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## Former gulag inmates recall hard labor, starvation

By Ashley Rowland and Hwang Hae-rym, Stars and Stripes Pacific edition, Tuesday, February 9, 2010

SEOUL — Bitterly cold winters, hard labor and searing hunger.

Little is known about North Korea's gulags, but accounts from former prisoners who've defected to South Korea never fail to include such conditions.

"Once you finish your meal, you are hungry again," said Jung Gyoung Il, a prisoner at the Yodok camp from 2000 to 2003. He said inmates there were fed a little more than a pound of corn a day. Those who couldn't finish their heavy daily work quotas got smaller meals, or none at all.

If one inmate made a mistake, the entire cell — about 40 people — was punished, often by withholding food or heat.

"People go crazy" in those conditions, he said. One inmate was beaten to death by his cellmates when their entire group was punished.

Jung, who said he was a former agent for North Korea's Intelligence Agency, was working as a branch president of a commercial trade firm when he was arrested in 2000 on charges of spying. His job allowed him to travel frequently to China and mingle with South Koreans also there on business. Jung believes the informant was jealous of his success.

Many gulag inmates were imprisoned for vague political crimes, like Kim Young-soon, now vice president of the Committee for the Democratization of North Korea, who lived in a Yodok gulag for nine years during the 1970s.

Her crime: She attended high school and college with Sung Hye Rim, Kim Jong Il's second wife, and authorities were afraid she knew too much about Kim's personal life.

Her 9-year-old son drowned to death at Yodok, and her husband was sent to another gulag. Kim never heard from him again. Another son, in his early 20s, was shot to death in a regular prison after he was caught trying to defect to China.

She said most prisoners died of starvation and overwork. "People there eat anything that flies, eat anything that crawls, eat anything that grows in the grass, even eat corn stuck in cows' feces," she said.

Former inmate Kang Cheol-hwan said the North Korean gulags are comparable to the Nazi concentration camps of World War II.

"Prisoners are starved to death, die from forced labor, and wither to death gradually and slowly," he said.

Kang was imprisoned along with his grandfather and several other immediate family members. He said his family was sent to the gulag because of charges against his grandfather. Although those charges were never announced, Kang believes his grandfather was arrested for criticizing the regime.

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Jung estimates that half of the 400 prisoners in his unit died from starvation, torture or the effects of hard labor during his three years in the gulag. He was released in April 2003, after the charges against him were dropped for lack of evidence.

But his professional and personal lives were shattered. The government forced his wife to divorce him while he was in the gulag. His house and money were confiscated, and he was unable to find work.

With the help of his former business contacts, he said he escaped in 2004 into China, Vietnam and eventually Cambodia, arriving at the South Korean consulate. His two children, ages 20 and 15, have since defected to the South.

He still has nightmares about being recaptured and sent to the gulag, and performing hard labor like dragging a log by a chain.

"I think it is those terrifying political prisons that keep the North Korean people from saying anything they believe about their government," he said. "That's why something like democracy cannot start in North Korea."

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