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Former Korean military officer now clearing mines

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Joseph Kim Ki-ho (UCAN photo)

SEOUL, KOREA
Seeing colleagues injured by landmines and knowing how many more people fell victim to the devices opened Joseph Kim Ki-hoto to a life of service.

"Before, I lived only for myself and my family," said the former military warrant officer. ?Now I work for others.?

His Catholic faith has sustained the 54-year-old director of the Korea Mine Clearing Research Institute in his commitment. He converted to the faith just after he married a Catholic woman more than 30 years ago.

?Without the Catholic faith teaching us to cherish life and love others, I would not be able to engage in this work," he said in a recent interview.

Kim?s life changed after he witnessed a mine accident that injured two military officers in 2000. All three were working to remove landmines in order to rebuild a railway through the De-Militarized Zone (DMZ), which has divided the Korean peninsula since the end of the Korean War in 1953.

Upset by the accident, he devised a mine-clearing vehicle that year. Christened the "Millennium Dove," it clears landmines without danger to human life and the environment.

Although his invention proved effective, with the South Korean Zaytun Division making good use of it in Iraq from 2004 to 2008, he felt military authorities showed little interest in it.

So he resigned from the military in June 2004, ending more than 30 years of service, and set up his institute that October. Since then, he has been removing mines for the military and farmers inside the civilian travel restriction zone adjacent to the DMZ.

"Currently, there are about 3.5 million mines, mostly in the DMZ," Kim said.

The problem lies with anti-personnel mines laid inside the civilian travel restriction zone, he explained. They are difficult to detect, and floodwaters often sweep them away to distant places.

According to Kim, land mines have killed or injured about 7,000 people including 2,000 civilians since the Korean War. "But most South Koreans are ignorant of the danger," he lamented. "Lots of people have lost their legs or eyes because of the mines," but their pain remain largely unfelt by society.
The universal Church has addressed the issue.

In the 1999 papal exhortation "Ecclesia in Asia" (Church in Asia), Pope John Paul II worried about "the vast number of landmines in Asia, which have maimed or killed hundreds of thousands of innocent people." But Kim wants the Korean Church "to raise its voice, since mines harm life and the environment that the Church cherishes."

Father Hugo Park Jung-woo, secretary of the Korean bishops' justice and peace committee, acknowledges the local Church has not spoken out on this. "We have never dealt with the issue," he admitted.

Besides mine-clearing work, Kim?s main activities include raising people's awareness about landmines through media and lobbying lawmakers to legislate compensation for landmine victims.

In addition, as an executive committee member of the Korea Campaign to Ban Landmines, he is urging the South Korean government to join the 1997 Ottawa Convention on anti-personnel mines. Commonly called the Mine-Ban Treaty, it bans the use, stockpiling, production and transfer of anti-personnel mines.
According to the International Campaign to Ban Landmines website, 156 countries have signed the treaty, with North and South Korea, and the United States among the 39 others that refuse to sign it. The Holy See has actively supported the treaty, which it signed in 1997 and was the third state to ratify.

Kim continues his work despite personal challenges. Until early this year, he ran his institute only with his pension. He also suffered from liver cancer, for which he underwent surgery in 2003.

"I totally depend on God for my work," he reaffirmed, noting that he has overcome the cancer and mine-clearing contracts from the government have eased economic hardships.

?I believe God will grant me his grace to continue my work," he added.

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