The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Crimes, Concealment and South Korea's Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Do Khiem and Kim Sung-soo

In the summer of 1950, at the start of the Korean conflict, the government of Syngman Rhee in the South ordered the massive execution of over one hundred thousand (perhaps two hundred thousand) civilians simply suspected of being communist sympathizers. This war crime by any standard, civilized and uncivilized, has only been unveiled recently and officially by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Republic of Korea http://www.jinsil.go.kr/English/Commission/index.asp .

The TRC was established by the government of South Korea in 2005 and will issue its final report in 2010. It has received 10,907 petitions from individuals and organizations to investigate the history of the anti-Japanese movement during the colonial period and the Korean diaspora; the massacre of civilians after 1945; human rights abuses by the state; incidents of dubious conviction and suspicious death, including 1,200 incidents of mass civilian sacrifice committed by ROK forces and US forces (215 cases). In 2007 the TRC has excavated 4 among the 160 suspected mass graves. Then President Roo Moo-hyun has apologized to the citizens for the 870 victims confirmed at Ulsan. South Korea now has a new government and the TRC is currently fighting budget cuts and restrictions in order to complete its daunting and painful task.

Photograph of remains of some of 110 victims executed by ROK forces at Cheongwon. Released by TRC in 2007

Dr Kim Sung-soo is the head of the International Cooperation Team at the TRC. A historian by training and a graduate of the University of Essex (BA, MA) and Sheffield PhD (England), in this interview, Dr Kim speaks not in the name of the TRC but expresses his convictions and exchanges views as a citizen of Korea and a citizen of the world.
Dr Kim is the author of "Biography of a Korean Quaker, Ham Sok-hon"

Ä□á»— Khiem

ÄK: In "Bad Samaritans", Chang Ha-joon tells this anecdote. The economist was with Joseph Stiglitz, the Nobel Laureate, at the National Museum in Seoul, in 2003. Chang was lost in his thoughts, contemplating photographs of the Seoul of his childhood (late 50's-early 60's) when he heard a young woman standing behind him screaming:

> "How can that be Korea? It looks like Vietnam!"

The recent history of Korea and the recent history of Vietnam draw many parallels. We can start with the 38th and the 17th (parallels). We both had to suffer an internal-ideological conflict, a civil- liberation- intervention-aggression war (a war by any name is a war and…bloody); and a partition which still lasts nowadays in the Peninsula.

Today South Korean pop culture and soap operas permeate Vietnamese society. Vietnam is a rare country which has relations, good relations, with North Korea while welcoming South Korea investors with open arms. We know nothing about this dark chapter of Korea's history, the civilian massacres of 1950. I was shocked to learn only recently about its existence, its magnitude and the minutiae of its implementation. Hundreds of thousands of victims amount to millions involved in this tragedy if we include their friends and families. It also implies thousands of order givers and planners, thousands of executioners, and thousands of witnesses and observers. The dead notwithstanding, all these people have been silent for over half a century. The press has been silent for over half a century and the world has entirely ignored over five decades one of the most outrageous war crime of our time (and there have been many), a crime against humanity.

Ä□K: When did you come to know about these crimes, not as a member of the TRC but as a person living in South Korea?

KSS: In 2001, I watched an MBC documentary, The Forgotten Massacre." It was aired at 9:55 pm on April 27, 2001. The second part - "The Bodo League - The Dead and The Living" - was aired at 9:55 pm on May 4 of the same year.

ÄK: Munhwa (Culture) Broadcasting Corporation is better known in Vietnam for "All about Eve" ("Tình yêu trong sáng")… Lee Cha-hoon's film on the Bodo League, however, is groundbreaking in the true sense of the term as the crew of "Now it can be told" had to itself excavate the Gyeongsan Cobalt mine in order to document the massacre!

Ä□K: Can you tell us what the Bodo League was?

KSS: It was a "rehabilitation" program and an organisation established by the South Korean government before the Korean War to keep track of those suspected of having leftist sympathies. The Bodo League was organized in 1949 under President Syngman Rhee. Authorities listed people suspected of Communist activities and forced them to swing to the right. The number of Bodo League members is estimated at 200,000 to 300,000.

"It was the state-led organization whose purpose was to put former, or "converted," communists under constant surveillance. While it was declared that becoming a member depended on one's free will, former communist or anti-government activists had no choice but to enter this watchdog group. However, in the course of time membership was not restricted to political activists; the authorities forced those who were even once involved in antigovernment organizations to register with the Bodo League at the village level. For example, the Bureau of Police ordered the head of the regional police station to fulfill a quota of members of the Bodo League. In addition, simple uneducated peasants were strongly persuaded to enter. Thus, eventually more than 70 percent of the Bodo League might have been comprised of innocent peasants who had no consistent political will or ideology.

'Bodo' literally meant "caring and guiding." Originally, under Japanese imperialist rule, the policy put emphasis on the "caring" rather than the "detaining" because ex-political prisoners had difficulties in getting jobs and managing their family life. But we can not find any component of "caring" in the case of South Korea's NGL. Earlier imperial Japan even organized the "The League for Serving the State" in order to re-orient and rehabilitate the released Korean political dissidents. Later a group of South Korean rightist prosecutors who had been educated under Japanese rule thought that such an organization would be useful for controlling left-affiliated political dissidents by structuring it to "preserve the national security and maintain law and order." (Kim, Dong-Choon, The Wounds of War and Separation/ Dispersion and Massacre)

Ä□K: What happened to its members in the summer of 1950?

KSS: The members of the Bodo League were arrested under orders of "preventive
detention" just after North Korea's attack. Civic groups have claimed that the authorities killed Bodo League members amid worries that they would collaborate with the invading North Korean forces. The massacred civilians included 5,413 members of the Namno Party, a communist organization established in Seoul after Japanese colonial rule ended in 1945, including 3,593 Bodo League members, 1,897 activists in young communists' groups, and 48 people who had never been involved in leftist activity. The truth commission said the actual figure could be larger, as it was drawn only from police data. Prof. Kim Dong-Choon, Commissioner of the TRC, estimates that at least 100,000 people were executed.

"According to the recollection of survivors, ROK military police and police reserves called up, the Bodo League members were detained 'preemptively' just after the outbreak of war, even though they did not plot any protest against the South Korean regime. The executions of political prisoners and 'suspected communists' may have been practiced without due process in every isolated valley of South Korea. Initiatedfrom Suwon and Inchon on June 28 of 1950, three days after the North's invasion, the killings were separately practiced until about the end of August 1950. Now that several graves have been found, the pattern of killing across the country resembles testimony offered by survivors. The 'traitors' were confined in jail for several days, and finally were dragged to valleys to be shot."
(Kim, Dong-Choon, The Wounds of War and Separation/ Dispersion and Massacre)

Ä□K: When did you first hear rumors about massacres perpetrated against civilians during the war?

KSS: I had not heard anything before then. I was in the UK studying from 1990 -2000. I knew more or less as soon as I returned to Korea. Although my father was born in 1922 in North Korea and my mother in Seoul in 1932, they didn't know about this until 2001.

Ä□K: How was it possible that this was kept secret from the South Korean population?

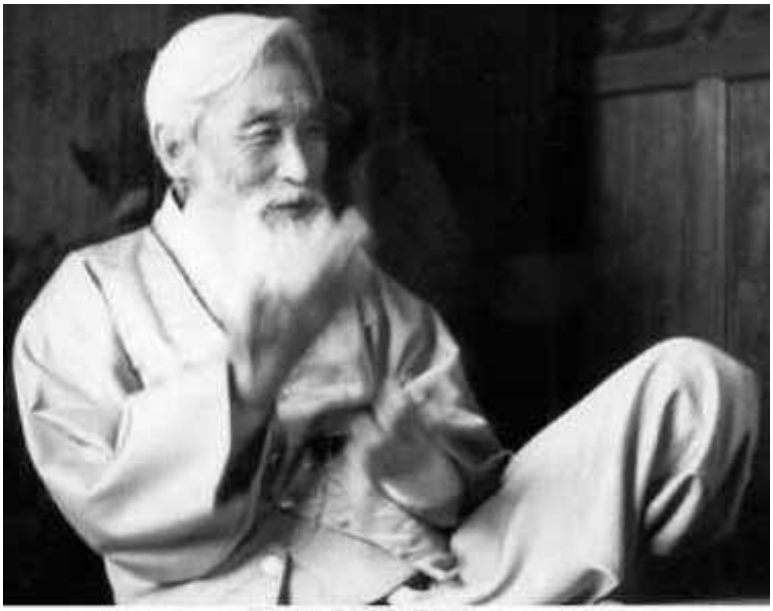
KSS: I think that the victims and bereaved families were so afraid of further retaliation from the dictatorial regime and the perpetrators justified their behaviors as necessary to build a new state after 1945.

ÄK: I guess that spying on everyone and knowing everything, even the redundant and the superfluous, were part of the police culture then in South Korea.

To Koreans, the silence, the secrecy, the whisperings, the air itself must have been oppressive. To you, as a child, a teenager, a young man growing up under the military dictatorship?

KSS: Since I was born in 1960 in Seoul, I was quite aware of the oppressive character of the military regime in the 80's. I presume that's why I admired and was inspired by civil rights leader Ham Sok Hon. See also this. And this.

"I am immeasurably indebted to Ham Sok-hon himself. It will soon be eighteen years since I first met him, and over nine years since he died. But the longer I live the more I am conscious of how much I owe him. Specifically, it was he who inspired me to become an historian rather than continue as an engineer; to become a latitudinarian rather than a fundamentalist, a humanist rather than an evangelical and a romantic rather than a puritan. It was he who taught me to love and enjoy history and philosophy, and all the most important things I needed to learn about life and humanity. For me, he has been a window through to the Truth, Tao and God. I wish he could have lived to see this result of his inspiration and teaching. His memory and example have been with me ceaselessly as I live and work at it.1998 Sung-Soo Kim"



Ham Sook Hon

ÄK: I have looked with great interest at your PhD thesis on the " Gandhi of Korea." You also provided the reader insight on Korean culture and background, i.e. the anecdote about the "Confucian" translation of the title of John Stuart Mill's "On Liberty"! If South Korea is now a democratic society, the credit is due to pioneers like Ham Sok-hon and activists in the struggle against dictatorship, and not to some liberal whim of the military.

Likewise, I have read "excuses" for the 1950 Massacre invoking the state of war and the dire situation of retreating ROK forces. This would be considered a war crime in any state or situation, and considered a war crime by any standard, last but not least the "Yamashita standard" http://www.pbs.org/wnet/justice/world_issues_yam.html upheld by the US Supreme court in 1946, which led to the execution of General Yamashita, commander of Japanese forces in the Philippines.
The very people who long hid these crimes now say that it belongs to the past! If we follow that argument, there is no need for the TRC or any soul searching?

KSS: I think that human history or the past is like the root of a tree. We cannot expect a tree to flourish if we cut its roots. Equally, we cannot dream of building a bright future while we ignore our history. The TRC's truth-finding activities are not only to settle the grievances of the individual victims, they also function as preventive measures against a recurrence of the same sort of incidents in the future. Its goal is to prevent a distorted past leading to a distorted present and future. Korea is the only country in Asia that reveals its shameful past to the public. However painful it may be, knowing the truth can help us build a better society in the future.

ÄK: The Jeju April 3rd incident occurred in 1948. There was no war yet. Jeju was an island protected by the 7th Fleet http://www.kimsoft.com/1997/43namh.htm and there was no enemy army threatening. Nonetheless, some 30.000 local residents were massacred in a "pacification" campaign. Lt Colonel Kim Ik-ruhl (later Lt General), then commander of the ROKA 9th Regiment in Jeju, refused to carry out the orders of Korea Governor General Dean because Kim considered it a war crime under international law. He was replaced by a more obedient officer. General Kim categorically denounced these crimes in his memoirs. Can the Jeju incident be considered the start of what some call the "Satanic Era" in Korea?

KSS: Yes indeed! It is true that the Jeju Uprising was initiated by leftwing leaders as a protest against the killing of six innocent people by the police, but due to the frantic reaction and overwhelming discrimination of the army, police and rightwing groups against the people of Jeju, even ordinary people came to sympathize with the leftwing leaders. Correspondingly diehard paranoid rightwing groups even more ruthlessly persecuted those ordinary people. In this respect, the Jeju Uprising was a microcosm of the polarized left-right clash in the Korean peninsular in the 20th century.

According to AMGIK (American Military Government in Korea, which ruled S. Korea from Sept. 1945- Aug. 1948), "the program of mass slaughter" of the Jeju people was conducted of necessity. From AMGIK's point of view, the massacre was vital to establishing a US-supported puppet government in South Korea. By doing so, AMGIK was able to establish a favorable capitalistic buffer state in South Korea against Soviet controlled North Korea. In this regard, Major General W. Dean of AMGIK and Police Chief Cho Byeong-Ok deliberately mis-described the Jeju Uprising as "externally inspired Communists rioting with the support of international Communist connections." By doing so, they justified their violent suppression of the Jeju Uprising and contributed to the partition of the Korean peninsular.

From the beginning of the Uprising, AMGIK preferred instant suppression by bloodshed to any kind of peace treaty with the rebels. On April 28 1948 there was a peace treaty attempt between Kim Dal-Sam, leader of the rebels, and Kim Ik-Yeol of the 9th regiment, but the police, disguised as rebels, set fire to Orari village, providing AMGIK with an excuse to break off the negotiations[1] Any negotiations or attempts at a peaceful solution were terminated. Correspondingly, on May 6th, the moderate Kim Ik-Yeol was dismissed by AMGIK and hardliner Park Jin-Kyung took over.

Jeju citizens awaiting execution

In my view, the Jeju incident was the most serious violation of human rights involving the misuse of public power in contemporary Korean history. I evaluate the Jeju Uprising from the perspective of a human rights movement rather than as part of the national security or ideological spectrum. The Jeju Uprising was a shameful example of 'the end justifies the means.' Therefore, I emphasize that impinging on fundamental human rights cannot be justified in the name of any ideology or national security.

ÄK: Do we know (or suspect) other civilian mass executions before Jeju and is this also within the scope of the TRC investigations?

KSS: Not that I know of. The scope of the TRC investigations covers the following five areas: the anti-Japanese movement during the colonial period and the history of the Korean diaspora; the massacre of civilians after 1945; human rights abuses by the state; incidents of dubious conviction and suspicious death; reinvestigation of the above categories and other incidents as determined by the Commission.

Ä□K: I understand the TRC is carrying on its work and new excavations are due this summer. Can you give us an update on this?

KSS: The new excavations will be launched in the beginning of July. This year we plan to excavate around 500 skeletons from 7 sites, and 500 other skeletons will be excavated from 7 other sites next year.

ÄK: Also, the Gwangju Democratisation Movement is a major event in the the democratization of South Korea. Is the massacre of 1980 part of the TRC duties?

KSS: No. Regarding the GDM please see this site.

Ä□K: As Gwangju is more recent, the truth would be more easily established?
KSS: Yes and no, because not only victims and bereaved families are around but also the perpetrators are around, holding influential position and power in S. Korean society even today. Also ironically, procedural legality, which grew in Korean society after democratization, prevented the retrospective punishment of the perpetrators of the GDM under the old regime after the statute of limitations had expired. Documentary evidence recently made available under the US Freedom of Information Act suggests strong US complicity with the perpetrators, the military dictatorship of General Chun Doo Hwan.

ÄK: Thank you for your help here in shedding light on these events which have been unbelievably kept secret all these years. When crimes of such a magnitude are committed, truth is due to the whole world.

Ä□K (born 1955), real name Do Khiem, is a poet, fiction writer, essayist and film maker. See the Wikipedia entry.

This article was posted at Japan Focus on August 1, 2008.

See also Heonik Kwon, The Korean War Mass Graves

Bruce Cumings, The South Korean Massacre at Taejon: New Evidence on US Responsibility and Coverup

Charles J. Hanley & Jae-Soon Chang, Summer of Terror: At least 100,000 said executed by Korean ally of US in 1950

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