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Seoul defends work on war abductions

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SEOUL -- South Korean government officials have defended efforts to investigate the fate of 486 persons thought to have been abducted by North Korea since the end of the 1950-53 war and tens of thousands still missing from the conflict.

"We are not turning our face away from this issue," Unification Ministry official Ko Kyung-bin told a group of National Assembly lawmakers and activists last week. "I must admit we have not been able to produce any tangible result."

The discussion last Thursday focused on the case of the Rev. Kim Dong-shik, a South Korean activist who is thought to have been abducted in the Chinese city of Yangji, close to the North Korean border, in January 2000. Since 1995, Mr. Kim had helped North Korean refugees escape to South Korea through China.

"We demand full disclosure of all information about Mr. Kim's whereabouts and how the abduction had been organized," said Do Hee-yun, secretary-general of the Citizens' Coalition for Human Rights of Abductees and North Korean Refugees, a nongovernmental group.

Mr. Kim's case has been a tangle of stories, purported sightings and conflicting reports, but it is not clear whether he is alive.

Mr. Do said Mr. Kim, suffering from malnutrition and the effects of rectal cancer, died in mid-February 2001 and was buried at a military base in Pyongyang. But government officials contest this account, saying Korean-Americans who have traveled to the North Korean capital said they saw him in 2002.

In December, Yu Yeong-hwan, a Korean-Chinese agent, was arrested in Seoul. Prosecutors said he claimed he was trained by North Korea's intelligence agency to hunt down defectors in China and that he was involved in Mr. Kim's abduction.

Chinese officials have cooperated with requests to investigate the purported abductions, said Lee Joon-kyu, a Foreign Ministry official who was general consul at the South Korean Embassy in Beijing until August. Mr. Lee said eight meetings were held with the Chinese about Mr. Kim, but the Chinese concluded again last month that there had been no progress.

No members of the ruling Uri Party, who generally align themselves with South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun's administration, attended the discussion.

Park Geun-hye, leader of the opposition Grand National Party, cited Japan's success in investigating abductions through direct negotiations with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il.

"I urge the government and the members of various parties to engage more positively and

aggressively," she said.

Five Japanese abductees were allowed to return to their country in September 2002 after a meeting between the North Korean leader and Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi.

But Mr. Ko said Japan has more leverage with North Korea, because it could use war-reparation funds to win cooperation from the communist country.

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