

## **Mission with Migrant Workers**

Rev. CHAE Hae-Won<sup>1</sup>

Korea's dependence on the labour of migrant workers from other countries is a long-standing and complex justice issue in this society. Hundreds of thousands of migrant workers, who contribute so significantly to the Korean economy with so little recognition, suffer the pain not only of separation from their distant families but also of discrimination, marginalization, difficult and dangerous jobs and working conditions, and serious violation of their rights. In June 2003, among a total of 400,000 migrant workers, as many as 300,000 held illegal status. The PROK has about ten migrant worker centres through which it serves the migrant workers through many and varied ministries and actively, persistently lobbies the government for just laws and policies in this field. In this the PROK works closely with other church denominations and civic organizations. PROK ministers Rev. Hae-Sung Kim and Rev. Eui-Pal Choi are leading figures in this struggle for justice, widely recognized and highly respected for their thorough and specialized knowledge in this field. Many other PROK ministers and lay people, as well as PROK ecumenical co-workers Rev. Joerg Baruth and Rev. Jessie Albestor from Germany and the Philippines respectively, give knowledgeable, compassionate, even sacrificial service in this vital ministry. Rev. Joerg Baruth offers, below, his perspective and experience in this field.

In its present attempt to reduce the number of illegal-status migrant workers, the government announced a final deadline of November 15, 2003 by which undocumented workers must "voluntarily" report to authorities, after which the authorities would carry out a massive crackdown of arrest and forcible deportation of those remaining. The reporting deadlines and subsequent enforced conditions differed according to the length of time the worker had already been in the country and are briefly included in Rev. Joerg Baruth's article. From among the original total of 300,000 undocumented workers, 180,000 had reported to authorities by the November 15 deadline, the remaining 120,000 going into hiding from November 16th. As this newsletter goes to press, about 2,450 have been arrested and some 1,800 deported since November 16th, with about 700 being held in detention.

As the November 15th deadline approached, Rev. Han-Sung Kim and fellow activists approached the churches with a request to give sanctuary to the workers, from which the workers could in turn actively protest against forcible deportation and demand justice. Most agreed, and currently about 850 workers are carrying out a continuous, round-the-clock live-in protest from several churches and church centres in Seoul and other cities. In Seoul these locations include the 15th and 14th floors of the Korea Ecumenical Building housing, respectively, the offices of the PROK General Assembly and the Christian Council of Korea (CCK;; not to be

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. CHAE Hae-Won was editor of PROK NEWS, Dec. 2003. Rev. CHAE was Executive Secretary for Ecumenical Relations.

confused with the NCKK); the PCK Centennial Building; Korean Methodist headquarters; Myoungdong Catholic Cathedral; and the Anglican Cathedral. Rev. Hae-Sung Kim and other leaders, together with staff and volunteers of the migrant worker centres, are sharing the 24-hour continuous live-in vigil with these protesting workers, at the same time as leading them in outdoor protests and constantly and specifically pressuring the government for changes on the side of justice.

A highly complex part of this whole issue is the case of overseas ethnic Koreans particularly from China and the former Soviet Union, who are covered differently and even more discriminately under existing labour laws. Among their calls for justice, the PROK and others are demanding revision of the Law on Overseas Koreans. The migrant workers protesting from the sanctuary of the Korea Ecumenical Building and the PCK Centennial Building are specifically Korean-Chinese as Rev. Hae-Sung Kim and others focus intently on this justice issue within the larger protest.

Those calling for justice are urging the government to stop the forcible deportation of undocumented workers; legalize all undocumented workers; amend the Law on Overseas Ethnic Koreans; implement the Work Permit System and abolish the Industrial Trainee System.