In a North Korean Nuclear Defector’s Own Words

by Bill Streifer and Sang S. Nam

According to experts, the weaponization of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program began in the early-1960s or early-1970s.\(^1\) And yet, it was not until October 2002, during high-level meetings in Pyongyang with Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James A. Kelly, that North Korean officials admitted they were pursuing a nuclear weapon.\(^2\) Four years later, on October 9, 2006, North Korea became the eighth nation — or perhaps ninth\(^3\) — to conducted a nuclear test.

To date, North Korea has conducted three underground nuclear tests. The nuclear fuel used — plutonium and perhaps highly enriched uranium (HEU) — was produced at the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center about 55 miles north of Pyongyang, North Korea’s capital. In 2000, a female nuclear researcher who had worked at the Bungang branch of the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center defected. And in June 2002, she was interviewed by RENK (“Rescue! The North Korean People”), a Tokyo-based Japanese civic organization supporting North Korean defectors. Using the alias Lee Mi (“beautiful plum”), Ms. Dong Chun-ok’s answers to thirteen questions were then published on RENK’s website in Japanese.\(^4\)

Although excerpts from Dong Chun-ok’s interview appeared in the South Korean press\(^5\) and large portions were later translated into English and published in Korean Web Weekly,\(^6\) the website of North Korean-born nuclear physicist Young Sik Kim, an English translation of Ms.
Dong’s entire interview has never before appeared in print or on any website. Although some of the “facts” in the interview “are not accurate,” Dr. Kim said, “the general picture described is correct as far as I know.”

Born in Hamhung, North Korea in 1935, Dr. Young Sik Kim emigrated to the United States in 1955 after serving with U.N. Forces during the Korean War. He earned his B.S. in Physics at Brigham Young University and his Ph.D. in High Energy Nuclear Physics from Purdue University in 1962. Dr. Kim was an Associate Professor of Physics at Ohio State University until 1980, after which he spent considerable time as a Visiting Scientist at the Argonne National Laboratory outside of Chicago. He also conducted additional research at the Brookhaven National Laboratory (Long Island, NY), CERN (Switzerland) and at Rutherford Laboratory (England).

Dong Chun-ok’s Interview

Question #1:

State your personal identities, education, career and experiences, the names of North Koreans who are in the field of nuclear project. Under whom have you studied and who were the ones you have spent your working life together?

Answer #1:

Name: Dong Chun-ok Sex: Female DOB: August 2, 1955
Birth place: Pungseo County, Yangkang Province
Family status: Father; Dong Mun-wha died November 27, 1957.
Elder sister: Dong Sang-ok worked at Atomic Science Committee
Dong Sang-ok’s husband (brother-in-law): Kim Sang-beom Chief of #1 Special Team, #66 Project Office of Atomic Science Committee.
Younger sister: Dong Bun-ok Myeong-cheon County, North Hamkyung Province
Dong Bun-ok’s husband: Tae Cheol-su, Party clerk at Chilbosan Foreigners Tourist Hotel, Myung-chun County, North Hamkyung Province.

Education:
Attended Bungang People’s School (+elementary); March 1, 1962 – 1965
Bungang High School; March 1, 1965 – 1969

Experiences:
After my father died on January 27, 1957 in Oro-county, South Hamkyung Province (now, Yeonggwang county), my mother was secretly summoned by the Central Party in the summer of 1960 and moved into a special base of Bungang Atomic Energy and Science Committee, Yongbyon County, North Pyeongan Province. Since my graduation from the university in the summer of 1974, at #25 - Branch Office, and #304-Research Center of Atomic and Science Committee.

- June 15, 1977: Married to an officer at Air Command Center and moved to Pyongyang.
- April 25, 1978: My first boy was born.
- Until 1980, lived as a military family at Air Command Center

- Starting from the summer of 1980, worked as a planning leader of Management Department, Metropolitan Pyongyang.

- Starting from 1982, worked as a booking clerk of Pyongyang City Railroad Department.

- Starting from 1983, became a leader for the safety of residence registration for the Railroad Region, as recommended by the Management Department of the Railroad.

- October 1990, moved to Yangkang Province as husband was discharged from the service.

- June 1991, divorced husband. Lived in my mother’s house in Bungang Region, Yongbyon County, North Pyongan Province, but moved to Hyesan City, Yangkang Province due to children’s problem.

- Starting from October 1995, assumed the position as Leader of Trade, Yangkang Province of People’s Military/Political Division

- February 21, 1999, received order to suspend work.

- September 2000; escaped to China.

- Before the inspection, the chairman of the Atomic and Science Committee was Pak Gwan-oh (currently President of Kim il-sung Integrated University). After the investigation it received direct control of Kim Jong-il but after Kim Il-sung’s death in 1994, the supply and control have weakened. Currently it is being reinforced and strengthened.

- Secrecy is guaranteed in the field of nuclear and the researchers were paid extra 20 to 30% for the living expense as the price for the secrecy guarantee cost.

- All the research institutes are being called by secret numbers; 101-laboratory, 304, 206-laboratories, 175-business office, 66-business center, August-enterprise, February-enterprise, or using a disguised name such as, for the meaning of often utilized, “Utilization Research Laboratory” generally used in a variety of applications. Each research laboratory cannot contact others and they are under strict control and regulations.

The 304-research center where I used to work;

Chief: Do Won-son PhD, (Kidnapped from South Korea in 1950)
Head of laboratory: Kim Dol-su, PhD, (Studied at Dubna in Russia)
Party Secretary: Pak Min-jon, PhD, (Studied abroad for 15 years)
Hwang Jun-man, PhD, (Studied in Russia)
Kim Jun-bok, PhD, (Studied at Dubna)
Kim Dong-su, PhD, (Studied at Dubna)
Kim Kyong-sun, Third class researcher (Studied at Dubna)
Hyon Chul, (Studied repeatedly at Dubna)
Kim Dong-hwi (Studied in Czechoslovakia)
Kim Ok-nyo (Studied in Russia)

Responsible person of the Regional Party of Bungang Region: Kim Yong-sik who used to work as a 304-researcher.
(The materials I’ve confirmed up to the year 1998)

**Question #2:**

Please state the functions, organizations and important personnel names of 101, 206, 304 Research Center and other facilities in Yongbyon.

**Answer #2:**

All the important facilities, buildings for the research laboratories, related features, and nuclear reactor were built under the supervision of Russia and by Russian materials and equipment while they were there.

After Kim Il-sung had grabbed the regime, for the purpose of developing nuclear arms, he had ordered the double-agent and republic’s spy hero Lee Hak-mun to abduct Dr. Lee Seung-ki, Dr. Do Won-sun, Do Sang-rok researcher, etc. from South Korea, and he did. After that, the Atomic and Science Committee, which was located in Hamhung, was expanded to Bungang Region in Yongbyon County, North Pyongan Province starting in late 1950. The one at Hamhung was established mainly by Dr. Lee Seung-ki as a branch institute while making Bungang Region as the home research center, for which Do Won-sun [may be read as Do Won-sop] and Kim Do-sul played as the main organizer.

**Question #3:**

Please state the functions, organization and facilities and the products of 175-factory, August-business and other enterprises in Yongbyon.

**Answer #3:**

**304-research:** The center is important laboratory among the laboratories in Bungang region, and it is the main research center for nuclear weapons development as well as for chemical arms development. Over 70 percent of the researchers of the group have studied overseas and restudied for the research. The emphasis is placed on the nuclear weapons development but they also participated in the chemical weapons development. Total number is about 150 persons. Every room of the researchers is guaranteed with laboratory, shower and modern facilities. Assistant is assigned to every doctoral researcher and research worker. About 70 to 80 percent of the researchers at 206-research center are professionals in the physics field. And it is the important research center for the nuclear weapons development in the Bungang region.

**Yiyong research center:** Although the name implies “economical utilization” it produces a variety of facilities including general weapons by locating a branch laboratory in Pakch’on. The number of personnel is about 150.

**175-factory:** The factory produces appliances for laboratory experiments needed at Bungang Research Center.

**August-enterprise:** It was newly built research center after the surveillance by United States (of 1990s’ nuclear inspection). It has installed railroad from Bungang Region which is hidden in a
forest outside the perimeter. It supplies the laboratory testing requisites after directly processing uranium supplied from Pakch’on branch laboratory.

101-research center: For the purpose as research center, it’s the same as 304 or 206. The number of personnel is about 100.

66-business office: Responsible for the construction of living quarters, and maintenance of the facilities and supply of materials in the premises. It employs about 20,000 personnel.

February-enterprise: The enterprise was newly made after the 1990’s surveillance, which holds nuclear reactor, so I heard from a research colleague with whom I’ve worked.

Export/Import Material Company: This organization supplements materials for the research center by importing them from foreign countries.

Question #4:

Please state the functions, organization, facilities and the storing capacity of underground nuclear facilities in Yaksan Dongdae and Mt. Sotaek. And, describe in details when the underground facilities were dug, constructed, and the conditions of the entrance, etc. as much accurately as you remember. It would be much helpful if you could draw sketches showing exterior of the entrance, shape and location. When and why did you visit the underground facilities?

Answer #4:

I was mobilized to a simulation exercise conducted in the summer of 1976 and I went inside of the place. The underground facilities at Yaksan Dongdae were built by 66-business center. There were many human casualties by accidents during the construction stage so that the Chairman’s fund was poured into all the material needs including cement. It was constructed after 1965 and the work was completed before 1970. I still remember that the facilities were unusually large and inside of all the caves were branched out in various shapes. The entrance to the cave was very large. The surface of the cave entrance was paved by finely finished cement and the inside was lighted.

[The use of the underground facilities]
The cave was built to accommodate all the materials and laboratory testing equipment and important systems when an emergency or surveillance is being proposed. Anticipating inspection by International Atomic Organization, all the equipment in the research centers had been relocated when the inspection was actually conducted. The news of possible inspection had been informed to all the researchers in advance and when the inspection was made, it was ready to be inspected.

[Sotaek-san]
Mt. Sotaek is located in a residential area. It is located behind a hospital and has two entrances. It’s an emergency shelter for the nuclear researchers and it was lighted. The inside is branched out to several offshoots caves. I entered there during a simulated exercise in 1976. The cave is under control after that, and couldn’t enter.

Question #5:

Please describe in details the names, location, organization and its facilities of the science university you’ve once stated.
Answer #5:

Its name is Pyongbuk Physics University. The president is Dr. Kim Myong-hwan. It is located, passing through a manned gate, at next to a hospital in residential area, and there are two high rise apartments. The university is for the education of researchers in the field of nuclear engineering who are mainly of children of nuclear professionals at Bungang. Especially brilliant persons from all over the country, if they fully understand the basics of politics, the university is accepting some in recent years. Now it’s directly controlled by the Central Party. The number of students is 300 and it’s gradually increasing. The number of teaching staff is about 50 and they are chosen from the researchers at the basic research center.

Question #6:

Are you aware of the progress of relocation of the researchers and the nuclear facilities from Yongbyon to other location? If there was relocation, please explain how researchers were reassigned and to which facilities, when, and why it’s relocated, and the name of the new location. Tell us, if the nuclear reactor was relocated from the center of Yongbyon before the International Atomic Organization conducted its inspection, why it was relocated. Where is the nuclear reactor now? Do you know if it was ready to show a part of North Korean nuclear program for inspection by the International Atomic Organization? If it was ready for the inspection, for what purpose and what kind of preparations were ready?

Answer #6:

When it foresaw the inspection while the world kicked up a fuss about North Korea’s having nuclear arm in 1990, some of the peoples in Bungang area were asked to wear military uniform, putting shoulder straps on the labor class, officer’s uniform on the executives and researchers, and together with their families they were secretly moved. New base was relocated to Pyongsan County, South Hwanghae Province (error for North Hwanghae Province), and at that time, even internally in the business region, it was kept as top secret. My elder sister’s husband was responsible person and directed the relocation and went there several times. All the materials to be sheltered were evacuated into cave when it received the inspection. Currently the nuclear reactor is located at February Enterprise of 304 Research Center.

Question #7:

How much does the personnel and scientists know about the leakage of nuclear radiation?

Answer #7:

Until presently, physical damages have shown on some of the researchers and persons who are related and unnatural babies were born. It is generally recognized as it was not a big accident.

Question #8:

If you know about compositions of the nuclear arms program of North Korea, please explain their details and from where you’ve heard. How much do you know in addition to the past efforts on the production of plutonium at Yongbyon, about the efforts put on for other fissional material? If you know please describe in detail about its essential activities, the time, and the locations. Are there any retreatment facilities for nuclear fuel besides the radiation chemical
experimental laboratory? Have the North Korean scientists ever showed interest in uranium enrichment? If so, please state it in detail.

**Answer #8:**

The research center at Bungang region is the research organization specialized in modernized military arms and the (illegible) produced by each laboratory at Bungang is not produced within the Bungang region. The researchers bring their own research products to the experimental factory or arsenal for its tests, and generally all of the research products are sent to section chiefs or managers who are doctoral researchers, and finally it was handled by the deliberative committee, after passing through strict seminars.

It will be actually tested only after having recognized at this committee. There is chemical factory within the arsenal for the production of important arms. Pakch’on laboratory handles all the materials of nuclear division, besides Yongbyon. It is thought that the base for the production of nuclear division and arms is hidden at Pyongsan in North Hwanghae Province which was classified before the inspection.

**Question #9:**

Do you know anything about travels to foreign countries or training by nuclear scientists or engineers? If you are aware of it, please describe purposes of study and travels. Do you know anything about travels or reallocation of foreign scientists or professionals in North Korea? If you know, what were the purposes of travels and relocation and the timing and what were the specialties of the foreign scientists or specialists?

**Answer #9:**

Bungang Nuclear Science Committee was established in late 1950s by the scientists and advisors of Russians who came to Bungang in concentration. They, with their families, built villas along the bank of Kuryong River and shuttled to and from the research center. Training studies by researchers were made mainly in Russia and China, and they were physics and chemical specialty fields of students at a various nations’ universities. And many of them went back to restudy at Dubna Science Center in Russia, when research center is built again. The scientists are prohibited to make private exist and entry within the country or from and to overseas countries and they are forbidden to meet outsiders.

Depending on the themes of the studies, and when it is decided that it’s impossible to solve the posed questions within the country, then a requisition may be filed for overseas study and gets its approval.

When many anti-national activities are exposed and when they were sent to political prisoners’ camp, after that, at some time, the overseas study had been regulated.

After the war of 1950, for the purpose of development of nuclear weapon by Kim Il-sung, Lee Hak-mun (hero of the republic’s double reconnaissance) had kidnapped from South Korea Dr. Lee Seung-gi, Do Sang-rok, Dr. Do Won-sun and so on. After the war ended in 1953, they first started to build research center in Hamhung City, and later it was developed to “Atomic Science Committee” officially, and then established “Nuclear Science Committee” in the geographically fitting basin of Bungang.

A total number of Russian advisors and foreigners are about 200. I do not know the exact figure. Before 1970, all secrete and Russian advisors’ materials were pulled out of strongbox and photo
copied, and then all the foreigners were withdrawn from the country. After having established Security Squadron and military guard posts of People’s Military Division, the country sustained itself since.

In my childhood years, my mother took me to foreigner’s resort villa, and I received some gifts and played with the children’s of foreign advisors in the perimeters. A person named Alexander of the research center especially loved me. After that, I stayed at mother’s home for 40 days in August 1998, and I saw Russians coming in and out of the restricted area.

**Question #10:**

Please state, if you know anything about the origin, administration, and fuel supply of the nuclear reactor for research use that was provided by Russia.

**Answer #10:**

The nuclear reactor located in Bungang was installed at the same time with the construction of Bungang Research Center. After that, Pakch’on branch laboratory and February Enterprise’s were built after the inspection. Fuel supply is also coming from Pakch’on branch laboratory. As I understand, all the supplies are conducted by Russia, and some are coming from China in recent several years. Each Section and by each Research center, they are classified as confidential.

**Question #11:**

Please state names, organizations, locations and the functions of nuclear related facilities other than Yongbyon area.

**Answer #11:**

Establishing Bungang nuclear base as the basis, the largest branch laboratories are Hamhung branch and Pakch’on branch. Dr. Lee Seung-ki was the principal at Hamhung branch. It trains newly growing modern researchers and basically specialize the development of chemical weapon and organisms. It has testing laboratories and so on which are needed for the incubation of bacteria, etc. At the first stage, they use rabbits or mouse and squirrels for animal tests, but for the first hand experiments, they employ prisoners or felons by using injections.

Pakch’on branch: Directly handles basic uranium

Hyewon branch: Studies basically about China and its purpose is for the researches of China’s radiation and air contaminations.

**Question #12:**

Please describe about falsehood efforts and plots related with the North Korea’s nuclear program.

**Answer #12:**

After the inspection, they covered the chain of Yaksan Mountains with trees, and newly built February Enterprise and August Enterprise. In order to prevent taking high altitude photos from sky, they created many wooden houses in steps, and opened in the woods outside the perimeters. At Pakch’on branch too, they installed many woods, locating them by the foot of crag sides so
that they cannot be distinguished. By a glance it looks nothing is there, but it’s there behind the hill.

**Question #13:**

You said the children of Prof. Kim at work place of 304 Research Center did work for their father and they have received education at outside the country, please tell us where and the names they used to get the study. You’ve also mentioned that their children are participating with the Daepodong program, please state about the Daepodong program, the purpose of Daepodong, and the kind of relationships with the Room 304.

**Answer #13:**

The name of Prof. Kim’s son is Dr. Kim So-in and is about 30 years old. Prof. Kim and his wife are both nuclear specialist and his brother works as direct assistant to Dr. Kim So-in. Dr. Kim So-in was born while studying in Russia, in Dubna, and returned to Bungang when he was 3 years old (currently his birth place is listed at Chunggu region, Pyongyang City), and entered Bungang Senior Middle School when he was 7 years old but he was so genius that the teachers couldn’t teach him. As reported to Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, he was recruited to Special and Science Colleges of Kim Il-sung Synthesis University and received private tutoring.

He met his parents when he was 13 years old and secretly sent to study at a foreign country (it was kept secret which country).

He received a semi-doctorial degree at the age of 19, and received doctor’s degree when he was 21 years old. Dr. Kim So-in was a doctor who deliberately raised by Kim Il-sung and is the successor of Dr. Lee Seung-gi of Hamhung branch.

Kim Jong-il is secretly nourishing some 20 young doctors in his hands to raise them as military specialists in the modern warfare providing with them the highest quality treatments. In the group, it includes the son-in-law of Dr. Lee Seung-ki and his grandson and the core among the researchers for the modernization of military is Dr. Kim So-in. His private and working life is kept as a top secrete and completely shut out from the outside world, and he receives orders directly from Kim Jong-il.

The word of Kim Jong-il goes: “I’ll unify the fatherland by these 20 young scientists of new generation.”

His father is at 304 research center. There is no relation with his father except he is son of nuclear specialist.

The alias of Nuclear Science Committee (Atomic Committee) is “Chosun Pyongyang #204,” and 304 Research Center is #19, 66 Enterprise is #17, and it starts with #26 for the numbers of telephone and vehicles. The Commander of Security Squadron for Social Safety Division of Bungang Nuclear Science Base is Ra Chang-sik The Nuclear Science Committee is recently being reinforced.

**END OF INTERVIEW**

*Bill Streifer’s and Sang S. Nam’s Bios*
Bill Streifer is a researcher and historian on the history of nuclear weapons and U.S. intelligence. His articles include the cover story in the OSS Society Journal, various articles for the American Intelligence Journal, DCBureau.org and others. “The Flight of the Hog Wild,” a book about the long history of nuclear activities in North Korea, co-authored with Irek Sabitov, a Russian journalist and newspaper editor, is in the works. Their website is here: http://TheFlightoftheHogWild.com

Sang S. Nam, a resident of Seoul, is a Korean-Japanese-English translator. He translated Ms. Dong Chun-ok’s interview from Japanese into English. He also drew the sketch of the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center from public sources and from information derived from Ms. Dong’s interview and sketch such as the location of Yongbyon’s secret cave.

1 Dr. Kang Ho-je, a South Korean authority on North Korean science and technology.
2 An admission they later denied.
4 http://www.bekkoame.ne.jp/ro/renk (now defunct)
5 Yonhap news agency, Seoul (in English), Oct 17, 2002.
7 In a message from Kim Young-sik to Joseph S. Bermudez, Jr., an internationally recognized analyst, author and lecturer on North Korean defense and intelligence affairs. (Oct. 20, 2002)