GlobalResearch
Center for Research on Globalization

Thousands Killed in 1950 by US's Korean Ally

By Global Research
Global Research, May 18, 2008
Associated Press 18 May 2008

Region: Asia
Theme: Crimes against Humanity

THOUSANDS KILLED IN 1950 BY US'S KOREAN ALLY

By Charles J. Hanley and Jae-Soon Chang

DAEJEON, South Korea (AP) – Grave by mass grave, South Korea is unearthing the skeletons and buried truths of a cold-blooded slaughter from early in the Korean War, when this nation's U.S.-backed regime killed untold thousands of leftists and hapless peasants in a summer of terror in 1950.

With U.S. military officers sometimes present, and as North Korean invaders pushed down the peninsula, the southern army and police emptied South Korean prisons, lined up detainees and shot them in the head, dumping the bodies into hastily dug trenches. Others were thrown into abandoned mines or into the sea. Women and children were among those killed. Many victims never faced charges or trial.

The mass executions – intended to keep possible southern leftists from reinforcing the northerners – were carried out over mere weeks and were largely hidden from history for a half-century. They were "the most tragic and brutal chapter of the Korean War," said historian Kim Dong-choon, a member of a 2-year-old government commission investigating the killings.

Hundreds of sets of remains have been uncovered so far, but researchers say they are only a tiny fraction of the deaths. The commission estimates at least 100,000 people were executed, in a South Korean population of 20 million.

That estimate is based on projections from local surveys and is "very conservative," said Kim. The true toll may be twice that or more, he told The Associated Press.

In addition, thousands of South Koreans who allegedly collaborated with the communist occupation were slain by southern forces later in 1950, and the invaders staged their own executions of rightists.

Through the postwar decades of South Korean right-wing dictatorships, victims' fearful families kept silent about that blood-soaked summer. American military reports of the South Korean slaughter were stamped "secret" and filed away in Washington. Communist accounts were dismissed as lies.

Only since the 1990s, and South Korea's democratization, has the truth begun to seep out.

In 2002, a typhoon's fury uncovered one mass grave. Another was found by a television news team that broke into a sealed mine. Further corroboration comes from a trickle of

declassified U.S. military documents, including U.S. Army photographs of a mass killing outside this central South Korean city.

Now Kim's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has added government authority to the work of scattered researchers, family members and journalists trying to peel away the long-running cover-up. The commissioners have the help of a handful of remorseful old men.

"Even now, I feel guilty that I pulled the trigger," said Lee Joon-young, 83, one of the executioners in a secluded valley near Daejeon in early July 1950.

The retired prison guard told the AP he knew that many of those shot and buried en masse were ordinary convicts or illiterate peasants wrongly ensnared in roundups of supposed communist sympathizers. They didn't deserve to die, he said. They "knew nothing about communism."

The 17 investigators of the commission's subcommittee on "mass civilian sacrifice," led by Kim, have been dealing with petitions from more than 7,000 South Koreans, involving some 1,200 alleged incidents – not just mass planned executions, but also 215 cases in which the U.S. military is accused of the indiscriminate killing of South Korean civilians in 1950-51, usually in air attacks.

The commission last year excavated sites at four of an estimated 150 mass graves around the country, recovering remains of more than 400 people. Working deliberately, matching documents to eyewitness and survivor testimony, it has officially confirmed two large-scale executions – at a warehouse in the central South Korean county of Cheongwon, and at Ulsan on the southeast coast.

In January, then-President Roh Moo-hyun, under whose liberal leadership the commission was established, formally apologized for the more than 870 deaths confirmed at Ulsan, calling them "illegal acts the then-state authority committed."

The commission, with no power to compel testimony or prosecute, faces daunting tasks both in verifying events and identifying victims, and in tracing a chain of responsibility. Under Roh's conservative successor, Lee Myung-bak, whose party is seen as democratic heir to the old autocratic right wing, the commission may find less budgetary and political support.

The roots of the summer 1950 bloodbath lie in the U.S.-Soviet division of Japan's former Korea colony in 1945, which precipitated north-south turmoil and eventual war.

In the late 1940s, President Syngman Rhee's U.S.-installed rightist regime crushed leftist political activity in South Korea, including a guerrilla uprising inspired by the communists ruling the north. By 1950, southern jails were packed with up to 30,000 political prisoners.

The southern government, meanwhile, also created the National Guidance League, a "re-education" organization for recanting leftists and others suspected of communist leanings. Historians say officials met membership quotas by pressuring peasants into signing up with promises of rice rations or other benefits. By 1950, more than 300,000 people were on the league's rolls, organizers said.

North Korean invaders seized Seoul, the southern capital, in late June 1950 and freed

thousands of prisoners, who rallied to the northern cause. Southern authorities, in full retreat with their U.S. military advisers, ordered National Guidance League members in areas they controlled to report to the police, who detained them. Soon after, commission researchers say, the organized mass executions of people regarded as potential collaborators began – "bad security risks," as a police official described the detainees at the time.

The declassified record of U.S. documents shows an ambivalent American attitude toward the killings. American diplomats that summer urged restraint on southern officials – to no obvious effect – but a State Department cable that fall said overall commander Gen. Douglas MacArthur viewed the executions as a Korean "internal matter," even though he controlled South Korea's military.

Ninety miles south of Seoul, here in the narrow, peaceful valley of Sannae, truckloads of prisoners were brought in from Daejeon Prison and elsewhere day after day in July 1950, as the North Koreans bore down on the city.

The American photos, taken by an Army major and kept classified for a half-century, show the macabre sequence of events.

White-clad detainees – bent, submissive, with hands bound – were thrown down prone, jammed side by side, on the edge of a long trench. South Korean military and national policemen then stepped up behind, pointed their rifles at the backs of their heads and fired. The bodies were tipped into the trench.

Trembling policemen – "they hadn't shot anyone before" – were sometimes off-target, leaving men wounded but alive, Lee said. He and others were ordered to check for wounded and finish them off.

Evidence indicates South Korean executioners killed between 3,000 and 7,000 here, said commissioner Kim. A half-dozen trenches, each up to 150 yards long and full of bodies, extended over an area almost a mile long, said Kim Chong-hyun, 70, chairman of a group of bereaved families campaigning for disclosure and compensation for the Daejeon killings. His father, accused but never convicted of militant leftist activity, was one victim.

Another was Yeo Tae-ku's father, whose wife and mother searched for him afterward.

"Bodies were just piled upon each other," said Yeo, 59, remembering his mother's description. "Arms would come off when they turned them over." The desperate women never found him, and the mass graves were quickly covered over, as were others in isolated spots up and down this mountainous peninsula, to be officially "forgotten."

When British communist journalist Alan Winnington entered Daejeon that summer with North Korean troops and visited the site, writing of "waxy dead hands and feet (that) stick through the soil," his reports in the Daily Worker were denounced as "fabrication" by the U.S. Embassy in London. American military accounts focused instead on North Korean reprisal killings that followed in Daejeon.

But CIA and U.S. military intelligence documents circulating even before the Winnington report, classified "secret" and since declassified, told of the executions by the South Koreans. Lt. Col. Bob Edwards, U.S. Embassy military attache in South Korea, wrote in conveying the Daejeon photos to Army intelligence in Washington that he believed

nationwide “thousands of political prisoners were executed within (a) few weeks” by the South Koreans.

Another glimpse of the carnage appeared in an unofficial U.S. source, an obscure memoir self-published in 1981 by the late Donald Nichols, a U.S. Air Force intelligence officer, who told of witnessing “the unforgettable massacre of approximately 1,800 at Suwon,” 20 miles south of Seoul.

Such reports lend credibility to a captured North Korean document from Aug. 2, 1950, eventually declassified by Washington, which spoke of mass executions in 12 South Korean cities, including 1,000 killed in Suwon and 4,000 in Daejeon.

That early, incomplete North Korean report couldn’t include those executed in territory still held by the southerners. Up to 10,000 were killed in the city of Busan alone, a South Korean lawmaker, Park Chan-hyun, estimated in 1960.

His investigation came during a 12-month democratic interlude between the overthrow of Rhee and a government takeover by Maj. Gen. Park Chung-hee’s authoritarian military, which quickly arrested many then probing for the hidden story of 1950.

Kim said his projection of at least 100,000 dead is based in part on extrapolating from a survey by non-governmental organizations in one province, Busan’s South Gyeongsang, which estimated 25,000 killed there. And initial evidence suggests most of the National Guidance League’s 300,000 members were killed, he said.

Commission investigators agree with the late Lt. Col. Edwards’ note to Washington in 1950, that “orders for execution undoubtedly came from the top,” that is, President Rhee, who died in 1965.

But any documentary proof of that may have been destroyed, just as the facts of the mass killings themselves were buried. In 1953, after the war ended in stalemate, after the deaths of at least 2 million people, half or more of them civilians, a U.S. Army war crimes report attributed all summary executions here in Daejeon to the “murderous barbarism” of North Koreans.

Such myths survived a half-century, in part because those who knew the truth were cowed into silence.

“My mother destroyed all pictures of my father, for fear the family would get an image as leftists,” said Koh Chung-ryol, 57, who is convinced her 29-year-old father was innocent of wrongdoing when picked up in a broad police sweep here, to die in Sannae valley.

“My mother tried hard to get rid of anything about her husband,” she said. “She suffered unspeakable pain.”

Even educated South Koreans remained ignorant of their country’s past. As a young researcher in the late 1980s, Yonsei University’s Park Myung-lim, today a leading Korean War historian, was deeply shaken as he sought out confidential accounts of those days from ordinary Koreans.

“I cried,” he said. “I felt, ‘Oh, my goodness. Oh, Jesus. This was my country? It was true?'”

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission can recommend but not award compensation for lost and ruined lives, nor can it bring surviving perpetrators to justice. “Our investigative power is so meager,” commission President Ahn Byung-ook told the AP.

His immediate concern is resources. “The current government isn’t friendly toward us, and so we’re concerned that the budget may be cut next year,” he said.

South Korean conservatives complain the “truth” campaign will only reopen old wounds from a time when, even at the village level, leftists and rightists carried out bloody reprisals against each other.

The life of the commission – with a staff of 240 and annual budget of $19 million – is guaranteed by law until at least 2010, when it will issue a final, comprehensive report.

Later this spring and summer its teams will resume digging at mass grave sites. Thus far, it has verified 16 incidents of 1950-51 – not just large-scale detainee killings, but also such events as a South Korean battalion’s cold-blooded killing of 187 men, women and children at Kochang village, supposed sympathizers with leftist guerrillas.

By exposing the truth of such episodes, “we hope to heal the trauma and pain of the bereaved families,” the commission says. It also wants to educate people, “not just in Korea, but throughout the international community,” to the reality of that long-ago conflict, to “prevent such a tragic war from reoccurring in the future.” ___

Associated Press investigative researcher Randy Herschaft in New York contributed to this report.
