

Jesuits in Korea Arrested and Jailed for Peace Action

Report prepared 14 Mar 2012 by Francis Mun-su Park, S.J.

Heading

Several Korean Jesuits have placed themselves in the caldron of controversy surrounding the construction of a Korean naval base on Jeju Island, a province of South Korea. The controversial issues include whether the base is necessary, whether the planned base would be harmful to Jeju Island (called 'an island of peace' and a tourist destination), whether the planned base will heighten military tension in N.E. Asia, whether the national government should beat down local opposition, and whether the construction will destroy irreplaceable environmental treasure. Several Jesuits have been arrested several times for bodily hindering construction work. One Jesuit is now (14 Mar 2012) under arrest and will be held for investigation and trial.

One Jesuit's reflection

The controversial base is planned for construction in the village named Gangjeong. Brother Johann Do-hyun Park, S.J. has lived in the village for more than 5 months accompanying the villagers in their opposition to the base along with many other social activists. The provincial of Korea sent him to live there. In February Brother Park sent out his reflection to the Jesuits of Korea. One part of his reflection follows.

"Reflecting on the parable of the Good Samaritan, I felt I must be a neighbor to the villagers. In my understanding the villagers correspond to the one in the parable who was attacked by robbers. The government had tried to promote building the naval base at the villages of Umi (on the Korean mainland) and Hwasun (in Jeju Island), but village opposition and environmental controversy blocked the projects. So 5 years ago government agents came stealthily to Gangjeong, and paying money to 87 villagers they gained support for the project. The villagers became divided among themselves, and even family members became enemies to each other. The village economic and cultural organizations broke up. The villagers have been seriously wounded.

"The robbers who had set upon the villagers were very powerful. The navy and the government lied and called the project a "national security project" and "national policy" and employed public enforcement. In fact the project is a ruse used by the Navy to boost their share of the budget. The powerful force of the national police and public prosecutors has been mobilized by the "Committee to Respond to National Security Emergencies," and the "Kingdom of Samsung" allied with them, providing funds, and the imperialist U.S. military lurked behind the scene.

"While living in Gangjeong village I have come to feel deeply the beauty of Jeju Island. I give thanks to God for this chance to be with many peace activists and Christians who are accompanying the villagers fervently, and without wages. I am thankful to our provincial for giving me permission to be here, and I ask all my brother Jesuits for their prayers and participation"

Some key points of the controversy

The Korean Navy claims it needs more space for aegis class warships. The present controversial site was chosen in the year 2007 after two other sites, one on the Korean mainland and one on Jeju Island, were deemed not suitable.

A preliminary village meeting in April 2007 of 87 persons out of more than 1000 eligible voters of the village approved the project. When more information became available a meeting of 800 villagers several months later overwhelmingly opposed the project (out of 725 votes 680 votes opposed it). The present government minister of defense has claimed the village decision was already made previous to that opposition, cites favorable opinion in a Jeju-wide opinion survey carried

out in 2007, and thereby discounts the overwhelming village opposition.

Bishop Peter Kang, ordinary of the Jeju Diocese, began public opposition to the project in 2007 because he knew that the people of Jeju harbored much opposition to the naval base in their hearts but were accustomed to suppressing such feelings before the national government. He sent a letter to then President Roh informing him of the misguided start of the project and mentioning the ideal of Jeju as an island of world peace. The response indirectly stated that it would be difficult for the government to pursue the project unilaterally. (The present government has no hesitation enforcing projects unilaterally.) For Bishop Kang the past history of the April 3, 1948 uprising of 100 or so Jeju militants followed by the Korean national army massacre of 30,000 Jeju islanders, a massacre about which information has been withheld from most Koreans, makes the unilateral, domineering plan of the government akin to another oppression of Jeju residents. The priests and religious and Catholic laity who have been active in opposition to the base are in solidarity with Bishop Kang.

Previous government policy regarding Jeju stresses its natural beauty. (This reporter first visited Jeju Island for research during his studies at the U. of Hawaii and found the island to be more beautiful than Hawaii.) Realizing its tourist potential the government has eased visa requirements for tourists to Jeju. Opening it to the world, the government encouraged the nickname of "island of world peace."

The opposing villagers of Gangjeong village have cited their loss of livelihood and the importance of peace in N.E. Asia, as well as environmental destruction, as their motives for opposition.

The governor of Jeju Province originally approved the project as a joint military-civilian project that would boost tourism by allowing huge luxury liners to dock. He was unfavorable to a naval base itself. Subsequent information shows it is highly unlikely that any such luxury liner will visit Jeju. For that reason the governor is now in opposition to the project, but the project is being carried out overriding his opposition.

Recent events

During the week of March 4-10 the naval base construction company was rushing to prepare demolition of Gureombi rock, a 1.2 km long seacoast rock of volcanic origin. Four of our Jesuit brethren, John Young-chan Lee, Joseph Chong-uk Kim, Kolbe Sung-hwan Kim, and Johann Do-hyun Park, along with other activists, were arrested when they broke through barriers and went out on Gureombi rock and bodily hindered preparations for dynamite detonations on the morning of Friday, March 9. Other arrested members were released the following day, but the local court approved warrants for the arrest of Joseph Kim as well as a Protestant minister. These two are now being held for further investigation and trial. On March 13th the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Korea held a press conference protesting the arrest of these two clerics, and Protestant groups have done likewise. The Conference of Major Superiors of male religious in Korea have agreed to release a public statement of protest, hold a public Mass, and request Catholic leaders to make a response to the arrest.

The controversy over the naval base has now become an important issue in the election of national assembly members scheduled for April 11, 2012. The leader of the government party has called the naval base "national policy" but the leader of the main opposition group made a special visit to the construction site in support of its opponents, and said that the project should be put under full review.