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features

Never said goodbye

Seven decades of separation in Korea

Seoul | South Korea

When Kim Kwang-ho fled advancing North Korean forces he expected to return home within days, so did not bother with a proper goodbye to his mother and brother. On Monday he meets his sibling for the first time in 68 years.

Now 81, Kim is one of a handful of Southerners to travel to the North's scenic Mount Kumgang resort next week for three-day reunions with family members separated by the turmoil of the Korean War.

Millions of Koreans were separated from their relatives by the 1950-53 conflict, which left the peninsula divided and all civilian communication banned between the two sides.

Since 2000, the Koreas have held 20 rounds of reunions, but time is running out for many ageing family members.

More than 130,000 Southerners signed up originally, most of whom have since died. The majority of the survivors are over 80 and the oldest participant this year is 101.

Close family connections across the border, like Kim and his brother or parent-child relationships, have become increasingly rare.

And some of those selected for this year's reunions -- the first in three years -- dropped out after learning their parents or siblings had passed away and they could only meet more distant relatives they had never seen before.

"I was so happy to hear my brother was alive," Kim said.

'I can't remember my mother's face'

But memories have faded over time.

Kim's father decided to flee, taking his four eldest children with him, when rumours circulated that the North Korean army was advancing on their village in far northern Myongchon county in late 1950.

Kim was 13 at the time, while his brother Kwang Il was nine -- a four-year gap that led to a lifetime apart.

"We thought we'd be away for only three days or up to a week, so women and young children were left behind to look after the house," Kim said.

Thinking they would be back soon, the refugees did not pack or take a single family photo with them.

Walking for hundreds of kilometres in the winter cold, with only the occasional lift from a passing car, they made their way south for several weeks as the US-led United Nations forces fell back.

In the end they were among some 100,000 refugees brought out in the Hungnam Evacuation, one of the US military's biggest-ever civilian rescues, which also saved the parents of South Korea's current president Moon Jae-in.

"When I got on the boat, I realised I will never be able to go back," Kim said.

The stinging pain of separation remains vivid in his heart and he chokes each time he is reminded of his mother.

But Kim, now aged and wrinkled, struggles to hold on to even a faint memory of the faces of his loved ones.

He recalls her crying after another of his broth-

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KIM KWANG-HO



Kim Kwang-ho, 81, one of a handful of South Koreans to travel to North Korea's scenic Mount Kumgang resort next week for three-day reunions with their relatives separated by the turmoil of the Korean War, holding a photo of his South Korean family

ers was killed earlier in the war, but said: "There must be something wrong with my head because I can't remember what my mother looked like."

'We share the same blood'

The refugees made new lives for themselves in the South, and the family is large and successful -- Kim is a retired professor of preventive medicine in Seoul and two of his children are a doctor and a dentist.

But his father and older siblings -- who have all died over the years -- never talked about the family they had left behind in the North.

"Talking about it just made each other sadder," he said. "So we just held the longing in our hearts."

Kim himself had given up hopes of meeting Kwang Il again, expecting only to see members of the next generation who were babies when he left.

Instead the Red Cross -- which handles practical aspects of the reunions -- informed him that his two nephews had died aged 60 and his niece,



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now 74, was paralysed and unable to attend, but his brother had survived.

"The first thing I'll do is thank him for being healthy and alive until now," he said.

Despite seven decades apart and his fading memories, Kim is confident he will be able to instantly recognise his kin.

"We share the same blood so I think we'll have some facial similarities at first glance," Kim said.

The brothers will have around 10 hours over the three-day reunion to make up for the lost years, and Kim refuses to think ahead to the moment when they will have to part ways again, this time in all likelihood for the final time.

But he laments that his older sister died 12 years ago and missed the chance to take part.

"If she was here, I would be able to share what I'm feeling right now because no one else knows," he said, adding that none of his children experienced the war or knew anything of the North.

"So I have no one to tell that I am happy or sad."