

## ‘Role and authority of OKA must be strengthened for the good of overseas compatriots in Korea’

Co-hosted with offices of Democratic Party lawmakers Lee Yong-sun, Lee Jae-gang, Park Hae-chul

‘Fundamental solution to legal status issue of Koryo-saram is restoration of citizenship, not residency status’



Participants in the “Policy dialogue for supporting the settlement of overseas compatriots in Korea,” held in Seminar Room 3 of the National Assembly Members’ Hall in Yeouido, Seoul, pose for a commemorative photo on Aug. 29.

To address the issues facing overseas compatriots residing in Korea, voices have emerged calling for the role and authority of the Overseas Koreans Agency as a control tower for overseas Koreans policy to be strengthened.

To mark the 80th anniversary of Korean independence, the “policy dialogue for supporting the settlement of overseas compatriots in Korea,” co-hosted by Democratic Party lawmakers Lee Yong-sun, Lee Jae-gang and Park Hae-chul, and the OKA, was held on the afternoon of Aug. 29 in Seminar Room 3 of the National Assembly Members’ Hall in Yeouido, Seoul.

“As we commemorate the 80th anniversary of Korean independence, it is our historical responsibility to not forget our Koryo compatriots’ dedication and love for our homeland but to warmly embrace them,” OKA Deputy Commissioner Byeon Cheol-hwan said in his opening remarks. “The OKA is committed to developing tailored, comprehensive support measures not only for our compatriots overseas but also for the approximately 100,000

Koryo compatriots who have settled in Korea dreaming of a new life in search of better conditions.”

In his welcoming address, Rep. Lee Jae-kang emphasized: “The right of Koryo-saram to work safely and with respect, even in demanding workplaces, is fundamental. To improve the reality of Koryo-saram being forced into unstable and poor jobs in the early stages of their return, we must strengthen employment stability, job training and industrial accident prevention systems.”

“We are exploring various measures to address visa and employment issues for multicultural individuals residing in Korea, as well as blind spots in health insurance coverage,” Rep. Park Hae-chul also stated in his welcoming address.

### Policies to attract immigrants that do not take systematic approach may fail

The policy dialogue featured three presentations: ▲ The current status of Koryoin in Korea and ongoing issues around settlement in

communities (Jeong Young-soon, president of the Association of Koryo-Saram), ▲ Stabilizing Koryoin residency and improving domestic working environments (Kim Young-sook, director of the Ansan Koryoin Cultural Center) and ▲ The current status of education and career paths for Koryoin youth and pathways for development (Cho Nam-cheol, executive director of the Asia Development Foundation).

“Koryoin can become a new growth engine in depopulating regions,” President Jeong Young-soon said in her presentation. “(However,) immigrant attraction policies that lack a systematic approach and consideration for the essential conditions for long-term family settlement, such as quality jobs, housing and education, are likely to fail.”

She emphasized that shifting from a model, where Koryoin must unilaterally adapt to Korean society, to a partnership model, where they collaborate with the existing population, is the shortcut to shared growth for both Koryoin and Korean society.

### ‘Integrated’ policy is needed to address issues spanning employment, health care, education

“The integration of residency status and the easing of employment restrictions for Koreans residing in Korea have lagged behind the pace of demographic and social change and the rapidly shifting industrial structure,” Director Kim said. “An integrated policy is needed that takes into account the children of Koryoin who obtained residency status after the Enforcement Decree of the Overseas Koreans Act. Furthermore, the employment restrictions for overseas compatriots’ family members should be redesigned from an inclusive perspective, a key demand of compatriots.”

Cho identified five key challenges facing young Koryoin living in Korea: a lack of Korean language skills, difficulties adapting to society, limited employment opportunities, discrimination and prejudice, and a lack of educational opportunities. To address these challenges, Cho emphasized, “We need to expand customized Korean language education support, strengthen social




OKA Deputy Commissioner Byun Cheol-hwan delivers a welcoming address at the policy dialogue on Aug. 29.

adaptation programs, provide job placement and vocational training, and implement campaigns to address discrimination and raise awareness.”

In the ensuing discussion, Professor Emeritus Lim Chae-wan of Chonnam National University, who moderated the discussion, said: “There are eight government departments related to overseas Koreans, and if you include the OKA, there are a total of twelve. The OKA, which handles overseas Korean issues, should see increased budget and personnel as a control tower, while its role and authority should be further strengthened.”

OKA Policy Director Lee Ki-seong said: “The president has instructed the OKA to address discrimination and residency status issues from the perspective of overseas compatriots living in Korea. The presidential office is paying significant attention to overseas Korean issues, and along with the OKA, the Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Employment and Labor, it is jointly reviewing the issues of compatriots residing in Korea. We will quickly establish a policy direction that reflects the voices of our compatriots.”

Furthermore, the discussion also raised the opinion that the fundamental solution to the legal status of Koryo-saram is now the “restoration of citizenship,” not “residence status.” 



Panel members answer questions from on-site participants at the policy dialogue on Aug. 29.