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Children 'Executed' in 1950 South Korean Killings: ROK and US responsibility

Charles J. Hanley and Jae-Soon Chang

Seoul—Government investigators digging into the grim hidden history of mass political executions in South Korea have confirmed that dozens of children were among many thousands shot by their own government early in the Korean War.

The investigative Truth and Reconciliation Commission has thus far verified more than two dozen mass killings of leftists and supposed sympathizers, among at least 100,000 people estimated to have been hastily shot and dumped into makeshift trenches, abandoned mines or the sea after communist North Korea invaded the south in June 1950.

The killings, details of which were buried in classified U.S. files for a half-century, were intended to keep southern leftists from aiding the invaders at a time when the rightist, U.S.-allied government was in danger of being overrun by communist forces.

Family survivors last month met with the U.S. Embassy for the first time, saying afterward they demanded an apology for alleged "direct and indirect" American involvement in the killings.

Declassified records show U.S. officers were present at one killing field and that at least one U.S. officer sanctioned another mass political execution if prisoners otherwise would be freed by the North Koreans. Uncounted hundreds were subsequently killed, witnesses reported.

With thousands of citizens' petitions in hand, the 3-year-old truth commission has been taking testimony from witnesses and family survivors, poring over police and military files, both here and in the United States, and excavating mass grave sites.

Before suspending operations for the winter, crews had exhumed the remains of 965 victims from 10 mass graves, out of at least 168 probable sites across South Korea. They only scratched the surface in some cases: At a cobalt mine in the far south, they penetrated just 36 feet into a vertical shaft, recovering 107 skeletons from among 3,500 bodies believed dumped there.

Some mass killings were carried out before the war; many came in the first weeks after the June 25, 1950, invasion, and others occurred later in 1950 when U.S. and South Korean forces recaptured Seoul and the southerners rounded up and shot alleged northern collaborators.

The executioners at times cold-bloodedly killed families of suspected leftists, the commission has found.

In late 1950 and early 1951, in Namyangju, 16 miles northeast of Seoul, the commission estimates that police and a local militia slaughtered more than 460 people, including at least 23 children under the age of 10.

Survivor Kim Jong-chol, 71, said his father, a South Korean border guard, had been forced to work for the conquering northerners, and then was executed by the southerners as a collaborator. More than a dozen relatives were also killed, including Kim's grandparents and 7-year-old sister, he said.

"Young children or whatever were all killed en masse," Kim told The Associated Press. "What did the family members do wrong? Why did they kill the family members?"

The 15-member panel, whose unprecedented inquiry will stretch into 2010, has thus far verified that children were among the victims in at least six mass killings. In a seventh case, it found, it was southern leftists who killed children of supposed South Korean rightists.

Similarly, the North Korean occupiers and their southern comrades at times killed policemen and others associated with the rightist regime after summary "trials." But the commission says petitions relating to executions of leftists outnumber by 6-to-1 those dealing with right-wingers' deaths.

That was his experience in Namyangju, said Kim Jong-chol.

"When the people from the other side (North Korea) came here, they didn't kill many people," he said, contrasting that with "indiscriminate" killing by southern authorities.

The AP has reported that declassified U.S. military documents show U.S. Army officers took photos of the assembly line-style executions outside the central city of Daejeon, where the commission believes between 3,000 and 7,000 people were shot and dumped into mass graves in early July 1950.

Mass execution of political prisoners at Daejon, July 1950. TRC.

Other once-secret files show that a U.S. Army lieutenant colonel reported giving approval to the killing of 3,500 political prisoners by a South Korean army unit he was advising in Busan, if the North Koreans approached that southern port city, formerly spelled Pusan.

The files show the U.S. command was aware in other ways as well of the organized bloodbaths.

On Nov. 13, four representatives of bereaved family groups met with a U.S. Embassy official in Seoul to ask that the U.S. open a "dialogue channel" with them and provide any documents relevant to a U.S. role in these deaths a half-century ago.

"It's the first time we relatives have met U.S. officials," said Oh Won-rok, 68, representing family survivors of a wartime mass killing in the southwestern county of Haenam.

Oh Byoung-Han, 65, representing those who lost relatives in the huge Daejeon-area slaughter, charged that the U.S. was involved "directly and indirectly" in that case.

"We asked them to review the case and cooperate positively," Oh said. "We demanded an apology."

Although at the time U.S. diplomats reported confidentially they had urged restraint on the South Koreans, there was no sign the U.S. military, with formal command over the southerners, tried to halt the mass executions.

After last month's meeting, embassy spokesman Robert Ogburn said the U.S. mission would not comment publicly on it.

The investigative panel, equipped with a 240-member staff, cannot compel testimony, prosecute or award compensation. Findings are meant to "reconcile the past for the sake of national unity," says its legislative charter.

It was established under the previous liberal administration of President Roh Moo-hyun, and many expect it to encounter budget and other restrictions under his conservative successor, Lee Myung-bak.

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

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Earlier reports on South Korean massacres and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission include:

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

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

The final report of the TRC is assessed by Charles J. Hanley and Hyung-jin Kim, South Korea Bloodbath Probe Ends. US escapes much blame