

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Asia > Korea > South Korea > Labor & co. (South Korea) > **Justice for Yeosu Detention Center Fire Victims and All Migrant Workers**

# Justice for Yeosu Detention Center Fire Victims and All Migrant Workers

Thursday 8 March 2007, by [Joint Committee on the Tragic Fire at Yeosu](#), [KCTU](#), [MTU](#) (Date first published: 8 March 2007).

Dear Colleagues,

Greetings from Joint Committee for Counter Measures to the Tragic Fire at Yeosu Foreigners Detention Center. The Joint Committee is composed of various social, people's and human rights groups.

We are writing to inform you about a tragic fire that recently broke out in a foreigners' detention center in the city of Yeosu in South Korea's Southern Jeolla Province. We hope you will take serious notice of this incident and South Korea's inhumane treatment of migrant workers, which are at its roots, and organize a response in your area in solidarity with our efforts here in Korea. (Please see the following regarding the summary of this incident)

There are currently roughly 400 thousand migrant workers in South Korea, of who about 189,000 are undocumented. Migrants in Korea have come either as 'industrial trainees' or under the government's Employment Permit System, which places them at specific factories and prohibits them from freely moving to other jobs. Most migrant workers experience inhumane treatment, unsafe working environments and low and unpaid wages. Therefore, many see no other choice but to leave their assigned jobs in search of better conditions, thus becoming undocumented. The government has responded to this situation with a brutal crackdown in an attempt to diminish the number of undocumented migrants in Korea. Migrant workers are frequently injured and killed in surprise immigration raids. What is more, they face brutal conditions and human rights abuses in detention centers like the one in Yeosu, which are worse than prisons.

It is because of this situation created by faulty government policies that the tragedy in Yeosu occurred. In fact a similar fire broke out at the same facility in 2005, but the Yeosu Immigration Office never conducted a thorough inspection of its fire prevention system nor updated its equipment. The inhumane treatment of migrant workers has also been evident in the aftermath of the fire. 3 injured migrants were handcuffed to their hospital beds out of fear they would try to escape. What is more, the government is refusing to reveal information about the incident to the bereaved families and civil society organizations.

We are now circulating the sing-on letter to the President Roh Moo-Hyun. (Please see the attached file) We are requesting you to sign on the letter and inform us. For the Korean press, please do not later than March 15<sup>th</sup>. (Please see the below about the contacts.)

In Solidarity,

Joint Committee for Counter Measures to the Tragic Fire at Yeosu Foreigners Detention Center

*If you have any questions, please feel free to contact :*

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To sign the petition:

[http://nodong.org/bbs//view.php?id=eng\\_action&no=42](http://nodong.org/bbs//view.php?id=eng_action&no=42)

**Letter**

**Honorable Roh Moo Hyun**

**President**

**Republic of Korea**

**Blue House**

**Seoul, South Korea**

**president cwd.go.kr**

**Dear Mr. President,**

**We, the undersigned, are shocked and angered to hear about the recent fire at Yeosu Detention Center, which took the lives of 9 innocent people and injured 18 more. We are fully aware that this tragedy is the result of the South Korean government's inhumane and anti-human rights policies towards migrant workers. Brutal work conditions and restrictions placed on migrants by the Industrial Trainee and Employment Permit Systems have led many migrants to**

**become undocumented. The government's response? a man-hunting crackdown and the confinement of migrants in detention centers that are worse than prisons? is the real root of the Yeosu tragedy.**

**We strongly urge you to pressure your government to comply with the following demands:**

- 1. Full disclosure of the real causes and facts of the tragedy, punishment of those responsible, resignation of the Minister of Justice and compensation to the bereaved families.**
- 2. Closure of all detention centers for their inhumane conditions and implementation of steps to revise the system.**
- 3. An end to the brutal crackdowns and legalization of all migrant workers.**
- 4. Institution of a system for the payment of back-wages and protection of migrant workers rights.**

**We want you to know that this incident and the situation of migrant workers in South Korea have come to the attention of people around the world. The international community will not condone the human rights violations perpetrated by the South Korean government against people who work honestly and contribute to the Korean economy.**

**We strongly urge you to guarantee their fundamental labour and human rights for all the migrant workers in line with international standards. We will be keeping a close watch on your future actions and will continue to monitor closely the situation in your country until the matters we raised are resolved.**

**Yours sincerely**

**CC :**

**Mr. KIM, Sung-Ho**

**Minister, Ministry of Justice, Korea**

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**Email : ksh302 moj.go.kr**

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## **“Justice for Yeosu Detention Center Fire Victims and All Migrant Workers”**

### **Summary of the Incident**

**At 4:00 am on February 11 a fire swept through the locked cells of the detention center at the Yeosu Immigration Controls Office, killing 9 detainees and wounding 18 others. Neither the alarm system nor the sprinklers operated when the fire broke out. The detention center staff tried but failed to put out the flames using portable fire extinguishers. Even so, they did not unlock cells to free the detainees. The detainees were forced to breathe in toxic fumes emitted from burning mattresses. These fumes were the cause of most of the deaths and injuries.**

**The cause of the fire is still under investigation. The South Korean government says it suspects arson by one detainee, but has not produced any evidence. Despite this alibi it is not hard to see that the real roots of the tragedy lie elsewhere- in the government’s inhumane policy towards migrant workers.**

### **Background on Migrant Workers in Korea**

**There are currently roughly 400 thousand migrant workers in South Korea, of whom about 189,000 are undocumented. Migrants in Korea have come under either the “Industrial Trainee System” or the “Employment Permit System,” which place them at specific factories and prohibit them from freely moving to other jobs. Most migrant workers experience inhumane treatment, unsafe working environments and low and unpaid wages. Therefore, many must leave their assigned jobs in search of better conditions, thus becoming undocumented.**

**The government has responded to this situation with a brutal crackdown. Migrant workers are frequently injured and killed in surprise immigration raids. What is more, they face inhumane conditions and human rights abuses in detention centers like the one in Yeosu, which are worse than prisons. Migrants’ organizations and their supporters believe that the only true way to solve the issue is to stop the crackdown, improve the migrant workers system and legalize all undocumented migrants.**

### **Human Rights Abuses in the Aftermath of the Fire**

**Injured migrants have been forced to receive treatment while handcuffed to their hospital beds. 28 migrants who were deemed to need no treatment were**

**transferred to Cheong-ju Detention Center. Of these, 17 were forcibly deported without begin given any compensation. The government is also refusing to reveal information about the case to bereaved families and civil society organizations.**

### **Response**

**In response, 'Joint Committee for Counter Measures to the Tragic Fire at Yeosu Foreigners Detention Center' was formed. We are working to raise awareness about the incident and its roots and investigating the actual conditions in detention centers around the country. We held a memorial service and mass rally on February 25, which was met by police violence.**

**Now more than ever, our struggle needs international support. The situation of migrant workers in South Korea must be familiar to all those who come from and/or work in immigrant working-class communities in throughout the world.**

**Please show your solidarity by signing this petition to the South Korean government!**

**Lee Changgeun**

**International Director**

**Korean Confederation of Trade Unions**

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**View online : [To sign the petition:](#)**