

## ‘There should be systemic efforts to include marginalized Sakhalin compatriots’

Policy debate at National Assembly co-organized by Democratic Party office and compatriot organizations

A policy forum on the systemic inclusion of the historically marginalized Sakhalin diaspora was held at the National Assembly on June 18, marking the 80th anniversary year of Korea’s liberation and the 60th anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Korea and Japan.

Co-organized by Democratic Party lawmakers Lee Jae-kang and Yang Moon-seok and the Korean International Network (KIN), the forum focused on hearing the voices of the Sakhalin diaspora and identifying the new government’s policy direction and legislative tasks for the National Assembly.

“I hope that the issues discussed today will lead to responsible policies and effective legislation so that the pain that has been hidden for so many years can be healed,” Rep. Lee Jae-kang said in his remarks. “I will be at the forefront of making sure the lives of the Sakhalin compatriots are no longer a lonely struggle but a journey of solidarity that the national community walks together.”

Rep. Yang Moon-seok said, “I will strive for continuous and concrete policy support so that each and every Sakhalin compatriot can enjoy a respectable and stable life in this country.”

The discussion comprehensively covered the issues of the permanent return and resettlement support for Sakhalin compatriots, analysis of similar cases in Japan, and policy suggestions from relevant ministries and compatriot organizations.

Dean of the College of Humanities at Sakhalin State University Lim Elvira, Korean Association of Sakhalin President Soon Ok Park and Sakhalin Korean Youth Association President Sergei Lee gave a presentation, in which they said, “The Sakhalin compatriot community is still in an institutional blind spot” and called for “a more all-encompassing and sustainable policy framework.” They called for a more systematic approach by the government, saying, “The post-return generation needs



The Overseas Koreans Agency’s Director of Overseas Koreans Policy Lee Ji-sung (2nd from R) explains the agency’s policies at the policy forum for the inclusion of Sakhalin compatriots on June 18.

support for identity restoration and cultural and linguistic adaptation.

“When the first generation of Sakhalin compatriots passes away, there is a problem that the second or third generation wants to return to their home country permanently but cannot come to Korea due to legal regulations and other conditions,” Lim said, emphasizing the urgent need for measures to address this.

Professor Paichadze Svetlana from Hokkaido University in Japan analyzed the cases of permanent returnees to Japan from Sakhalin and China, and said, “Japan’s policy shows the importance of administrative consistency and integration support from the very beginning stages of returnee resettlement.”

### ‘Establishing policy foundation for Sakhalin compatriots through special legislation and surveys’

The discussion centered on how the Overseas Koreans Agency plans to improve the support system for Sakhalin compatriots returning to Korea in 2024. Yoon Yeo-sang, director of the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, participated as the head researcher and presented her findings.

In Yoon’s presentation of the “Plan for improving the support system for permanently returned Sakhalin Koreans,” she revealed that since 2024, the OKA has begun to improve the support system in order to stabilize the settlement of permanently returned Sakhalin Koreans and strengthen their rights and interests by focusing on short-term tasks that can be realized in the next one to three years.

Speakers and panelists pose for a photo with co-organizers Lee Jae-kang and Yang Moon-seok of the Democratic Party of Korea at the policy forum for the inclusion of Sakhalin compatriots held at the National Assembly on June 18.



The plan contains specific and practical improvements that can be implemented within the scope of the current system and institutional structures.

The core of the policy direction is the establishment of a legal framework, a fact-finding survey and an integrated data-based management system. To this end, the implementation of the “Special Law on Support for Sakhalin Compatriots” will be scrutinized in detail, and a system will be established to integrate relevant survey and administrative data that are currently in different locations into a single system.

The functions of related organizations, currently centered on the OKA and the Korean Red Cross, will be made more efficient. At the same time, cooperation networks with local governments, Sakhalin diaspora organizations and local private sector organizations will be strengthened. In this process, the focus will be on actively collecting and resolving the difficulties and complaints of Sakhalin compatriots at home and abroad and those involved in the field.

### ‘Implementing support for resettlement; expanding integrated support for housing, medical care, mental health’

In order to provide practical support, the resettlement support system will be supplemented with housing, medical, language and cultural support for permanently returned Sakhalin compatriots. In addition to expanding the supply of public rental housing, the program will promote the realization of initial resettlement subsidies, expand medical support for the elderly and introduce new psychological/social integration programs.

To address language barriers and help them adapt to the culture, Korean language classes will be held in local communities, translation and interpretation services will be expanded, and Russian-language guides and leaflets will be produced and distributed. In addition, the government will study the feasibility of building a historical memorial and cultural center to remember the history of the Sakhalin diaspora and pass it on to future generations, and will prepare for its opening in consultation with relevant organizations.

Access to information will also be improved. The “Sakhalin Compatriots Support Platform” will be piloted, which will integrate relevant information from the national government and local governments, and will operate a dedicated one-stop service center to respond to common inquiries, including immigration procedures, citizenship acquisition and administrative support. The goal is to minimize the number of individual service requests and provide quicker and more accurate services to compatriots.

### ‘Considering creation of historical and cultural memorial space for Sakhalin diaspora’

Looking eight years ahead toward a long-term improvement plan, Yoon suggested, “Resettlement support should not only include housing and livelihood support but also establish a tentatively named Sakhalin support foundation, a social integration training center and regional support centers under the OKA in order to divide roles and establish a service support system for each stage of resettlement.”

In the general discussion, OKA Director of Overseas Koreans Policy Lee Ki-sung, National Association of Sakhalin Returnees Chair Kwon Kyung-seok, Association of Koryo-Saram President Jung Young-soon, Duksoo Law Firm lawyer Cho Young-kwan and officials from the Ministry of Justice presented various proposals to improve the system.

“As this year marks the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Korea, we have a greater sense of historical responsibility to the Sakhalin compatriots and will provide them with broader and deeper support, whether they live in Sakhalin or stay in Korea,” OKA Director Lee Ki-Sung said.

“We will continue to expand the number of permanent returnees and redouble our efforts to ensure that the OKA, which oversees the support of compatriots living in Korea, is able to help those who have returned from Sakhalin to live honorably in the country.”

Meanwhile, the “Special Law on Support for Sakhalin Compatriots,” which came into force in 2021, provides a legal basis for the return of the first generation of Sakhalin compatriots and their immediate relatives, and stipulates that the state is responsible for formulating and implementing relevant policies, including resettlement support. As a result, 270 people are expected to return home permanently this year. 🇰🇷