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SOUTH KOREA'S KWANGJU INCIDENT — REVISITED

INTRODUCTION

South Korean university students occupied the United States Information Service Building in Seoul for four days this May, demanding a U.S. apology for its alleged complicity in what is known as the "Kwangju incident" of May 1980. The Kwangju incident was in fact a major civil uprising in the Republic of Korea (ROK) that resulted in the death of 191 Koreans.

The student action at the USIS building reveals that even after five years, the violence in Kwangju continues to haunt South Koreans. In fact, the uprising has become a powerful political weapon for opponents of the current government of President Chun Doo Hwan. During the National Assembly session this June, for instance, the opposition New Korea Democratic Party demanded an official investigation of the incident. Despite explanations by the government, many critics continue characterizing the Kwangju incident as a brutal and premeditated massacre of civilians by the government. Critics accuse the Chun Administration of a coverup, claiming that the official death toll of 191 is vastly underestimated.

Yet a careful investigation of the facts reveals that the Kwangju uprising has suffered from great exaggeration and distortion, including the allegations of a U.S. role in the matter. The Kwangju tragedy left deep scars on the psyche of all Koreans. Unintentional or deliberate hyperbole, however, cruelly and needlessly prolongs the national grief. It is time that the incident be evaluated freshly and dispassionately.¹

¹ This paper is based largely on personal interviews during June and July 1985 with South Korean government officials, National Assembly members, military officers, Kwangju residents, and Kwangju Citizens' Committee members.

SOURCES OF THE TROUBLE

The regime of President Park Chung Hee, which had begun in 1961, unexpectedly ended in October 1979 when he was assassinated by a disgruntled aide. Martial law was declared, Prime Minister Choi Kyu Ha became interim president, and the stage was set for an intense political struggle. While the ruling Democratic Republican Party wrestled with the problem of purging corrupt members who had exploited their positions, the opposition New Democratic Party was racked by bitter infighting between former party chief Kim Dae Jung and the new leader, Kim Young Sam. By April 1980, it became clear that Kim Dae Jung lacked the support to recapture the leadership post. He announced he would seek his political base elsewhere.

Political uncertainty intensified as South Korea's economic situation began to deteriorate. For the first time in 16 years, the economy stopped growing. Tensions heightened when university classes resumed and students took to the streets demanding an end to martial law. On April 16, Kim Dae Jung, in violation of martial law, addressed a huge student rally in Seoul. Earlier, a mine workers' protest resulted in the death of a policeman. On May 15, another policeman was killed during a student riot in Seoul, and large-scale demonstrations erupted in several other major cities. On May 16, student association representatives met at Ewha University in Seoul and endorsed a resolution calling for nationwide demonstrations on May 22.

In response to the rising level of violence, President Choi imposed a heightened state of martial law at midnight May 17. Universities were closed, and political activity was prohibited. Kim Dae Jung was arrested and charged with inciting riots by funneling money to student demonstrators and conspiring to overthrow the government. The government explained these steps were necessary "to restore public peace and order."

The extension of martial law included the deployment of troops to major cities. As part of this plan, the 33rd and 35th Battalions of the 7th Airborne Brigade were moved into Kwangju from an area north of the city. Kwangju, with a population of about 800,000, is the capital of South Cholla Province, the home district of Kim Dae Jung. The demonstrations that had rocked South Korea for weeks ended quickly in most areas of the country. Rioting in Kwangju, however, continued.

CONFRONTATION

On the morning of May 18, several hundred rock-throwing students clashed with troops at Kwangju's Chonnam University. That afternoon, the students marched into downtown Kwangju where confrontations with the authorities continued. Violence escalated the next day, when the demonstrators vandalized police property and two television stations and set fire to a number of vehicles.

This initial stage of the trouble was characterized by fierce hand-to-hand fighting between police and military authorities and the demonstrators. Many demonstrators were armed with rocks and iron pipes and were extremely hostile and aggressive. A number of observers charged the policemen and troops with excessive brutality, but other eyewitnesses noted that "for the most part, the army avoided an open fight with the rioters."² There were many injuries on both sides, but only two rioters were killed during the first two days of the confrontation.

Regional tensions played an important role in the escalating violence. Many citizens of Cholla Province, located in the southwestern section of the peninsula, feel their region has suffered discrimination by the central government for hundreds of years. Some claim that the late President Park, a native of neighboring Kyungsang Province, deliberately neglected Cholla's economic development while fostering progress in his home region. The arrest of Kim Dae Jung and the clashes between troops and Kwangju citizens fueled local speculation that the extension of martial law was aimed specifically at Cholla Province.

On the first day of the riots, the rumor spread that soldiers of Kyungsang Province had come to kill the Cholla people. There were reports that as many as 40 people had been killed during the first day of strife; in fact, no one had been killed. Some residents were told that Kim Dae Jung had been executed. The most bizarre rumor was that, to make them more fierce, the troops had been starved for several days and given drugs before coming to Kwangju.

Some of these tales were believed by residents, prompting many nonstudents to sympathize with the rioters. In addition, the specter of troops and police battling and arresting young people on the streets of Kwangju quickly turned public opinion against the authorities.

By May 20, thousands of students and other citizens had taken to the streets. Rioters torched City Hall and a television station. Commandeered busses and taxis sped wildly through the streets. At the Provincial Government Building, four policemen were killed when a car crashed into a police barricade. The situation rapidly was getting out of the authorities' control.

The violence continued into early morning May 21. Events took an ominous turn when rioters attacked an army reserve base and seized rifles, ammunition, and other weapons. About 9 a.m., an automobile factory was sacked, and several hundred cars were stolen along with a number of armored personnel carriers. Other military and police facilities were raided in nearby villages and hundreds of firearms were taken. A large amount of TNT was seized from an explosives manufacturer.

² Time, June 2, 1980, p. 37.

During the afternoon rioters installed a machine gun on the roof of a downtown building and fired on troops. On the outskirts of the city, meanwhile, soldiers guarding the Kwangju Prison were attacked by waves of well-armed rioters in armored personnel carriers and fire trucks. Apparently aimed at freeing the prison's inmates, the attacks continued until the next morning. In the face of a large-scale insurrection, the troops were forced to withdraw from Kwangju at 6 p.m. on May 21, leaving the entire city in rebel hands.

Some of the student leaders who initially had organized the demonstrations were stunned. They had lost control of events to much more radical and violent elements. Said one university student: "This is something we never intended."³ While popular support for the demonstrators at first was widespread, most Kwangju citizens were shocked by the escalating violence. On May 22, a Committee for Settling the Kwangju Turmoil was formed by a group of about 60 Kwangju civic leaders, including doctors, lawyers, journalists, and religious figures. The group offered to negotiate between the authorities and the rioters. The Committee also called on all armed citizens to surrender the 5,008 rifles, 395 shotguns, 288,680 rounds of ammunition, 526 hand grenades, and 3,000 boxes of dynamite believed to be in the public's hands.⁴

By May 23, the Committee seemed to be making progress. Relative calm settled over the city. Some weapons had been turned over to the authorities, and 34 armed rioters had surrendered to the Martial Law Command.

The following day, the situation worsened dramatically. At a large downtown rally, some rebels proclaimed that, if they could hold out for several more days, the ROK government would fall. Scattered fighting occurred along the troop perimeter around the city. Another large demonstration took place the next day. Although the Committee continued its negotiation efforts, it had reached the limit of its influence.

On May 26, martial law troops made several advances toward Kwangju, encountering fierce and well-organized resistance. The "citizens army" was tightening its grip on the city and developing a systematic command structure. In response, martial law authorities decided to act.

Given the extent of the insurrection, the retaking of Kwangju by martial law troops was a well-planned and well-executed operation designed to minimize casualties and property damage. Using aerial reconnaissance photographs and intelligence gathered from

³ Ibid., p. 38.

⁴ Korea Herald, June 9, 1985, p. 1

agents inside the city, the authorities pinpointed rebel strongholds. On May 27 at 1 a.m., when most citizens were asleep, the troops moved in. Using small units and carrying out surgical strikes, the mission recaptured the city in a few hours. Only 17 rebels were killed.

Throughout the confrontation, the ROK government and the Martial Law Command vigorously sought a negotiated settlement. On May 22, for example, the Prime Minister came to Kwangju appealing for order, as did President Choi on May 25. Leaflets calling on citizens to put down their weapons were scattered throughout the city. Helicopters, planes, and vehicles equipped with loudspeakers broadcast appeals. Martial law authorities cooperated with the citizens' committee. Five times during the incident, the authorities met with rebel representatives using the Committee as mediator. To show its good faith, the Martial Law Command on several occasions released groups of demonstrators who had been arrested. Although a number of rebels surrendered and some weapons were turned over, the negotiations were largely unsuccessful.

THE AFTERMATH

The most controversial issue concerning the Kwangju uprising is the number of casualties. The official death toll announced after a ten-day investigation was 191--comprising 164 civilians, 23 soldiers, and four policemen. A total of 852 were injured, 122 seriously. Yet these official figures have been ridiculed as too low. This stems from reports by some foreign press sources and critics of the ROK government. News accounts frequently cited the official number but stated that "others say the figure actually was much higher."⁵ Some reports said bluntly that "at least 1,000 people were killed."⁶ Others claimed that "no reputable source puts the death toll. . . at under 1,000 and many estimates are closer to 2,000."⁷ These claims rest on speculation and are completely unsubstantiated.

Unlike other aspects of the complex and highly emotional Kwangju issue, the facts of the casualty rate are clear. When the incident ended on May 27, members of the citizens' committee involved in negotiations were invited by the Martial Law Command to participate in counting the dead and performing autopsies. A group of 49 civilian and military doctors, religious leaders, lawyers, and other Kwangju citizens was involved. A Christian minister and long-time resident of Kwangju, who acted as chairman

⁵ Washington Post, May 24, 1985, p. A21.

⁶ Sanford J. Ungar, "A Korean Exile's Long Journey Home," New York Times Magazine, December 23, 1984, p. 32.

⁷ Christopher Hitchens, "Going Home with Kim Dae Jung," Mother Jones, May 1985, p. 13.

of the citizens' committee, told The Heritage Foundation that he participated in the death count and stressed that the reported toll of 191 deaths is correct.⁸

Most casualties in Kwangju resulted from fierce fighting between two heavily armed camps and not from innocent citizens being cut down in the streets by troops. At the Kwangju Prison, for example, more than 50 armed rioters were killed during the numerous assaults against the government-held facility.

In the tragedy's aftermath, the government, together with a Kwangju-based relief organization, gave about \$16,000 to the families of each of the dead. The government also paid medical expenses for all those wounded. Nearly \$2 million was spent on emergency food and fuel for needy citizens, and assistance programs were initiated to help bring Kwangju back to normal. Grants were given to Kwangju citizens to reconstruct destroyed houses and businesses.

Of the 2,522 citizens arrested during and immediately following the uprising, 404 were tried in military courts. The most serious charges resulted in death sentences for three and life terms for seven. All these penalties subsequently were reduced. The remainder of those tried in military courts received varying prison sentences or conditional releases. All eventually were released and granted amnesty. No one arrested in connection with the Kwangju uprising remains in prison.

THE ALLEGED U.S. ROLE

Critics of the ROK government's handling of the Kwangju riots recently accused the U.S. of complicity. This charge stems from the unique relationship between the ROK military and the 40,000 U.S. troops in South Korea, which function as a joint force under the United Nations Command (UNC). The U.N. Commander in South Korea is an American general who concurrently commands U.S. forces in the ROK. Some interpret this relationship to mean that the South Korean government must secure formal permission from the U.N. Commander prior to using any ROK military forces. This has prompted supposition that the U.S. approved the use of ROK troops in Kwangju.

This supposition is incorrect. Former U.S. Ambassador to South Korea William Gleysteen explains that, as long as the use of ROK troops creates no "threat to national security," Seoul need only "notify" the U.S. of its actions.⁹ During the Kwangju uprising, the ROK government took care to inform the U.S. of its decision to redeploy its 20th Division and to insure that its

⁸ Interview, July 16, 1985.

⁹ Interview, August 26, 1985.

actions did not compromise national security. Ultimately, the ROK government's right to use those forces was a function of its sovereignty. The U.S. does not and, indeed, should not have absolute authority to command the ROK military. U.S.-ROK joint forces agreements and the UNC itself are designated specifically to guard against provocation or invasion by communist North Korea or any other external threat. The South Korean government has the authority to use its military for domestic purposes.

As a matter of historical record, Ambassador Gleysteen told The Heritage Foundation that the U.S. Embassy was not aware of the seriousness of the Kwangju situation until "roughly two days" into the riots.¹⁰ On the last day of the crisis, the retaking of Kwangju was accomplished by elements of the 20th ROK Army Division based near Seoul. Ambassador Gleysteen accepted the decision, calling it a "highly sensible action," given the fact that these troops were well-trained and experienced in riot control.¹¹ The U.S. Embassy's acceptance of the troop redeployment did not constitute "approval" or complicity.

CONCLUSION

The events of May 1980 were not a deliberate plot by the ROK government to massacre innocent civilians in South Cholla Province. Nor was the U.S. involved in the incident. Given the extent of the insurrection, the death toll was remarkably low--a fact that reflects the ROK government's efforts to minimize casualties. Those who continue to distort what happened at Kwangju should have their motives questioned. They seem determined to prevent the wounds from healing and to drive a wedge between the U.S. and the Korean people. The ROK government, by contrast, has been trying to put the Kwangju incident to rest and to heal the country's physical and emotional wounds.

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¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Shin Dong-A Magazine, Seoul, Korea, July 1985.