

# **YOUNG** **HUMAN RIGHTS** **REPORTER** **OF THE YEAR**

## **Scars Not Only Physical for North Korea's "Ghost Prisoners"**

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Witnessing a 6 year old beaten to death for eating corn, being hung upside down on a coal fire and having a knuckle chopped off for dropping a sewing machine. Is this the reality for prisoners of North Korea's modern day concentration camps? Yes. However, "No" is the answer from the North Korean authorities who consistently deny their very existence. The ghost prisoner Shin Dong-hyuk, along with 200,000 others, go through these traumatic ordeals on a daily basis.

People in Kwanliso are considered "sub-human animals" that are not worthy of being taught anything. For 23 years Shin Dong thought that "society inside the camp would be the same as outside". Shin believed that he was born to be a prisoner, even though the reality was that he was an innocent victim of a tragic system, known as the "three generations of punishment".

When Shin's uncle committed the capital crime of escaping from the state, his remaining family was imprisoned for life in Camp 14. Shin was born and bred there. It was not until meeting an older prisoner, a disgraced party official who had travelled abroad, that he started to dream of a world beyond the electric fence - and beyond North Korea.

After 23 years of constant torment, in 2005, he escaped camp 14 by climbing through the bared wire and eventually arrived in South Korea to start a new life. This is the first time that someone has escaped from the brutal camp; however, unfortunately it is not as simple as starting afresh.

When Shin Dong was interviewed, he said, "I live a content life. But mentally I am very distraught." There is no escaping the graphic memories and the inhumane

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experiences. As Shin was unable to communicate with family members within the camp, relationships were complex and confusing for Shin. He simply does “not know what love is”.

Due to Google Maps and human rights activists the camps have been mapped. Activists spotted another camp appear on the map in early January 2013. So what has been done? It is increasingly difficult to put an end to these camps – how can you stop that which officially does not exist? The only evidence we have has been voiced by Shin Dong, a voice which gives us an insight into unimaginably appalling treatment of innocent people. The public being able to look in with such clarity on the camps might—just might—move the needle a bit to the side of humanity.

These barbaric concentration camps are not just North Korea’s problem. A global change is needed in order to fit a modern, apparently ‘more civilized’ society. While we sit back, cosseted in our homes, there is a world beyond our imagination of people who are being treated atrociously - yet nothing is done. They are ghosts in the eyes of the North Korean authorities; ghosts to us all. As Shin carries the mental and physical scars of his experiences, so too are the scars borne by our society.