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Caught in America's War: South Korea and Iraq

by Ha-yung Jong

SEONGNAM, South Korea -- The image of a South Korean hostage, Kim Sun Il, blindfolded and kneeling at gunpoint before his death in Iraq last week was a chillingly familiar one for us back in his homeland -- despite the orange jumpsuit, the masked faces and the foreign tongue.

For a century Koreans have collected reel after reel of grisly memories as victims and perpetrators of war and oppression. We endured acts of torture and tyranny under Japanese colonial rule, then inflicted them ourselves on our countrymen in the Korean War and on dissidents during nearly four decades of dictatorships and military regimes.

Now we can't help but wonder: why are we reliving these traumas in Iraq, in a faraway country we hardly know? Isn't it clear that our involvement and the danger that accompanies it -- will only increase now that America has handed official sovereignty over to Iraq?

It's impossible to understand the Korean presence in Iraq without understanding our complex and unequal relationship with the United States. In fact, our role in Iraq parallels our role in another American-led conflict, the Vietnam War.

From 1963 to 1975, President Park Chung Hee sent 312,853 Korean troops to Vietnam, in return for economic aid from the United States and of course, to solidify the alliance between the two countries. More than 4,600 South Koreans lost their lives, and thousands more were wounded. In that war, our men earned precious dollars by selling C-rations and Lucky Strikes on the black market; less gloriously, they fathered and deserted thousands of half-Vietnamese children and committed their own massacres.

Then we moved on, working maniacally to build our economy and to slowly make the transition to democracy. But under this success, beneath the skyscrapers and S.U.V.'s, the cellphones and Prada-clad teenagers, our old wounds linger.

When Kim Sun Il was beheaded, President Bush said that the United States would not be intimidated by the terrorists. His words were soon echoed by our president, Roh Moo Hyun, whose reputation as a left-leaning populist was a source of concern in Washington when he was elected last year, but who is now adamant about sending 3,000 more troops to Iraq to join the 660 already there. The first deployment was comprised of military engineers and doctors, but this time we will send combat forces, tanks and heavy artillery. If the government has its way, South Korea will have the third largest number of foreign troops in Iraq, behind the United States and Britain.

So Mr. Kim's death is only the beginning of another reel. What will follow is more South Korean casualties, then another call for additional troops, then more deaths. Our government keeps talking about the national interest, but what does that mean? The privilege to win more subcontracts to supply pillows and sunglasses to American soldiers only to be taken from the delivery truck, killed and tossed out, headless and booby-trapped? As in 1963, the government's real goal seems to be convincing the United States that we're on its side.

But something has changed. We are no longer caught up in the ideological paranoia of the cold war as we were in my childhood. What's more, we are no longer a nation that lives with the threat of being locked up for speaking our minds. Kim Sun Il's mother did not hesitate to crush the funeral bouquet sent by President Roh, in front of TV cameras, moaning: "What good is all this? My son is dead."

What the insurgents demanded in return for Kim Sun Il's life was the cancellation of the deployment of more South Korean troops to Iraq. And that is what we should have done, not because that is what terrorists asked for -- but because, for once, it is in our national interest.

This op-ed appeared in The New York Times, June 30, 2004. Ha-yun Jung is working on a novel.