

MINBYUN-Lawyers for a Democratic Society

2F, 74, Seocho-daero 46-gil, Seocho-gu, Seoul, Republic of Korea, P.O. 06649
Tel (82 2) 522 7284 Fax (82 2) 522 7285 <http://minbyun.or.kr> Email: admin@minbyun.or.kr

Urgent Appeal to the UN Special Procedures on the Demolition of the Former Dongducheon STD Management Center

*Addressed to the Special Rapporteur on Truth, Justice and Reparation, the Special
Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls, Its Causes and Consequences, the Special
Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights, and the Special Rapporteur on Torture*

I. Information

A. Author(s)

- Name**
1. **0000000** ('Gijichon comfort women' victim)
 2. **Joint Countermeasure Committee to Prevent Demolition of Dongducheon's Old STD Management Center**(Coalition of NGOs)
(Co-representatives: Eunjin Kim, Sonnduk Woo, Laegoon Park, Manyol Yi, Jang Hie Lee, Jeongae AhnKim, Chungmok Han, Nayoung Lee, Sungyoung Song)
 3. **MINBYUN-Lawyers for a Democratic Society**
- Nationality** Republic of Korea

B. Contact

Name Chaewan Suh, MINBYUN-Lawyers for a Democratic Society

Address Standard Building 2f, 74, Seocho-daero 46-gil, Seocho-gu, Seoul, Republic of Korea (06649)

Email chaewan.s@minbyun.or.kr

II. Background

A. Context

1. From the end of the Korean War until the early 1990s, more than a million Korean women were involved in government-endorsed prostitution for the US military. These women worked in designated zones around U.S. bases, known as ‘Gijichon(translated as camptown),’ which were regulated by the government of the Republic of Korea and policed by the U.S. Army. Dongducheon, with up to 7,000 registered prostitutes, was the largest of these zones.¹

2. Dongducheon's Old Sexually Transmitted Disease (hereinafter ‘STD’) Management Center building is located at the foot of Mount Soyo, Gyeonggi Province, Republic of Korea, and it was established and operated by the ROK government from 1973 to 1996 under the pressure of the US to reduce its soldiers’ rate of STDs. It served as a detention center for women who failed mandatory STD screenings. These ‘comfort women,’ many of whom were coerced into state-controlled prostitution for the US military, were forcibly confined in this center,² where they had to endure severe side effects from high doses of penicillin that were administered without proper prior testing.³ The facility's nickname, ‘Monkey House,’ was given because the sight of the detained women clinging to the windows and screaming to be let out resembled that of monkeys in the zoo, reflecting the inhumane treatment that the women endured during their time there.⁴ The facility trampled on women’s rights and posed a fatal threat to the lives of the ‘comfort women’ who were forced into prostitution for the US military. Dongducheon's Old STD Management Center is the last of six facilities operated in the 1990s, and has been preserved as an abandoned building.

¹ Tim Shorrok (2019). Welcome to the Monkey House: Confronting the ugly legacy of military prostitution in South Korea. *The New Republic*, 2 December. Available at

<https://newrepublic.com/article/155707/united-states-military-prostitution-south-korea-monkey-house>.

² 1981 Dongducheon City municipal ordinance dictates to detain, without hesitation, any Nakgeomja (translated as ‘failed examinees’) at a clinic and seek help from the police and the mayor to confine anyone who refuses to be detained for treatment.

National Archives of Korea (1981). National Archives Database. Available at

<https://theme.archives.go.kr/viewer/common/archWebViewer.do?bsid=200300922044&dsid=000000000014&gubun=search>. Accessed on 4 September 2024.

³ Sanghun Choe (2023). A Brutal Sex Trade Built for American Soldiers. *New York Times*, 3 May. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/02/world/asia/korea-us-comfort-women-sexual-slavery.html>.

⁴ Minjoo Kim (2024). It has long been an 'eyesore'... What is the reason for opposing the demolition of the 'Monkey House' in the US military camptown?, *Maeil Business Newspaper*, 25 August. Available at <https://www.mk.co.kr/en/society/11101134>.

B. Recent Developments

3. The ROK government promoted and justified prostitution among women as a patriotic duty to bring in foreign currency that significantly contributed to the country's economy during its post-war poverty.⁵ On September 29, 2022, the Supreme Court ruled in the “State Compensation Claim for US military ‘Comfort Women’ in Gijichon” that the operation of the Gijichon and STD management centers was state-led violence aimed at boosting the morale of US troops and obtaining foreign currency, with the US military ‘comfort women’ being the victims of that violence.⁶ The Court further stated that the ROK government violated the victims’ dignity and human rights under the pretext of operating and managing the Gijichon by forcibly detaining the victims without proper medical examinations and indiscriminately injecting them with penicillin.⁷

4. The dignity and honor of the ‘Gijichon comfort women’ victims have yet to be restored. Nevertheless, the city of Dongducheon is planning to demolish Dongducheon's Old STD Management Center building in order to expand and develop the Mount Soyo tourist area.⁸ Dongducheon's Old STD Management Center, which encapsulates the site of past state violence and the violation of women’s rights, holds significant value as a modern cultural heritage. In 2020, the Gyeonggido Women & Family Foundation conducted a study titled “A Study on the Living Conditions and Support Policies for Gijichon Women,” which concluded that “Dongducheon's Old STD Management Center is a structure of historical significance that needs to be preserved as modern architectural heritage.” The report even recommended that the building be “purchased by Gyeonggi Province and transformed into the Gyeonggi Women’s Rights and Peace Museum.”⁹ However, the ROK government and local authorities not only failed to investigate the heritage value of Dongducheon’s Old STD Management

⁵ Kim, Heejin (2009). Dongducheon: De-Territory, Non-Nation. *Journal BOL*, vol. 9 (Winter), pp. 12-13.

⁶ Supreme Court of Korea. Decision 2018Da224408. Decided 29 September, 2022; Minjung Shin (2022). S. Korean Supreme Court rules state must compensate camptown women who worked near US bases. *Hankyoreh*, 30 September. Available at https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1060899.html.

⁷ Seoul High Court Decision. 2017Na2017700. Decided 8 February, 2018; Minkyung Kim (2018). Court finds that South Korean government encouraged prostitution near US military bases. *Hankyoreh*, 9 February. Available at https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/831625.html.

⁸ Cheongmo Yoo (2024). Civic groups urge Dongducheon to preserve old STD management center. *Yonhap News Agency*, 12 August. Available at <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240812006500315>.

⁹ Jung, Hyewon, and others (2020). A Study on the Living Conditions and Support Policies for Gijichon Women. Gyeonggi Women & Family Foundation, pp. 236. Available at https://www.gwff.kr/storage/old_board_file/wp-content/uploads/kboard_attached/4/202102/6036112a426b61404618.pdf.

Center but also did not undertake the registration and designation procedures needed to legally protect the site from indiscriminate development and other threats.¹⁰

5. On 12 August 2024, 59 ROK civil society organizations established the Joint Countermeasure Committee to Prevent Demolition of Dongducheon's Old STD Management Center. The Committee called for an immediate cessation of the demolition plan, claiming that the building symbolizes the painful chapter of modern and contemporary Korean history that the nation needs to reflect upon.¹¹ **However, on September 6, 2024, the Dongducheon City Council passed the city's second supplementary budget, which includes 220 million KRW for the demolition of Dongducheon's Old STD Management Center as part of its tourism development plan for the Mount Soyo area.**¹² **With the budget approved, the city is expected to begin the demolition of Dongducheon's Old STD Management Center in October unless there are special circumstances.**

III. Relevant Laws and Alleged Human Rights Violations

6. The prostitution promoted and facilitated through the operation of Gijichon by the ROK government and the US military is essentially 'sexual exploitation and forced prostitution.' This constitutes 'torture and ill-treatment' prohibited by the *Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*, 'violence against women and girls' prohibited by the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, and 'trafficking in persons' or 'exploitation of prostitution' prohibited by the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime* and the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. Additionally, from the perspective of transitional justice, the sexual exploitation and forced prostitution of Gijichon constitutes 'serious human rights violations' that occurred during periods of authoritarian rule and dictatorship.

¹⁰ Modern and contemporary cultural heritage that is registered or designated is legally protected from the development by the acts, such as the Act on Conservation and Utilization of Cultural Heritage(See Act on Conservation and Utilization of Modern and Contemporary Cultural Heritage. Available at https://elaw.klri.re.kr/kor_service/lawView.do?hseq=63973&lang=KOR. Accessed on 4 September 2024.)

¹¹ Yoo, *Yonhap News Agency*.

¹² Jaepil Lee (2024). Budget for the demolition of STD management center passed, regional conflict erupts. *Hello TV News*, 6 September. Available at <https://news.lghellovision.net/news/articleView.html?idxno=480570>.

7. Provisions of international human rights standards, such as Article 8 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 2 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, Article 14 of the *Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*, Article 6 of the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, and the *Basic Principles and Guidelines on the Right to a Remedy and Reparation for Victims of Gross Violations of International Human Rights Law and Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law*, provide the right to a remedy or redress for victims of serious human rights violations: the right to truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence. The right to reparation includes ‘satisfaction’ of the victims; therefore, the State party has a duty to ensure the satisfaction of the victims.

8. Memorialization processes for the victims, one of the measures for satisfaction, constitutes the fifth pillar of transitional justice. The authorities that adopt and implement memory policies should ensure that such policies properly represent the views of the victims and are established in collaboration with civil society, especially human rights organizations.¹³

9. The State party’s duty to memorialize and commemorate victims of gross human rights violations must also be fulfilled to realize the cultural rights specified in Article 27 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and Article 15 of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*. Decisions regarding the preservation, renovation, or demolition of monuments or memorial sites from oppressive past regimes always carry significance; hence, such decisions must be discussed and a framework must be established. Demolition or transformation of such monuments may be interpreted as an intent to erase a part of history or a specific narrative.¹⁴ Thus, the State party should ensure transparency in all stages of memorialization and commemoration by promoting civil society participation in decision-making and centering the process on empowering the victims by reflecting their perspectives.¹⁵

¹³ A/HRC/45/45, para. 104.

¹⁴ A/HRC/25/49, para. 63.

¹⁵ A/HRC/25/49, para. 106. (b)

10. The STD management centers, including Dongducheon's Old STD Management Center, are monuments that testify to the human rights abuses suffered by the ‘Gijichon comfort women’ victims. These facilities are symbolic spaces that represent the painful past of modern Korean history. They should not be erased but rather should be reflected upon and atoned for by the community.

11. Dongducheon City has developed a plan to demolish Dongducheon's Old STD Management Center as part of its tourism project for the area surrounding Mount Soyo. Despite the ongoing opposition from civil society organizations and victim groups, Dongducheon City has not revised its plan and is moving forward with it. The planned demolition of the center constitutes a violation of international human rights standards as it erases the narratives of ‘Gijichon comfort women’ victims and does not adopt a victim-centered approach by excluding the participation of civil society groups and victims from the process.

12. Notwithstanding the Supreme Court’s 2022 ruling recognizing state liability for some ‘Gijichon comfort women’ victims, the State party has not taken any legislative or administrative measures to restore the dignity and honor of these victims. There has been no official public apology from the ROK government, and no legislation has been enacted to seek the truth and ensure the rights of the victims. The victims are elderly and face significant difficulties with their livelihoods and health, and the lack of effective governmental measures to support them is inconsistent with international human rights law.

IV. Conclusion and Request

13. Therefore, it is requested that the Special Rapporteur on Truth, Justice and Reparation, the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls, Its Causes and Consequences, the Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights, and the Special Rapporteur on Torture:

- Pay close attention and express concerns regarding the demolition plans for Dongducheon's Old STD Management Center which is contrary to UN international human rights standards.
- Publish a press release, statement, or communication urging the ROK government to respect the wishes and perspectives of the victims and preserve the Dongducheon's Old STD Management Center as a site of commemoration.
- Investigate to establish the truth about the scale and history of human rights violations related to the 'Gijichon comfort women' victims, the current status of the official government apology to restore the victims' honor and dignity, and the financial, psychological, and medical support needed for the victims' recovery.
- Recommend the State party to:
 - Stop the demolition process of Dongducheon's Old STD Management Center and take due account of the views of the 'Gijichon comfort women' victims;
 - Present official public apologies to the 'Gijichon comfort women' victims;
 - Ensure that the rights to truth, justice, and redress for the 'Gijichon comfort women' victims and their families are fully upheld, including the prompt provision of thorough rehabilitation and fair and adequate compensation.