

# **Urgent Call to Action from KCTU-MTU (Migrant's Trade Union)**

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Dear allies and friends,

Greetings from the Seoul-Gyeonggi-Incheon Migrants' Trade Union. We are a union formed by and for migrant workers in South Korea. Our members come from many countries including Bangladesh, Nepal, the Philippines, the U.S., Indonesia and Sri Lanka.

We write 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.

At around 4:00am on February 11 a large-scale 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 to put out the flames using portable fire extinguishers but failed in their attempt. Even so, they did not unlock cell doors to free the people inside out of fear that they would escape. Migrants trapped behind locked doors and bared windows were forced to breathe in the toxic fumes emitted from burning mattresses that contained Urethane. These fumes were the cause of most of the deaths and injuries. The fire was not contained until after firefighters arrived on the scene.

The proximate cause of the fire is still under investigation. The South Korean government has said it suspects arson committed by one detainee in an attempt to escape; however it 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 anti-human rights policy towards migrant workers.

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.

In response, MTU has come together with migrant community and civil society organization in Korea to form a collective response. We are conducting a public education campaign to raise awareness about the incident and its roots and investigating the actual conditions in detention centers around the country. We will also hold a mass demonstration on February 25. Our demands of the South Korean government are as follows:

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.

There are many ways for you to support our struggle:

1. There are two protest letters attached to this email, one addressed to South Korean President and Prime Minister and one to be sent to the South Korean embassy in your country. Please send these letters in your organization's name and encourage other organizations to send them as well.

South Korean Prime Minister: [m-opm omp.go.kr](mailto:m-opm@omp.go.kr)

South Korean President: please send the letter to us and we will email it for you.  
([migrant@jinbo.net](mailto:migrant@jinbo.net))

2. Please organize protests in front of South Korean consulate and embassy buildings in your area.
3. Please also help us spread the word about this horrible tragedy by passing this message along to your networks.
4. Finally, after you have conducted these activities please write us a short message and/or send pictures to let us know.

Thank you for your support,

Seoul-Gyeonggi-Incheon Migrants' Trade Union

Korean Confederation of Trade Unions(KCTU)

If you have any questions you may contact:

ABM Moniruzzaman (Masum), General Secretary: (office) 82-(0)  
2-2285-6068, (cel) 82-10-9384-2693

Wol-san, International Solidarity Team: (cel) 82-10-2261-0613

Email: [migrant.jinbo.net](mailto:migrant.jinbo.net)

Website: <http://mtu.or.kr>

And, you can also contact ;

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### **Sample Letter to the president and prime minister**

To President Noh Moohyun and Prime Minister Han Myeong-sook,

We 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 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. Urgent action is needed.

Thank you for your attention,

Name:

Organization:

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### **Sample Letter to the embassies**

Dear representatives of the South Korean Embassy,

We 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.

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