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The Massacre at No Gun Ri: Army Letter reveals U.S. intent

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Six years after declaring the U.S. killing of Korean War refugees at No Gun Ri was "not deliberate," the Army has acknowledged it found but did not divulge that a high-level document said the U.S. military had a policy of shooting approaching civilians in South Korea.

The document, a letter from the U.S. ambassador in South Korea to the State Department in Washington, is dated the day in 1950 when U.S. troops began the No Gun Ri shootings, in which survivors say hundreds, mostly women and children, were killed.

Exclusion of the embassy letter from the Army's 2001 investigative report is the most significant among numerous omissions of documents and testimony pointing to a policy of firing on refugee groups — undisclosed evidence uncovered by Associated Press archival research and Freedom of Information Act requests.

South Korean petitioners say hundreds more refugees died later in 1950 as a result of the U.S. practice. The Seoul government is investigating one such large-scale killing, of refugees stranded on a beach, newly confirmed via U.S. archives.

No Gun Ri survivors, who call the Army's 2001 investigation a "whitewash," are demanding a reopened investigation, compensation and a U.S. apology.

Harvard historian Sahr Conway-Lanz first disclosed the existence of Ambassador John H. Muccio's 1950 letter in a scholarly article and a 2006 book, "Collateral Damage." He uncovered the declassified document at the U.S. National Archives.

John Muccio (right) with South Korean President Syngman Rhee

When asked last year, the Pentagon didn't address the central question of whether U.S. investigators had seen the document before issuing their No Gun Ri report. Ex-Army Secretary Louis Caldera suggested to The Associated Press that Army researchers may have missed it.

After South Korea asked for more information, however, the Pentagon acknowledged to the Seoul government that it examined Muccio's letter in 2000 but dismissed it. It did so because the letter "outlined a proposed policy," not an approved one, Army spokesman Paul Boyce argues in a recent e-mail to the AP.

But Muccio's message to Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk states unambiguously that "decisions made" at a high-level U.S.-South Korean meeting in Taegu, South Korea, on July 25, 1950, included a policy to shoot approaching refugees. The reason: American commanders feared that disguised North Korean enemy troops were infiltrating their lines via refugee groups.

"If refugees do appear from north of US lines they will receive warning shots, and if they then persist in advancing they will be shot," the ambassador told Rusk, cautioning that these shootings might cause "repercussions in the United States." Deliberately attacking noncombatants is a war crime.

Told of the Pentagon's rationale for excluding the Muccio letter from its investigative report, No Gun Ri expert Yi Mahn-yol, retired head of Seoul's National Institute of Korean History, suggested the letter was suppressed because it was "disadvantageous" to the Pentagon's case.

"If they set it aside as nothing significant, we can say that it was an intentional exclusion," he said.

Conway-Lanz called the Pentagon's explanation "thoroughly unconvincing."

"The Muccio letter in plain English says, `Decisions were made,'" the historian noted.

No Gun Ri survivors said U.S. soldiers first forced them from nearby villages on July 25, 1950, and then stopped them in front of U.S. lines the next day, when they were attacked without warning by aircraft as hundreds sat atop a railroad embankment near No Gun Ri, a village in central South Korea. Troops of the 7th U.S. Cavalry Regiment followed with ground fire as survivors took shelter in twin underpasses of a concrete railroad bridge.

The bridge at No Gun Ri

The killings remained hidden from history until an AP report in 1999 cited a dozen ex-soldiers who corroborated the Korean survivors' accounts, prompting the Pentagon to open its inquiry after years of dismissing the allegations.

The Army veterans' estimates of dead ranged from under 100 to "hundreds." Korean survivors say they believe about 400 were killed. Korean authorities have certified the identities of at least 163 dead or missing.

No Gun Ri, where no evidence emerged of enemy infiltrators, was not the only such incident. As 1950 wore on, U.S. commanders repeatedly ordered refugees shot, according to declassified documents obtained by the AP.

One incident, on Sept. 1, 1950, has been confirmed by the declassified official diary of the USS DeHaven, which says that the Navy destroyer, at Army insistence, fired on a seaside refugee encampment at Pohang, South Korea. Survivors say 100 to 200 people were killed. South Korean officials announced in February they would investigate.

More than a dozen documents — in which high-ranking U.S. officers tell troops that refugees are "fair game," for example, and order them to "shoot all refugees coming across river" — were found by the AP in the investigators' own archived files after the 2001 inquiry. None of those documents was disclosed in the Army's 300-page public report.

South Koreans have filed reports with their government of more than 60 such episodes during the 1950-53 war.

Despite this, the Army's e-mail to the AP maintains, as did the 2001 report, "No policy purporting to authorize soldiers to shoot refugees was ever promulgated to soldiers in the field."

The 2001 official report instead focused on a single document issued the day the No Gun Ri shootings began, a Korea-wide Army order saying refugees should be stopped from crossing U.S. lines. That order did not say how they should be stopped, but retired Army Col. Robert M. Carroll, a lieutenant at No Gun Ri, said the meaning was clear.

"What do you do when you're told nobody comes through?" Carroll said in an AP interview before his death in 2004. If they didn't stop, he said, "we had to shoot them to hold them back."

Other ex-soldier eyewitnesses, including headquarters radiomen, told the AP that orders came down to the 7th Cavalry's 2nd Battalion command post, and were relayed through front-line companies at No Gun Ri, to open fire on the mass of village families, baggage and farm animals.

The US Army's 7th Cavalry Unit in Korea

Such communications would have been recorded in the 7th Cavalry Regiment's journal, but that log is missing without explanation from the National Archives. Without disclosing this crucial gap, the Army's 2001 report asserted there were no such orders. It suggested soldiers shot the refugees in a panic, questioned estimates of hundreds of dead, and absolved the U.S. military of liability.

The Army report didn't disclose that veterans told Army investigators of "kill" orders, of seeing stacks of dead at No Gun Ri, and of earlier documentation of the killings. Such interview transcripts have been obtained via Freedom of Information Act requests. Examples:

_Ex-Air Force pilot Clyde Good, 87, of Melbourne, Fla., told investigators his four-plane mission, under orders, attacked 300-400 refugees in mid-1950 on suspicion the group harbored infiltrators. "I didn't like the idea," he said. "They had some young ones, too. ... kids on the road." A South Korean government report in 2001 said five ex-pilots told Pentagon interviewers of such orders. The U.S. report claimed "all pilots interviewed" knew nothing about such orders.

_The U.S. report said the No Gun Ri shootings weren't documented at the time. It didn't disclose that ex-Army clerk Mac W. Hilliard, 78, of Weed, Calif., testified he remembered typing into the now-missing regimental journal an officer's handwritten report that 300 refugees had been fired on. "If you see 'em, kill 'em" was the general attitude toward civilians, Hilliard told the AP in reaffirming his testimony.

_The Army report said ex-GIs estimating large numbers of dead were using "guesswork," that none got a close-up look. But in a transcript obtained by the AP, ex-soldier Homer Garza told a Pentagon interrogator he was sent on patrol through one underpass and saw heaps of bodies.

"There were probably 200 or 300 civilians there — babies, old papa-sans," Garza, 73, of Hurst, Texas, said in a subsequent AP interview. Most may have been dead, but it was hard to tell because "they were stacked on top of one another," said Garza, who retired as a command sergeant major, the Army's highest enlisted rank.

In addition, the 2001 report by the Army inspector-general didn't disclose the existence of July 1950 mission reports from the Air Force's 35th Fighter-Bomber Squadron that said pilots attacked apparent refugee groups and struck at or near No Gun Ri on the dates of the killings.

In describing another critical document, a July 25, 1950, memo from the Air Force operations chief in Korea, the Army report dropped its key passage: a paragraph saying pilots, at the Army's request, were strafing refugee groups approaching U.S. lines. The Army report portrayed the strafing as a proposal, not a fact, as the Army now is doing with the Muccio letter.

The Pentagon has told the South Korean government the ambassador's letter, evidence that senior Washington officials knew of a policy to shoot South Korean refugees, does not warrant a reopening of the No Gun Ri investigation.

Seoul accepts that U.S. position, said a South Korean Foreign Ministry official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Informed of the Pentagon position, the No Gun Ri survivors issued a statement. "We cannot accept the U.S. Defense Department's false explanation and are indignant over the repeated lies by the U.S. Defense Department," it said.

AP Writer Jae-soon Chang in Seoul and AP Investigative Researcher Randy Herschaft in New York contributed to this report.

Charles J. Hanley and Martha Mendoza are Associated Press writers. This story was published on April 13, 2007. They are the Pulitzer Prize winning authors, with Sang-Hun Choe of The Bridge at No Gun Ri: A Hidden Nightmare From the Korean War. Posted at Japan Focus on April 15, 2007.

The official US Army Report on No Gun Ri of 2001 is available.

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