

Soldiers' deaths reveal widespread abuse in South Korean military

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A South Korean army private was found dead last month in the latest of a series of deaths in the military. The private, surnamed Song, was found hanged in an army warehouse in an apparent suicide.

Earlier last month, two staff sergeants in their early 20s, surnamed Lee and Cho, died after collapsing during a training exercise on how to survive when captured by enemies. Soldiers had to spend an hour kneeling down with their heads wrapped in cloth and hands bound behind the back, military officials said.

During August, three soldiers took their own lives, while the brutal murder of another in April drew public criticism of the military.

Song, 21, reportedly received treatment for depression in July and August. However, a subsequent investigation into the private's death revealed that his body was covered in bruises, including one on the left side of his head.

Song's family questioned the claim that he committed suicide. His sister stated, "My brother grew up with love in a harmonious household. There was no reason for him to become depressed." Referring to the injuries on Song's body, she continued, "My brother's illness was caused in the army."

While the details of Song's death are still unclear, a graphic picture of what he may have endured has emerged. On April 6, another private, surnamed Yun, from the 28th division was taken to a hospital and pronounced dead. However, on July 31 the Center for Military Human Rights Korea obtained information that revealed Yun was beaten, tortured and sexually abused before his death.

Four of Yun's fellow soldiers were arrested and charged with murder. Two others were charged in connection with Yun's death. A private first class was accused of assault and destruction of evidence and a

sergeant was charged with dereliction of duty for not reporting the abuse.

For more than a month, Yun was beaten, deprived of food and forced to eat his own vomit, among other abuses. Several times, Yun fainted only to be revived and beaten again. At one point, he was put on an IV drip. Finally, while being forced-fed food, Yun choked and died.

In June, another soldier, a sergeant named Im, killed five fellow soldiers after suffering from abuse. Im later attempted suicide, shooting himself before being apprehended. His case recalled similar attacks. In 2011, a soldier carried out a grenade attack on a barracks, killing four. In 2005, a soldier killed eight. Both perpetrators reported being abused.

Self-harm is common. During August, three soldiers committed suicide in response to the harsh military life. Two of them, found together, were from the same division as Yun. Since 2004, 820 soldiers—about 80 a year—have chosen to end their lives to escape from the military's abuses.

A 2007 investigation led by Kwon Insook of Myongji University produced a report, the first of its kind, entitled "Sexual Violence Among Men in the Military in South Korea." Out of the 671 military personnel polled, 15.4 percent reported they were victims of sexual harassment, 7.2 percent said they were perpetrators, and 24.7 percent stated they witnessed such acts.

Since then, little has been done to address these issues. An army survey conducted during April in conjunction with the investigation into Yun's death revealed 4,000 cases of abuse that went unreported. In the first three weeks of August alone, 758 cases of physical and sexual abuse were reported, an increase of 26 percent from the previous month, indicating that

many victims were coming forward in light of recent developments.

The country's National Human Rights Commission typically ignores abuse reports from the military. From 2009 to 2013, the NHRC dismissed 75 percent of petitions without investigation. Another 18 percent were investigated but no action was taken.

South Korea maintains a huge military of around 600,000 troops. All men must serve at least 21 months of military service. Those opposed to doing so are incarcerated. South Korea leads the world by imprisoning approximately 600 men a year for refusing to join the military, far outstripping second place Eritrea, which sent 50 people to prison last year.

Successive governments, led by both the present ruling Saenuri Party and the opposition Democrats, have maintained this regime, under which the military is also largely closed off from the public's eye. It is left to govern itself, and those deemed too weak or unable to adjust are singled out for abuse.

Kwon's 2007 study also found that 81.7 percent of those victimized in the army became perpetrators of such acts. This institutionalized violence cannot be explained as the conduct of depraved individuals. It serves a disciplining purpose for the military hierarchy, while turning young men into soldiers who will be brutal and willing to kill on command.

In the case of Yun, Saenuri Party lawmaker Rhee In-je blamed the soldier for his own death, saying, "It's up to you to protect yourself. Private first-class Yun should have gunned down his attackers if he needed to."

The South Korean military has significant political clout. For three decades, beginning with Park Chung-hee's coup in 1961, followed by Chun Doo-hwan's takeover in 1979, and ending with Noh Tae-woo's administration in 1993, South Korea was ruled over by a military dictatorship. Korean society was militarized in order to produce a society that was loyal to both the government in Seoul as well as the family-owned conglomerates known as chaebol, that enriched themselves at the expense of workers' rights and job conditions.

Military officials have continued to play prominent roles in South Korean politics despite the establishment of civilian rule. Kim Jong-pil, nephew-in-law of Park Chung-hee and founder of the notorious Korean Central

Intelligence Agency (KCIA), served as prime minister under President Kim Dae-jung's Democratic Party administration in the late 1990s. Park utilized the KCIA to spy on political opponents and crush working-class opposition to his rule, in many cases utilizing torture and murder.

Current President Park Geun-hye, the daughter of Park Chung-hee, has filled her cabinet with former generals, such as Kim Kwan-jin, now Park's National Security Advisor, Park Heung-ryeol, head of the Presidential Security Service, and new Defense Minister Han Min-gu.



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