

Why Many South Koreans Fear the U.S.

By George Katsiaficas

At a time when North Korea's nuclear program has made the Korean peninsula a leading news story and test case for the Bush Administration's foreign policy, most Americans are clueless why our allies in the South are so upset with us. Some point to the recent killing of two schoolgirls by a US military vehicle as the cause of anti-Americanism, but the problem is much deeper.

The massacre of hundreds of civilians in the early days of the Korean War at No Gun Ri was first publicized in a Pulitzer Prize winning Associated Press article in 1999. As news of the 1950 killings circulated in South Korea, dozens of other people came forward with their own horror stories. It turned out that all over the country civilian refugees—the "people in white"—had been gunned down by American soldiers and pilots. As these testimonies circulated, public anger grew. It didn't help when the BBC then aired the film "Kill 'Em All" about No Gun Ri and other massacres in which evidence of high-level US orders to shoot civilians was denied by Pentagon spokespersons. A recent scholarly study estimated that one million civilians were killed during the war, 80% of them by US and allied forces.

The worst single massacre predates the beginning of the Korean War by two years and has yet to be acknowledged by the United States. At least 30,000 people on the island of Jeju were killed under the auspices of the post-war US military government. Jeju's people rebelled on April 3, 1948, demanding Korean unification and independence. In response to guerrilla attacks, US commanders imported hundreds of North Korean refugees who, organized as armed militias, ruthlessly suppressed the rebellion along with former Japanese-trained soldiers and police.

The reason that these stories are now newsworthy in South Korea is that for over 40 years, it was illegal to discuss them in public under various US-backed military governments. Even today fear of reprisal is so widespread among victims that the Korean Parliament has had to pass a special law specifically granting immunity to anyone who comes forward to testify. A Parliamentary commission is now due to release a full report on the Jeju massacre this Spring.

In 1980, an uprising against the military government was bloodily suppressed in the city of Gwangju, and hundreds of people were killed. Nearly every Korean knows the history of Gwangju because it was the heart and soul of the South Korean movement for democracy (which finally won direct presidential elections in 1987). Yet Americans remain largely ignorant of this massacre—and of US government collusion. We do remember the taking of 300 Americans hostage in Teheran at that time. Fearing a "second Iran," then President Jimmy Carter, his Ambassador to South Korea William

Gleysteen, Richard Holbrooke and other top US policymakers gave the South Korean military the green light to crush the Gwangju insurgents.

The recent wave of candlelight vigils against US military forces in South Korea began when a previously unknown activist proposed the idea on the internet. Overnight thousands of people turned out, and the event became a weekly occurrence. More militant protests, including random attacks on Americans in the streets of Seoul, began to escalate. Over one million Korean signatures were collected calling on President Bush to revise the agreement governing US forces on the Peninsula so that American soldiers suspected of crimes in South Korea would be tried in Korean courts (as already occurs in Japan), rather than in US military courts. When petition organizers went to the White House in December, however, they were refused entry to the grounds, and told to take their petitions with them. When they refused to disperse, the DC police knocked several of them down and charged the diminutive Korean woman carrying the petitions with assault. Although this incident received scant media attention here, in South Korea it was perceived as another example of US arrogance.

Many South Koreans love the US and are grateful for US assistance to their democracy. Yet, the underlying history of US brutality against Koreans has yet to be addressed. Until Americans acknowledge and accept responsibility for the tragic actions of our government, many Koreans will regard us with fear, hostility and suspicion.

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