



The United States, the United Nations, and the Second Occupation of Korea, 1950-1951¹

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This article is part of an ongoing series at *The Asia-Pacific Journal* commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the start of the US-Korean War.

Amidst the chaos surrounding North Korea's military offensive in the summer of 1950, the United Nations Security Council passed a series of resolutions which gave the United States-led United Nations Command (UNC) sanction to occupy the Korean peninsula. A crucial element of the work of this occupation – the second of southern Korea since 1945 – dealt with refugees.² By August 1950, as the territory under United Nations Command jurisdiction shrank and came to centre around the Kyöngsang provinces, South Korean authorities reported that the northern advance had displaced well over one million people.

As part of the effort to deal with the refugee situation in South Korea, the Security Council passed a resolution on 31 July 1950 that provided the framework for the "relief" operations of the United Nations Command. The Council approved the resolution several weeks after American soldiers had committed a mass killing of up to several hundred Korean civilians at Nogün-ri and in the wake of mass killings of suspected Communists by the South Korean authorities, but the Council framed the refugee tragedy solely in relation to the North Korean offensive. Pointing to the "hardships and privations to which the people of Korea are being subjected as a result of the continued prosecution by the North Korean forces of their unlawful attack", the Council called on UN and non-governmental organizations to "provide such assistance as the Unified Command may request for the relief and support of the civilian population of Korea, and as appropriate in connection with the responsibilities being carried out by the Unified Command on behalf of the Security Council."³



In the aftermath of the Security Council resolution, in early September, the UNC established a Public Health and Welfare Section under the authority of the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers (SCAP) to assist with military operations, advise General Douglas MacArthur on relief policy, and act as liaison with non-military bodies, United Nations and otherwise, dealing with public health in Korea. At the time, a small number of US Army public health and welfare officers operated in Korea, conducting civil affairs work in conjunction with the Economic Cooperation Administration and the Department of State.⁴ The scale of their work, needless to say, was monumental. After conducting surveys, American soldiers estimated there were 300,000 refugees in the Pusan perimeter, the area controlled by the United Nations Command and occupying most of the North and South Kyöngsang provinces. Many of the refugees were located along the line of fighting or just south of it. The soldiers were thus fighting amidst refugees – a situation that had led to the No Gün-ri massacres in July.

A refugee camp at Sangnim, between Kimhae and Chingyön-ni. In early September 1950 there were more than 125,000 refugees in the Kimhae area. United Nations Photo Archive, Photo # 128638



The UNC, the Republic of Korea, and Korean Refugees in the Fall of 1950

By September, South Korean health authorities had established their presence in the refugee camps within the Pusan perimeter. Their work far outweighed the initial efforts of the US soldiers connected with “relief” operations. In an effort to gain some control over the refugee situation, American soldiers established formal channels of communication with Korean officials, formed small “public health, welfare and sanitation teams” for Pusan and Taegu, attempted to determine the basic material and health needs of the refugees, and worked to exert greater political influence on the refugee and public health programs of the Republic of Korea (ROK). To achieve the latter objective, US army officers soon joined the ROK government’s Central Refugee Relief Committee, which was then sometimes referred to as the Central Joint Refugee Relief Committee. The committee was formally responsible for assessing the needs of the civilian population and managing the Korean relief program. The addition of the word “Joint” to the name of the committee was an important change, as the new administrative arrangements gave civil assistance officers significant influence over the politics of the relief effort, and led to a sharing of political sovereignty between the American army and the Korean government on a broad range of matters linked to the health and welfare of the Korean population. As I. H. Markuson, the Chief of the Welfare Division of the Army’s Public Health and Welfare Section noted in 1951, American military participation on the joint committee “did not reduce or compromise the authority vested in United Nations Command personnel for responsibility for the total [relief] program, but provided a method by which the Korean government and the UNC personnel could arrive at decisions jointly.”⁵ American representation on the Central Joint Refugee Relief Committee was thus one example of the many ways in which UNC military operations during the war encroached on the sovereignty of the Republic. Indeed, a major withering away of Korean sovereignty had already occurred in July 1950 when the Syngman Rhee government agreed to subordinate the command of its armed forces to General MacArthur and the UNC in Tokyo, a decision which effectively established a de facto American protectorate over the Republic.

While the politics of the relief effort were worked out in favour of joint UNC-ROK sovereignty, the UNC firmly managed the civilian public health officials operating in Korea. In late September, in the aftermath of the Inchön landings, two doctors from the World Health Organization (WHO), Walter Crichton and Henry Meyer, arrived in Pusan. Dr. Crichton wanted to establish a UN public health presence in Korea relatively independent of the American army. Over the course of the fall of 1950, however, the American-appointed commanders of the civil assistance programs ordered Crichton and other officials from UN agencies and non-governmental organizations to be absorbed into the UNC civil assistance program.⁶ Non-military officials could shape policy at lower levels, but could not determine overall strategy. There was thus no independent UN public health oversight in Korea.

The work of the Public Health and Welfare teams expanded tremendously as a result of the UNC offensive across the thirty-eighth parallel. Surveys done after the crossing of the 38th parallel indicated that there were about 1.8 million refugees in South Korea, along with about one million more in the north. In the ROK, about 250,000 houses had been lost in the fighting. Food shortages existed throughout the peninsula. Even when grain reached Pusan to be transhipped to UNC-held areas, military supplies retained first priority on the limited transport network, so refugees had to wait for adequate transportation to be arranged. When the first shipment of rice reached the outskirts of Seoul in October, several hundred Korean labourers carried it on their backs to the Han River, where it was shipped and later carted by more labourers to the city centre. Throughout the country there were significant shortages of fuel and clothing, a situation that only got worse with the coming of winter and the Communist counter-offensives.

Entering the war zone in the north, civil assistance teams discovered widespread destruction and suffering. They noted that the northern population was not yet afflicted with disease – in North Korea there had been fairly widespread inoculations against typhoid and smallpox – but due to destruction of medical facilities, northern Korea now lacked capacity to provide basic medical care for the sick, wounded, and dying. Travelling to P’yöngyang in late October, Dr. Crichton found “considerable destruction of medical establishments”. He also pointed to an “urgent need” for medical assistance in Sariwon, “where the city was almost completely destroyed.”⁷

In areas north of the 38th parallel, where the United States and United Nations did not formally recognize the legitimacy of the Republic of Korea, civil assistance teams took on responsibility for the formation of local government. Since American civil affairs doctrine required the employment of local persons in governmental activities, US soldiers selected former North Korean communist officials to establish local governments-in-being. These very rudimentary political organizations, put together in the immediate aftermath of the devastating ROK-UNC counter-offensive, provided extremely limited services, but were



A woman examines the remains of her stove in the ruins of her home in Seoul in early October 1950. United Nations Photo Archive, Photo # 187890

meant to lay the groundwork for the longer term “reconstruction” of the Korean peninsula. For the public health teams, however, the acute shortages of food and medical supplies soon contributed to devastating outbreaks of typhus: as people sought alternative sources of food, especially rodents, they became susceptible to the bites of fleas infected with the bacteria that causes the disease.

In line with the UNC counter-offensive and plans for the occupation of all of Korea, the American Army clarified its lines of authority vis-à-vis United Nations health workers and other civilian officials. On 19 October 1950, the UNC reaffirmed that “over-all responsibility and authority for civilian relief and support in Korea, as well as for the conduct of military operations, is placed in the Unified Command, Washington, and is further delegated to the Unified Command, Tokyo.”⁸ In late October and early November, the UNC ordered a major reorganization of the army’s Public Health Section. SCAP ordered most of the soldiers working in the existing Public Health and Welfare teams out of Korea. Their operations would be replaced by new civil assistance teams working under the direction of the American Eighth Army, particularly the newly-created “UN Public Health and Welfare Field Organization” and the Eighth Army detachment linked to it, the 8201st Army Unit. In December, these organizations became known respectively as the UN Civil Assistance Command, Korea (UNCACK), and the 8201st Army Unit, UNCACK. While the UNC adopted the name “United Nations” in its civil assistance and affairs activities, policy remained the privilege of American soldiers working in the field or operating in consultation with Korean authorities. “United Nations” civil affairs operations thus reflected the broader reality underlying the war, that the United States, and especially the American military, not the United Nations or South Korea, dominated the strategic decision-making processes associated with the conflict.



A column of refugees crosses the provisional bridge over the Han River in early December 1950. United Nations Photo Archive, Photo # 103323

Theoretically, there was a difference between civil affairs and civil assistance, the latter involving work with a sovereign state, and the former involving formal military government operations in the absence of recognized state authority. With the surrender of ROK control over its military to the UNC, however, war zones in South Korea were in reality under the control of American-UNC authority. Of course, even in military zones south of the 38th parallel there was some shared sovereignty, and occasionally American civil assistance authorities recognized the distinction, noting for example, that their work involved advising ROK authorities. In practice, however, the differences between civil affairs and civil assistance broke down. US military authorities, for example were the ones who determined movement of people back to former military zones, and this meant that Koreans could not return to their homes or jobs without first obtaining the consent of the UNC. When the UNC determined the time was appropriate, South Korean officials returned to their posts in areas that previously had been classified war zones. The ROK government’s sovereignty, in short, was greatly compromised by the wartime situation and by American military decision-making during the war. Writing in 1951, Major Arthur Dodson of UNCACK pointed out that the civil affairs organization was initially structurally unsound “as it failed to provide minimum requirements of personnel to cope with the mission assigned”. Rather than placing emphasis on civil affairs, Dodson argued, “an organization similar to a military government group would have been more adequate. The present organization of UNCACK, in many ways, has assumed the semblance of this type unit.”⁹

The Violence of Civil Assistance

Despite the implied meaning of the phrase “civil” assistance”, military authorities held a monopoly on relief work. During the fall and winter of 1950-1951, American soldiers, in both public and private policy statements, reiterated the UNC civil assistance objective to “prevent disease, starvation and unrest.” Although UNCACK pamphlets emphasized humanitarian aspects of relief assistance, the major objectives of UNCACK were strategically linked to the violence of war: to prevent refugees from “interfering” in military campaigns. According to the philosophy underpinning civil assistance, refugees ill from their travails might spread diseases not only to civilians but also to soldiers; or they might turn to acts of “banditry” to survive, force a re-allocation of human and material resources away from the main enemy, and become a danger to both civilians and combatants. Fighting “bandits” either in war zones or behind battle lines therefore became an ancillary activity linked to civil affairs teams. The object was not only to separate possible guerrillas from refugees, but also to prevent discontented civilians from “destabilizing” military operations by being recruited by enemy soldiers or guerrillas. US soldiers distinguished between “bandits” and “guerrillas” by linking the latter with communism, though in practice both were seen as threats to civil affairs operations, and the UNC and civil affairs authorities coordinated their anti-guerrilla and anti-bandit operations with Korean army and civil police officials, often getting Korean soldiers and police assigned to this sort of combat duty behind the front lines.

Civil affairs operations were designed to support the movements and battle strategies of UNC armies. In particular, they tried to prevent refugees from entering into so-called “battle zones”. Another major goal of the teams was to stop refugees from travelling on Main Supply Routes, or MSRs, roads soldiers travelled on or which were used to supply UNC units. Civil assistance teams set up roadblocks or authorized Korean police and military units to interdict refugees, in a broader effort to separate soldiers and civilians. Given the timing of the emergence of UNCACK, in the months after September 1950, the creation of the unit was an explicit recognition of the bloody consequences of civilians mixing with soldiers. The emphasis of civil assistance was not to stop

soldiers from firing on or toward civilians, but to prevent civilians from hindering military offensives and other activities, an important distinction which reflected the acceptance of violence toward civilians underlying UNC relief programs. Refugees were viewed not so much as a group to be protected, but as a "problem" for civil assistance teams. A booklet issued by the United Nations Command entitled "Civil Assistance in Korea" stated in its opening paragraph that refugees presented "a constant problem to civil assistance."¹⁰ The logic of this strategy fed a perception that civilians moving in war-zones were legitimate military targets for US and other UNC soldiers.



Battle-weary Korean civilians crowd a Korean road in late January 1951 seeking safety from the continuous fighting. United Nations Photo Archive, Photo # 88448

In late 1950 and early 1951, as a result of the UNC and Chinese-North Korean offensives, several million more refugees were added to those already fleeing the warring armies. By mid-1951, there were 4.4 million refugees in South Korea alone, out of a population of about 21 million. With the evacuation of Seoul in late December and early January 1950-1951, 600,000 left the city. Unlike the first occupation of Seoul in the summer of 1950, the population abandoned the city. In December and January, UNCACK units again turned to prevent the movement of refugees into battle areas. As the Civil Assistance Command report for January 1951 pointed out, UNCACK activities "centered around the control of the civilian population in order to prevent its interference with military operations." The report spoke of "vigorous enforcement" of policy and noted that "No refugees were permitted to cross our lines."¹¹ The use of leaflet drops from planes and psychological warfare operations were described as achieving "considerable success". The leaflets, of which more than 100,000 were dropped in front of the American I and IX Corps, stated, presumably in Korean, that the movement of refugees was forbidden and that civilians should "return to your homes or move off roads to the hills and remain there. Any persons or columns moving toward the United Nations Forces will be fired upon."¹² Nothing was said about refugee casualties, but throughout the month Korean civilians were treated violently. The Chinese intervention had caused many more refugees to settle in Pusan and Taegu, and the UNC ordered that refugees be cleared from these cities and the areas and MSR's immediately surrounding them. UNCACK worked with officials from the Ministry of Social Affairs as well as police authorities to move the refugees. According to UNCACK reports, when refugees refused to move, "Police action was used to clean out make shift camps." In Pusan, refugees were briefly

"moved by force" to Cheju and Koje islands. When some Korean authorities became reluctant to continue forcing refugees to leave for the islands, the movement was temporarily halted. The experience taught civil affairs officials not that care should be used to treat refugees, but that, in addition to needing official Korean support, "only force would succeed in the movement of people against their will when they were concerned about their own safety."¹³ And force continued to be used to move refugees in the spring and summer of 1951, as refugees attempted to move northwards, back to villages, towns and cities, as the military situation stabilized.¹⁴ The army now found a new challenge on its hands, how to keep civilians away from northern areas of southern Korea, especially since removing them southwards only resulted in their moving northwards once again.

Conclusion

The US Army's civil assistance program during the Korean War reflected battlefield priorities. The need for civil assistance teams had emerged in the first months of the conflict as American combatants encountered and sometimes shot at Korean refugees fleeing the fighting. Established in the context of UNC military offensives across the 38th parallel in the fall of 1950, the United Nations Civil Assistance Command, Korea, with the help of the Korean police and army, kept refugees out of battle zones to ensure they did not interfere with the prosecution of the war. Although UNCACK operated as a United Nations organization, it came under the command of the United States military, specifically the Eighth Army. Civilians from the UN and non-governmental agencies formed part of the UNCACK workforce, but were integrated into UNC military operations, and no independent United Nations oversight of civil assistance occurred during the war.

UNCACK played an important supporting role in the US-led UNC occupation of Korea. The organization's military leadership shared decision-making authority with the South Korean government in a wide range of activities related to civilian welfare. In the absence of Korean governmental structures, civil affairs soldiers established local authority, and thus temporarily took on responsibilities of civil government. UNCACK's limited resources, however, meant that civil assistance teams were dependent on South Korean officials for political assistance and dealing with refugees.

Although UNCACK publications from the period describe humanitarian-related work in the fields of preventing disease and providing food and shelter, some American soldiers' belief in the utility of employing violence and force against refugees resulted in deadly threats to the lives and well-being of Korean civilians during the period of massive refugee flows in 1950-1951. Civilians learned on the battlefield that UNC armies could treat them as they would enemy soldiers. Even behind the front lines, refugees were forcibly evacuated from their camps; and civilian resistance only hardened UNCACK's commitment to using violence. Tragically, the well-being of civilians was a distant consideration for soldiers who were under orders to link plans for refugees to the wider goal of supporting, at any cost, UNC military objectives.

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Recommended citation: Steven Lee, "The United States, the United Nations, and the Second Occupation of Korea, 1950-1951," The Asia-Pacific Journal: Vol 8 Issue 50 No 3 - December 13, 2010.

Notes

¹ I would like to thank the Korea Society, especially Natalee Newcombe, and the Center for Korean Research, Columbia University, for sponsoring the conference where I presented a different version of this article. Special thanks go to Charles Armstrong and Heonik Kwon for their support.

² The first American occupation lasted from 1945 to 1948; US troops withdrew in 1949, a year after they fostered-into-being the newly-established Republic of Korea. One can trace the history of the US-led United Nations Command occupation of Korea until at least the signing of the armistice in July 1953. In a broader sense, however, the second occupation has not ended, since American soldiers remain in South Korea to this day and US forces command South

This article is part of a series commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the Korean War.

Other articles on the sixtieth anniversary of the US-Korean War outbreak are:

- [Mark Caprio](#), *Neglected Questions on the "Forgotten War": South Korea and the United States on the Eve of the Korean War*.
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- [Wada Haruki](#), *From the Firing at Yeonpyeong Island to a Comprehensive Solution to the Problems of Division and War in Korea*.
- [Nan Kim](#) with an introduction by John McGlynn, *Factsheet: West Sea Crisis in Korea*.

Korean troops. This article examines the first year of the US-United Nations Command occupation of the Korean peninsula, specifically the role of the United Nations Civil Assistance Command, Korea, in that history. For an overview of American occupation policies in Korea, see my "Military Occupation and Empire Building in Cold War Asia: The United States and Korea, 1945–1955", in Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, editor, *The Cold War in East Asia*, Stanford University Press, forthcoming.

³ The text of Security Council Resolution 85 is available [here](#).

⁴ National Archives of Canada, United Nations Command, "Civilian Relief and Economic Aid - Korea", 7 July – 30 September 1951, prepared by the GHQ, UNC, p. 9; United States National Archives (henceforth USNA), RG 407 Box 1995, General Order No. 5, 2 September 1950.

⁵ USNA, RG 407, Box 4995, "Staff Section Report, Public Welfare Section" for the period 5 September 1950 to 31 August 1951, p. 6.

⁶ Ibid., "Staff Section Report, Public Health Section", for the period 5 September 1950 to 31 August 1951.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., General Headquarters, UNC, General Order 15, 19 October 1950.

⁹ Ibid., "Staff Section Report, S1 Section", for the period 15 October to 31 August 1951.

¹⁰ USNA, RG 407, Box 1214, "Civil Assistance in Korea", Far Eastern Command, June 1951.

¹¹ USNA, RG 407, Box 1150, "Command Report", Civil Assistance Headquarters, January 1951.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See Ibid., box 4995, Staff Section Report, Public Welfare Section, UNCAK 5 September 1950-31 August 1951.