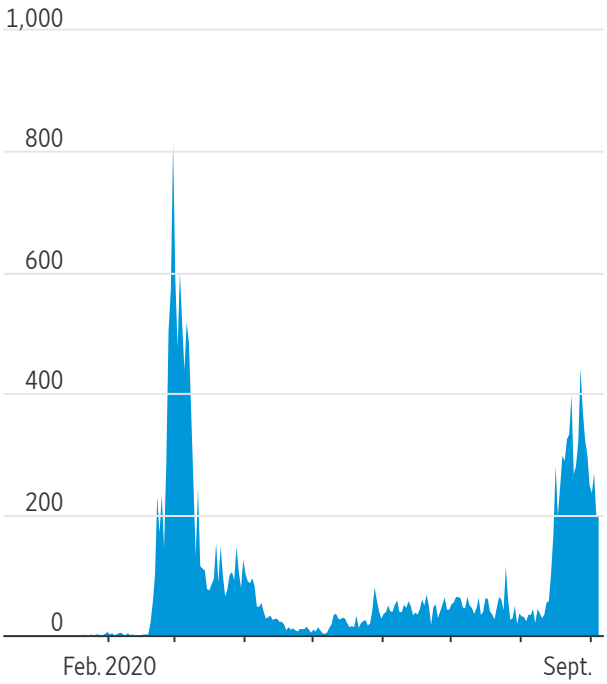
Many schools in the U.S. reopened this fall, even after the virus surged over the summer. Most schools in Europe reopened as well, despite rising infections there, with many countries opting to close schools on a more targeted basis when outbreaks arose. And other countries in Asia, like Japan and China, have kept in-class learning going without interruption after reopening schools, despite battling subsequent outbreaks.

In South Korea, schools closed last month because of a tiered response system to outbreaks that the country put in place in June, which triggers increasingly restrictive measures at relatively low levels of infection compared with numbers elsewhere in the world. In August, when the number of new infections being reported daily surpassed 300, the South Korean Centers for Disease Control and Prevention banned gatherings of more than 10 people in the worst hit regions, including the Seoul metropolitan area, which required the closure of those schools. Some rural areas have also closed schools voluntarily.

Virus Surge

South Korea's coronavirus-case counts have risen to numbers unseen since March.

Covid-19 daily cases



Source: South Korea's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

The country initially delayed its school year three times before online classes began in April. Students returned to classrooms in phases the following month, going to school on alternate days to limit capacity. Even when infections remained low throughout much of the summer, officials capped attendance at one-third of students at elementary and middle schools, and two-thirds at high schools.

South Korea allowed more of the oldest students to return to avoid disturbing their preparation for the country's national college entrance exam in December.

South Korea had expected its second semester, which started last week, would feature a gradual student return—possibly to full capacity. But those plans were scrapped after the country reported more infections in the past three weeks than it had in the prior three months combined.

The country had some advantages in making an extended shift to online learning. It is one of the most connected nations on the planet, with some of the world's fastest internet speeds and nearly 95% of citizens owning a smartphone. But the shift to remote learning has still been profound for teachers like Kim Jung-hoon. His elementary school lacks the equipment to live stream classes and only had Wi-Fi installed in recent months. Mr. Kim, 33, had expected to see his students three times a week this semester.

With his suburban Seoul school closed at least through Sept. 20, Mr. Kim had to cancel cultural lectures with guest speakers and a play he had planned to hold with his students. He has replaced classroom discussions with assigned writing homework.

“I spend a lot of my time adjusting the curriculum,” Mr. Kim said.

The Korean Federation of Teachers’ Associations, the country’s largest professional organization for educators, has called for further support in establishing a functional remote-learning system.

Shut Again

The coronavirus has closed South Korean schools for the second time. Here's how the pandemic has shaped the country's education system.

Feb. 29, 2020

South Korea reports 909 daily cases, marking the peak of its first wave of infections. At that time, the country had the largest outbreak outside of China. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

March 2, 2020

Scheduled first day of classes for the 2020-21 school year. It would be postponed three times by the education ministry.

April 9, 2020

Online classes begin in stages, starting with ninth and 12th graders. PHOTO: JEON HEON-KYUN/EPA

May 20, 2020

In-person classes begin in phases. Students attend school on alternate days to limit contact. PHOTO: YONHAP NEWS/ZUMA PRESS

Aug. 23, 2020
South Korea tightens social-distancing measures nationwide as infections jump..

Aug. 25, 2020

The education ministry orders schools in the Seoul metropolitan area to return to online learning until Sept. 11. PHOTO: YONHAP/SHUTTERSTOCK

Sept. 4, 2020
The education ministry extends tightened social-distancing measures and orders schools in the Seoul metropolitan area to continue online learning at least through Sept. 20.

In recent months, the country has been preparing for a lengthy period of online learning. The education ministry lent out more than 280,000 tablet computers to students and began setting up Wi-Fi at 190,000 classrooms lacking internet connectivity. The country's three major telecom carriers, at the government's request, have given free access to students accessing educational websites on their phones.

South Korea reoriented its education infrastructure around a government-run online portal called Edunet, where students can watch online lectures and submit homework. Only some wealthy private schools for now can live stream all their lectures.

Most public schools follow a national curriculum using state-issued textbooks, meaning the government's public education broadcaster can create and upload videos for daily

lessons that serve a wide swath of students. Still, students complain that it isn't the same as being in class.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What lessons do you see from South Korea's experience with schools? Join the conversation below.

"It's harder to understand the material and prepare for tests," said Oh Ye-rim, a 16-year-old high-school student who attends public school. She misses being able to ask her teachers questions when an uploaded lesson confuses her.

The abrupt return to remote learning has presented challenges for working parents who feel torn between ensuring their children's safety while trying to regain some semblance of their daily routines.

Jung Yong-kyo, 39, runs a jewelry store in Seoul with his wife, but the couple now takes turns making sure their son in first grade watches and understands the day's lessons. When unexpected errands pop up, the Jungs have been forced to close the store.

"This wasn't the kind of education parents wanted," Mr. Jung said.

Write to Dasl Yoon at dasl.yoon@wsj.com

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https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-north-korean-defectors-tale-shows-rotting-military-11593867607

ASIA

A North Korean Defector's Tale Shows Rotting Military

Roh Chol Min, who slipped across the fortified border, describes an army life of corruption, hunger—and dedication to 'Supreme Leader' Kim Jong Un

By Dasl Yoon and Andrew Jeong
July 4, 2020 9:00 am ET

SEOUL—They were supposed to represent North Korea's fighting elite. Dispatched to Korea's demilitarized zone roughly three years ago, Roh Chol Min was a new recruit on the front lines. He sized up his fellow 46 soldiers in the unit and saw men like himself: tall, young and connected.

Mr. Roh had won the coveted position, in the late summer of 2017, owing to his sharpshooting skills and height; at 5-feet-8-inches he is unusually tall for North Korea. But when he attended his first target practice, he was stunned. Nobody else had bothered to show up. His compatriots had bribed senior officers to avoid the drill.

What Mr. Roh came to learn—and what ultimately drove him to defect to South Korea—was a distinction that separated him from his elite comrades. Unlike them, he lacked the money to buy better treatment, faster promotions, reprieve from training and even enough food to keep from going hungry. "I saw no future for myself," he says.

North Korea's future itself appeared hazy when leader Kim Jong Un shunned public appearances for nearly three weeks in April, and rumors swirled about his health. After he reappeared, the North blew up a jointly run inter-Korean liaison office after Kim Yo Jong, sister and confidante of Mr. Kim, expressed fury over Seoul-based defector groups sending antiregime leaflets over the border. North Korea announced it had put troops on alert and began reinstalling propaganda loudspeakers at the border that it had dismantled after a 2018 inter-Korean pledge to tone down military tensions.

Then last week, Mr. Kim suddenly declared a suspension of military action directed at South Korea. North Korea again removed the loudspeakers and has yet to conduct further actions targeting the South.

Defector Roh Chol Min in the living room of his dormitory.

PHOTO: TIM FRANCO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Yet Mr. Kim's grip on power, at its most practical level, hinges on North Korea's military, the regime's paramount institution. Military experts, in the U.S. and Asia, have long speculated the country's armed forces are rotting from the inside, racked by corruption and strategic decisions that funnel precious funds into nuclear weapons and missile research instead of caring for its troops.

Now a growing stream of defectors are building out the picture with gripping personal accounts of deprivation.

Roughly 33,000 North Koreans have fled to South Korea over the years, including homemakers, traders and even a few diplomats. Most took routes through China. Since 1996, only 20 have defected across the heavily fortified DMZ while serving in the military, according to an internal South Korean government document reviewed by the Journal.

The Wall Street Journal spoke with Mr. Roh for more than 15 hours over the past year, in his first interview with Western media. His account, which couldn't be independently confirmed, verifies and illuminates broader views by intelligence agencies, North Korean defectors and researchers.

"It was lawless there," Mr. Roh, in his early 20s, says now. "If you had money, you could basically get away with anything."

Mr. Kim, facing Western sanctions over his nuclear program and strains posed by the coronavirus pandemic, needs unquestioned military vitality all the more now. At a Workers' Party meeting late last year, he announced a "new strategic weapon" would be unveiled soon and encouraged his people to tighten their belts and prepare themselves for life under sanctions. In the country's Covid-19 fight, of which Pyongyang has yet to report a single case, soldiers play a key role locking down borders and ensuring citizens abide by preventive measures.

North Korea maintains one of the world's largest standing armies with about 1.2 million active soldiers. Pyongyang spends roughly a quarter of its gross domestic product on military expenditures, the highest ratio among 170 countries tracked by U.S. State Department estimates. In contrast, America's defense spending represents about 3% of GDP.

Little of that money trickles down to front-line troops, to hear defectors talk. Mr. Roh, serving just across the border from South Korean and American troops, had expected the prominent DMZ role would mean plentiful food, organized leadership and focused training. Instead soldiers died from accidental discharges of weapons. Superiors stole his food. He withered to 90 pounds in a few months, eating wild mushrooms and somehow avoiding the toxic ones that killed others. The only thing widely available, he recalled, was cigarettes.

"Don't you want a promotion?" he says a commander once asked him, while demanding a payout he couldn't afford.

North Korean men, with few exceptions, serve for at least 10 years. They are conscripted at a young age partly to indoctrinate firm allegiance to the state. But it is a hardship that has forced some enlistees to crack.

From 2016 to 2018, six soldiers defected over the inter-Korean border. One sprinted across the border under heavy gunfire, requiring 12 liters of blood infusion while undergoing treatment by South Korean doctors, making headlines across the world. He was found to

have an exceptionally long parasitic worm in his stomach. Another wore shabby boots wrapped in clothing while serving in the snow-capped mountains of eastern Korea, before making a run for it across the DMZ. Another active-duty soldier defected across the border last year.

None of the soldiers would have been informed of Mr. Kim's recent absence if they were still serving inside North Korea, Mr. Roh says, as the twice-a-day news broadcasts don't report on the Supreme Leader's health status. The public didn't learn why Mr. Kim was absent for nearly seven weeks during a 2014 ankle surgery, receiving clues only afterward when the leader emerged with a cane and a limp. "The domestic audience is kept in the dark about these things," Mr. Roh says.

As a boy, Mr. Roh grew up in relative luxury in a rural mountain town near the Chinese border, with a television, a couch, and batteries for electricity. His grandparents were highly educated elites in Pyongyang; his grandfather even attended university with Kim Jong Il, the current leader's father. Both his parents worked for a time but life became more difficult as the economy contracted, and often both were out of work. He has memories of his older sister selling handpicked herbs so she could feed him a potato.

He says he dreamed of joining the North Korean military—a feeling that deepened after Mr. Kim assumed the mantle of "Supreme Leader" in late 2011.

Before he landed his DMZ post, Mr. Roh was drafted into one of the many units that comprise North Korea's 200,000-strong special forces, in large part, due to his social class. When going through a background check, Mr. Roh remembers an officer from the Ministry of the People's Armed Forces coming to see him. "You have a good foundation, comrade," the official told him.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un purportedly supervises an artillery firing competition between army units in the country's west in March 2020, in a photo distributed by the government.

PHOTO: KCNA/KNS/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

At his first post in the special forces, Mr. Roh's physical limits were tested through tough military training, lack of food and proper medical care. His loyalty for Mr. Kim was reinforced by daily ideological sessions.

One "glorious" day, Mr. Roh recalled, the leader himself visited his base. Mr. Kim appeared in his luxurious black van, escorted by bodyguards. Mr. Roh says he nearly choked as he saw the leader pass by from afar. He sobbed into his flavorless bowl of dinner, overwhelmed by the general's presence. Not daring to look at the leader directly, Mr. Roh felt his head throbbing.

Once Mr. Kim left, Mr. Roh stood with his fellow soldiers, fanatically chanting, "Long live General Kim!"

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What do you make of the North Korean defector's revelations? Join the conversation below.

Even a televised image of Mr. Kim inspecting a factory or farm would prompt Mr. Roh and his fellow soldiers to sit up straight, neaten their uniforms and clap in unison. Citizens are taught from a young age that North Korean leaders must hail from the "Mount Paektu bloodline" with a direct lineage to the country's founder Kim Il Sung. It is unimaginable anyone but a Kim would rule the country, Mr. Roh says: "It is a respect you only feel for Kim family members."

When Mr. Roh arrived at the DMZ posting after toiling through a 12-hour train ride on North Korea's World War II-era railways, he was ordered to move bricks at a construction site of a new dining facility. An officer approached him.

"You do as I say. If I want to beat you, I beat you. If I tell you to die, you die," he says the officer told him.

Roh Chol Min reads news and watches videos on his bed at a dormitory house shared with other North Korean defectors.

PHOTO: TIM FRANCO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Roh, now in his early 20s, lived alone in South Korea before settling down at the dormitory.

PHOTO: TIM FRANCO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Roh exercises in the backyard of the house. He says his physical limits were tested through tough military training, lack of food and proper medical care in the special forces.

PHOTO: TIM FRANCO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The soldiers were mobilized to move bricks day and night. Mr. Roh was only assigned to the construction project for his first three days. He didn't get to see the cafeteria completed, as he defected after just three months at the front lines.

Corruption was rampant at the border, where men from elite backgrounds were stationed. Officers sold the rice provided to the unit at a nearby market, feeding soldiers cheaper corn porridge. The front-line soldiers, with high-ranking parents, carried around cash as bribes.

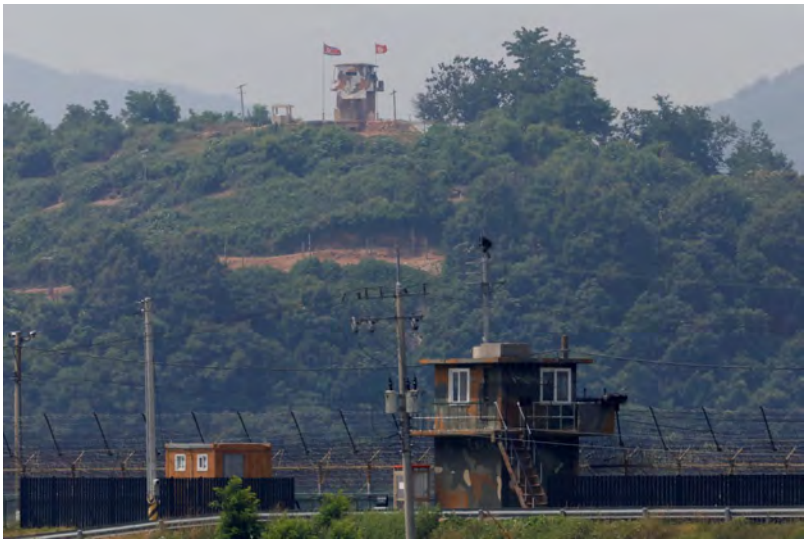
His main duty was to stand guard at a post overlooking the DMZ. Mr. Roh worked 13-hour shifts in a uniform that hardly kept him warm. The temperature dropped to nearly 40 degrees below zero. As he set out for duty every morning, his skin cracked and eyebrows frosted at every breath.

The others avoided standing in the cold, having bribed the unit's commanders with U.S. dollars at sums of up to $150 a month. The payments bought extra food, wearing warmer clothes and making weekly phone calls to family.

Money could buy an immediate promotion and help a soldier drop out of training. Mr. Roh felt devastated. He watched as the others enjoyed extra sleep and went out to local markets to buy sweet bread. He hadn't been able to make a single call to his family and spent most of his time at the guard post.

Inside North Korea's front-line guard posts, posters of South Korean aircraft hung on the walls. Each of the South Korean combat planes were labeled under their photograph with their models. Pictures of South Korean soldiers in their military uniforms were posted on the wall for familiarization. Mr. Roh wondered if their lives were any different, as he shivered in the cold.

In the weeks before his defection, Mr. Roh often stood at his guard post, having gone days without sleep. Messages came through the phone in tap code as he sat inside the guard post alone. "Don't fall asleep," a commander signaled.



A North Korean soldier stands guard at his post in this picture taken from Paju, South Korea, near the demilitarized zone.

PHOTO: KIM HONG-JI/REUTERS

Some days Mr. Roh walked out into fields to accomplish impossible missions: to bring back 100 praying mantis eggs within two hours. The officers would sell the eggs at the marketplace, to be used in Chinese medicine. Mr. Roh trudged around the reed field with a plastic bag trying to fill the quota, from which the officers would profit.

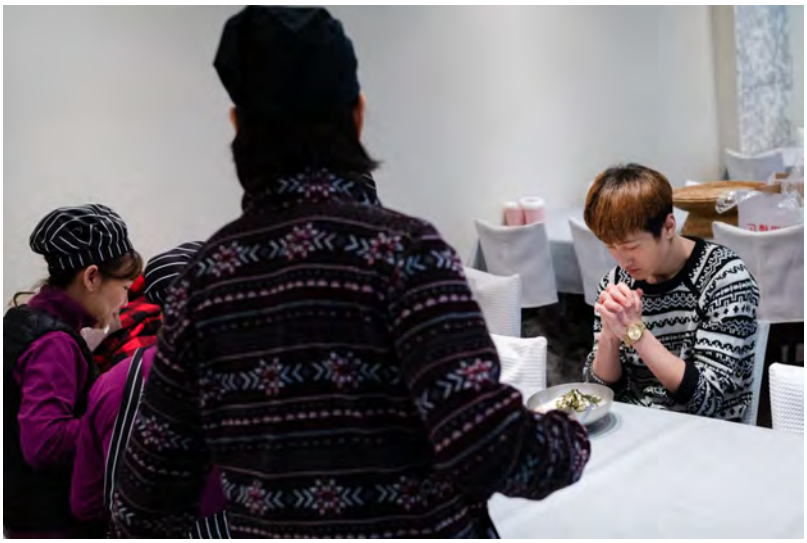
Young soldiers like Mr. Roh studied to become members of the ruling Workers' Party. Gaining party membership is a step up the social ladder in North Korea, a country dominated in all aspects by the ruling party. To pass the test, Mr. Roh used the little time he had to memorize military law by filling his notebook with army regulations. But within a month Mr. Roh found himself lacking the money to even buy a new notebook or a pen.

Officers pressured Mr. Roh to call his parents for money. One time, they lent him enough for a two-minute phone call home. As an officer stood next to Mr. Roh nudging him to ask for money, he couldn't say a word about how painful life was at the front lines. His sister sent him funds to cover the phone call—the equivalent of a dollar. With the few pennies left over, he bought a notebook and a flashlight.

The border smelled of rotten animals. Mr. Roh often heard wild boars electrocuted by the fence. At other times, with his binoculars, Mr. Roh could see South Korean tourists curiously looking over into North Korea.

Mr. Roh unloads a truck at his part-time job at a wedding buffet before guests arrive.

PHOTO: TIM FRANCO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



He prays before breakfast at the start of the work day. He sometimes skips meals now that food is plentiful.

PHOTO: TIM FRANCO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Roh is now enrolled at a college in Seoul and works weekends at the buffet.

PHOTO: TIM FRANCO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

In the days leading up to his decision over whether to flee, Mr. Roh says military officials accused him of stealing rice crackers—a crime he says he didn't commit. His squad leader beat him and he was forced to endure self-criticism sessions.

One December 2017 morning, when he made the short walk to his DMZ guard post, a tantalizing—but dangerous—idea flashed in his head. Passing under a North Korean flag he refused to salute for the first time. Mr. Roh then lifted up a metal fence with a gentle nudge of his rifle butt. He crawled under. And made a run for it.

When he bolted, Mr. Roh waded through chest-high waters, rifle over his shoulder, carrying 90 bullets and two hand grenades. As Mr. Roh ran through the fog to freedom, hoping he wouldn't step on a land mine, a propaganda slogan came to mind: "No matter the temptation, we shall protect the nation."

The slogan, embedded in his memory from years of chanting, sent shivers down his spine as he considered the enormousness of his betrayal.

Once he safely reached the South Korean side, soldiers barked at him: "Are you a defector?" But Mr. Roh was puzzled. He had never heard the word before.

Now he reads Sherlock Holmes novels, which he finds more entertaining than the Kim hagiographies he was forced to consume. Food is now so plentiful he occasionally skips a meal. He's developed a fondness for hot lattes.

Mr. Roh recently enrolled at a college in Seoul and works weekends at a wedding-hall buffet. As he watches online lectures from his home, feeling safe from the coronavirus, Mr. Roh worries about his family members in the North who have little protection from the pandemic. He shudders thinking of how he'd be treated as a North Korean soldier. "They would leave us to die," Mr. Roh says. "We're considered disposable."

He carries around guilt about his defection—especially since he doesn't know what happened to his family. The Kim regime often punishes family members of defectors. But Mr. Roh tries not to dwell on the unknown too much. It only causes him more pain.

"I try to forget every day," he says.

Roh Chol Min enjoying a stroll in a local park.

PHOTO: TIM FRANCO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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