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To: whoever it may concern

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## **Expert Statement – Patterns of Abuse in South Korean Military**

In connection with asylum claim by Mr. Shin seungchul– a South Korean citizen faced with obligatory military service in South Korean army – I, as a specialist on Korean history and society, can make the following statement:

1. Generally, the atmosphere of violence continues to permeate the South Korean military. As it was explored in details in a wonderful research work by Prof. Moon Seungsook (Vassar College), *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*. (Duke University Press; Politics, History, and Culture Series, 2005), from its very establishment in 1948-49, the South Korean conscript military inherited the disciplinarian techniques of the pre-war Japanese Imperial Army (where most career officers of the fledgling South Korean army actually began their service), which combined the modern emphases upon drills, precise fulfillment of orders and regimented bodily movement and speech with rather pre-modern recourse to “naked violence” – regular punitive beatings and verbal abuse, supposed to instill the climate of fear conducive to unthinking obedience. The situation somewhat improved after the formal “democratization” of the country in late 1980s-early 1990s, but the atmosphere of abuse remains pervasive. According to South Korean Defence Ministry’s own statistics, for example, in July-December 2006 11% of the conscripts experienced physical abuse and 10% were verbally abused, but more independent monitoring by NGOs showed that, despite all the recent prohibitions of physical punishments and sanctions, they still affected up to 30-40% of the conscripts, if not more. The atmosphere in the military seems to have once again deteriorated after a conservative president Lee Myungbak – followed by even more conservative president, Park Keunhye – assumed power in 2008. For example, after the shocking beating death of a conscripted soldier, private Yun in April 2014, the South Korean Defence Ministry monitored for one month the violent incidents in the ranks and found out that ca. 3900 soldiers and officers were complicit in violence against their juniors or physically weaker individuals during this period only ([http://www.huffingtonpost.kr/2014/08/03/story\\_n\\_5645064.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.kr/2014/08/03/story_n_5645064.html) ). Most likely the real figures were much higher. Most Korean males with military service experiences whom I interviewed during the last 15 years, unanimously tell the tales of oppressive and abusive atmosphere in the barracks; a significant fraction of them mention also the experience of direct physical abuse. There are also certain units (the riot police units staffed by conscripts are especially notorious) where routine physical abuse affects majority of the draftees and leads to frequent desertions and suicides. Around 60% of all cases of deaths in South Korean army are suicides, and there are ample grounds to assume that a large part of those suicides is directly related to various forms of the abuse of the draftees by their superiors.

2. Alternative civic service for the persons refusing to be conscripted on the ground of their religious or other beliefs does NOT exist in South Korea. The refusal to be conscripted is routinely followed by a trial ending in prison sentence averaging 1,5 or 2 years. The prison sentence over 1,5 years implies that the person – as a “convicted criminal” – would never be called up again. However, the possession of a criminal record of this kind renders one into a second-rang citizen in South Korea. As a “former criminal”, the conscientious objector with a prison record would not be eligible to employment in the public sector, and most likely will be rejected by most large-scale private employers as well. He may also suffer restrictions on foreign travel, as well as the problems with the use of financial services. That the practice of institutionalized discrimination against formerly imprisoned conscientious objectors contradicts basic human rights norms has been repeatedly mentioned by a number of international human rights watchdogs, Amnesty International included.
3. From Mr. Sin Seungcheol’s statement – which he sent me via e-mail in Korean – it appears that he possesses strong pacifist beliefs, and resolutely disagrees with a number of practices customary to the South Korean military: for example, the forcible use of the conscripts as riot policemen for the suppression of popular rallies. It also appears that he generally espouses a skeptical attitude about South Korean government’s democratic credentials; his attitude is grounded in a number of cases when South Korean authorities acted in either highly irresponsible or strongly authoritarian way towards the members of vulnerable groups in the society. I would assume that, in case Mr. Sin ends up being conscripted against his will, his beliefs and attitudes may expose him to a serious danger of abuse – including physical sanctions – by his superiors in the barracks.
4. **Based upon the facts listed above, I strongly support Mr. Shin seungchul’s appeal for asylum. As much as I know South Korea (which is the primary field of my research and teaching, not to mention the fact that I am a naturalized South Korean citizen), being a forcibly conscripted pacifist does involve high risks of violence, inappropriate treatment and stigmatization. At the same time, former conscientious objectors with prison records are exposed to life-long discrimination after their release from prison. Acquiring a refugee status abroad seems to be the optimal solution for a person in such a situation.**

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