

Aquariums of Pyongyang is Kang Chol-hwan's first person account of his life in North Korea and eventual escape to South Korea.

Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag

Chol-hwan was born in 1968 in Pyongyang, North Korea's capital and largest city. His grandfather was a high government official, and his family had a lavish standard of living by North Korean standards. However, his grandfather courted danger by being an outspoken critic of the government's inefficient bureaucracy. Chol-hwan was nine in July 1977 when his grandfather disappeared, a typical fate of government critics.

In North Korea an arrested person's family is considered culpable for that member's real or imagined offense, so a few weeks after his grandfather disappeared the Security Force (North Korea's equivalent of the FBI) arrested Chol-hwan, his sister, father, grandmother and uncle. Political prisoners such as Chol-hwan's family are confined in North Korea's Gulag, which is comprised of a nationwide network of forced labor camps. (North Korea is about the size of Pennsylvania.) There is no intermixing between convicted criminals that are confined in regular prisons, and political prisoners in the Gulag. Chol-hwan's family was immediately transported to the labor camp at Yodok.

Yodok is a very large valley enclosed on three sides by mountains that was turned into a vast labor camp by the erection of a barbed wire fence across its open end. The valley is also divided by barbed-wire fences into several camps that have no contact with one another. Many thousands of political prisoners are interned at Yodok.

Chol-hwan's family was sent to Yodok's camp for "redeemables." Which meant that while they hadn't been accused, tried, convicted or sentenced for committing any crime, they would only be released if the authorities thought they had successfully been re-educated into having unwavering loyalty to North Korea's government. That also meant loyalty to Kim Il-sung and his son, Kim Jong-il, who were not just North Korea's leaders – but worshiped as gods.

There was also a camp at Yodok for "irredeemables" and their unfortunate family members. "Irredeemables" would never be released because their transgression – such as spying for South Korea or the United States – was considered too severe to be correctable. There were camps for "irredeemables" in oth-

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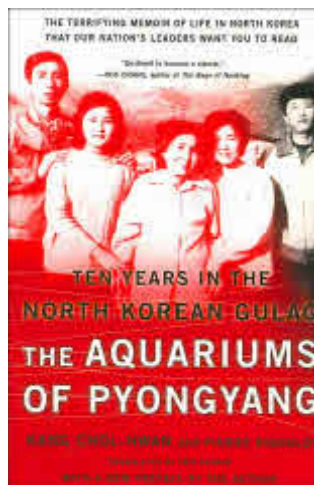
Review by Hans Sherrer

er places – such as those set-up to build top secret military facilities – in which the prisoners were deliberately worked so hard and so ill-treated that none would survive to tell anyone outside the camp what they knew of the facility.

Chol-hwan candidly acknowledges the conditions at his family's camp were better than what was experienced by the "irredeemables." However, his description of the horrid living and working conditions at his camp and the punishments meted out for the slightest transgression makes you wonder how that is possible. The prisoners work seven days a week with two days off per year. The day begins at 5 a.m. and work generally ends at dark. A major industry is the brutally hard work of harvesting timber almost entirely by manual labor. The workers are slave laborers only provided with room and board, and the rudimentaries of life. The staple food is corn, but the food rations aren't nutritious enough to stave off starvation or vitamin deficiency diseases. So survival depends on learning to acquire a taste for insects such as grasshoppers, roaches and ants. Rats are the only source of meat. Chol-hwan writes about how he thought of rats as vile disgusting creatures when he arrived at Yodok, but he learned to consider them as friendly animals vital to keeping him and his family alive.

In North Korea an arrested person's family is considered culpable for that member's real or imagined offense. ... No contact is allowed between a person in the labor camps and the outside world. No mail or visits are allowed.

People who can't adapt to the back-breaking work schedule and a meager unconventional diet die quickly. Chol-hwan writes that if a person learns the skills to survive the first year, they have a good chance of living for years. Unless of course the person becomes gravely ill or suffers a serious injury. In that case the medical care consisted of being given one or more days off from work and treatment by a prisoner with no



medical supplies to speak of. A prisoner who needs a life-saving operation or medicine simply dies from lack of care.

Absolute obedience is expected and discipline is swift and severe. Anyone captured after trying to escape is immediately and publicly executed. Being caught stealing food from the camp's stock can also result in summary execution. A minor rule violation is rewarded with a severe beating. While a serious transgression earns a three month stay in the

"sweat box," which is Yodok's form of solitary confinement. One offense that is guaranteed to result in a "sweat box" visit for a man is being caught engaging in sexual relations – even with one's wife – since it is prohibited. The "sweat box" is an uninsulated wooden box located outdoors that is only large enough inside for a person to squat. A person can't stand, lie down or even sit during their three months in the "sweat box." The person is not allowed out for any reason. Many people don't survive the "sweat box," and those that do often have their health broken and are physically crippled.

No contact is allowed between a person in the labor camps and the outside world. No mail or visits are allowed. So people at Yodok literally live in a limbo land, and relatives and friends on the outside don't know if they are alive or dead.

Once a year a dozen or so "redeemable" families are released. After ten years Chol-hwan's family was deemed rehabilitated. On the same day they were told they were being released, they were transported to live in a rural community. Chol-hwan was 19. Six years later he and a friend escaped across the border into China. As a control mechanism North Korean authorities typically punish the family members of an escapee, so Chol-hwan knew his family would likely suffer in the wake of him fleeing the country. After months dodging Chinese authorities that would have forcibly deported the two young men to North Korea, they made their way to South Korea.

The book's title comes from the fish aquariums that Chol-hwan had at the time of his arrest in Pyongyang. They symbolize the civility of his life in the city contrasted with the brutishness of life at Yodok. Co-author Pierre Rigoulot describes North Korea as the last Stalinist regime, and writes that upwards of

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Police Torture Victims Awarded \$493,000

On July 21, 2010, twenty-one people tortured by the police were awarded a total of \$493,000 (Kshs. 39.2 million) by Kenya's High Court.

The 21 plaintiffs were tortured between 1982 and 1997 in what is now known as the Nyayo House Torture Chamber in Kenya's capital of Nairobi. After their arrest for a variety of offenses, each of the twenty-one received the same treatment. They were stripped naked and held incommunicado in a small completely dark waterlogged basement cell. When interrogated to obtain information or extract a confession, they were blasted with pressurized cold water, subjected to extreme heat and cold air, and denied sleep and nutrients during long interrogation sessions.

Some of the plaintiffs confessed and were sentenced to a prison term after pleading guilty. While those who didn't confess continued to be held in the dungeon and interrogated – some for more than two years.

The twenty-one plaintiffs filed separate lawsuits against Kenya's Attorney General seeking compensation for breach of their fundamental rights and freedoms under various sections of the Constitution of Kenya.

Because they made similar claims all the lawsuits were combined.

The Attorney General's four primary defenses were: the fundamental rights of Kenyans are not absolute so the plaintiff's treatment was not illegal; the lawsuits were filed after expiration of the one-year statute of limitations; the lawsuits did not disclose the complete facts of their claims; and their claims of mistreatment should be handled by Kenya's Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission. The High Court ruled in regard to those defenses:

- Kenya is a signatory to the "UN Convention against Torture, and other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment" that was ratified by Kenya, and its definition of torture is applicable to the Kenyan Constitution's protection of fundamental rights and freedoms. Nyayo House was a government institution and the acts of physical and mental torture alleged by the plaintiffs were committed by government employees.
- "There was no limitation period for seeking redress for violation of the fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual under the Constitution of Kenya."
- The plaintiffs had given sufficient particulars of their arrest and confinement to enable the A.G. to know the nature of the plaintiff's claims.

- The plaintiffs were "seeking declaratory relief and monetary redress for violation of their fundamental rights and freedoms under the Constitution," not to simply have the truth of what was done to them exposed publicly.

The High Court ruled it had the Constitutional authority to award damages for violation of a plaintiff's fundamental rights and freedoms by the A.G.'s deliberate endangerment of their health and infliction of mental pain that amounted to torture. The High Court also opined that in addition to actual damages it could award punitive damages based on the rights violated and the period of time the violations occurred.

In conclusion the High Court determined the twenty-one plaintiffs had each established substantial violations of their fundamental rights and freedoms under the Kenyan Constitution. The High Court awarded damages to the plaintiffs that varied from \$12,579 (Kshs. 1 million) to \$37,736 (Kshs. 3 million).

Note: Kshs. Are Kenyan shillings.

Sources:

Harun Thungu Wakaba and 20 others v The Attorney General [2010] eKLR
"Torture Victims awarded close to Kshs. 40 million in damages," Kenya Law Reports weekly e-newsletter, July 30, 2010.

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200,000 political prisoners are incarcerated at any given time in its forced labor camps – which is about 1% of the country's population.

Aquariums of Pyongyang is the first published true-life account about the inner workings of the North Korean Gulag. It makes it evident that there is a rule of law in North Korea, but it is the rule that a person is subject to summary arrest and indeterminate confinement as a slave laborer with no option for challenging their imprisonment. Chol-hwan describes a Kafkaesque world in which innocence is irrelevant and no one knows whether he or she will ever be allowed to emerge from being buried alive in hell on earth.

Aquariums of Pyongyang is available from *Justice:Denied's* BookShop for \$15.95. (check, money order or stamps) Use the order form on page 15, or order with a credit card from Justice Denied's website at, <http://justicedenied.org/books.html>

Gladys and Jamie Scott Getting National Publicity In Bid For Mississippi Pardons

For years Nancy Lockhart was a lone voice in the wilderness advocating on behalf of the innocence of Gladys and Jamie Scott. In 1994 the sisters were convicted of robbing two men in Scott County, Mississippi of \$11. The men were not injured. Three boys confessed to the robbery and agreed to plea deals giving them jail sentences of less than a year in exchange for testifying against the sisters, who insisted at their trial they were not involved in the robbery. Both sisters were convicted and sentenced to life in prison.

One of the boys has signed an affidavit the sisters didn't have anything to do with the robbery and he only testified they were so

he would get a short jail sentence. There are also two other affidavits clearing the sisters of the crime.

The Scott sisters filed a pardon petition, and the outrageousness of their case has attracted national attention, even being featured on MSNBC. Even without their credible claim of innocence, life in prison for a non-violent \$11 robbery is draconian.

More than three hundred people rallied in support of the Scott Sisters at the capital in Jackson, Mississippi on September 15, 2010. The *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* published a major article with pictures.

For current information about the Scott Sisters and who you can contact to help them in their effort to be pardoned. See their website maintained by their mother, <http://www.freethescottisters.blogspot.com>



Jamie & Gladys Scott