

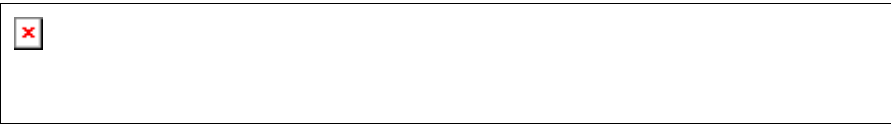


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# Korea

May 17, 2006



## US feels sting of South Korean protest

By Donald Kirk

DEACHURI, South Korea - The prayers and chants of the elderly farmers and young activists waft from the circle of land in front of a small white-walled church at the heart of this village on the prow of a hill some 65 kilometers south of Seoul.

"No US base," they shout in Korean. "Save our land."

It is a daily ritual staged in defiance of thousands of South Korean police against a plan to turn the region of rice paddies and orchards into one of America's largest overseas bases.

The police control the countryside, blocking off traffic, but the farmers cling to this enclave of sturdy brick homes in a standoff

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that embarrasses the United States and South Korea - and reveals some of the weaknesses in a deteriorating alliance.

"It's up to the Korean police to get them out of there," grumbles an American officer, observing the standoff from the security of nearby Camp Humphreys, shielded by double rows of wire fencing. "I can't see why they don't get them out of there."

The reason appears to be the desire of Korean leaders to avoid a showdown of tear-gas grenades and bashed heads and also underlying questions about South Korea's relationship with the United States.

Korean officials swear they're living up to their agreement for the US to build the base, and South Korean soldiers are busy setting up a 24km barbed-wire fence surrounding the whole area set aside for the base.

The fact is, however, they're appalled by the prospect of the base becoming an easy target for the same activists who've been demonstrating off and on for years outside US bases elsewhere. An assault by 10,000 police officers on May 4 managed to dislodge hundreds of activists from an abandoned school building



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but failed to stop the protest, much less get the farmers to leave the homes that they view as their reward for more than half a century of hard work tilling the soil since the Korean War.

That refusal of farmers to leave makes their cause an easy one for activists, who for years have demanded the departure of all US forces from Korea.

A firebrand Catholic priest leads daily slogan-shouting protests at the epicenter of the worst standoff in nearly four years between South Korean forces and an array of student groups and labor organizations.

The priest, Moon Jeong-hyun, 69, returned here less than a week after holding out for most of a day on the roof of the school building with nine other priests and two National Assembly members defying the riot police, who drove the activists from the building, some of them kicking and screaming.

A distinctive figure with a flowing beard, often seen holding a video camera as he records prayer meetings and confrontations, Moon and his cohorts were promised they would not be arrested before descending down a ladder from the roof on May 4.

Moon has lived in the village for the past two years, making it the center of the same anti-US struggle that he led during enormous protests in Seoul after the deaths of two schoolgirls, run over by a 50-ton US armored vehicle during military exercises nearly four years ago.

"Pray for this land," Moon preaches to the villagers. "You have prospered on this land. Pray for your homes. You have built these homes. The land is yours. Your prayers will protect you."

Now Moon is protected by activists manning checkpoints at entrances to the village within shouting distance of police blocking off narrow paved roads across the rice paddies into the village, on the western fringe of the bustling town of Pyongtaek, on the main railroad to Seoul.

The activists carry banners, not weapons, but they're clearly ready to battle any attempt by police to enter the village. They appear to have returned quietly by night across the rice paddies, staying in the homes of farmers who view them as defenders against government forces. They meet in the church and a small government building, having lost the school to demolition by bulldozers and loaders that tore it down as soon as Moon and his cohorts came down from the roof on May 4.

Police officials directing the thousands of officers in well-ordered array at strong points on the roads are under strict orders to avoid violence, stopping protesters with shields, throwing them back in occasional clashes, but refraining from bashing heads, much less using weapons.

Conservatives fear the fracas over the base plays into the hands of North Korea, while South Korea and the US are at odds on how to pull the North back into six-party talks on Pyongyang's nuclear program.

Some wonder if the South's governing Uri Party is actually encouraging the standoff in which an assembly member from the party, Im Jung-in, is playing a leading role.

Im was up on the roof with the priests before they all came down on May 4 - and has appeared again at rallies in the village. He talks frequently on his mobile phone with party officials, and his presence in the village symbolizes support for the farmers and activists in the government.

US officials, fearful of upsetting already strained relations with the government, say only that they expect South Korea to live up to the agreement and turn over the land for a base. They wonder, however, how the US can move its military headquarters from

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Seoul to the base while protests persist.

"We'll have to build a new headquarters building," says a US officer. "That's not going to be easy."

More difficult, the US Army has to move combat forces, now headquartered at Camp Casey on the historic invasion route from North Korea to Seoul, down here. The base, when it opens, will have facilities for 20,000 US troops, the vast majority of the 25,000 expected to be left in Korea by the end of the decade. Most of the remaining US forces remain just 16km closer to Seoul at Osan Air Base, headquarters for US combat aircraft.

The ruckus over the base provides a rallying cry for anti-American forces at a time when the US and South Korea are at odds over how to deal with the North on such issues as nuclear weapons, counterfeiting and human rights.

Although none of these issues immediately affects the base, the relationship is clear.

The US Command regularly advances the argument that US forces have to move south of Seoul to keep them out of the way of North Korean artillery. No one conjures the specter of a North Korean attack, but the threat remains - and could increase if other issues persist.

"A nuclear North Korea is a problem for everyone," says Jon Wolfsthal, a fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. He sees no solution, though, while North Korea refuses to attend the six-party talks and the administration in Washington loses interest in a solution.

"We're likely to see a prolonged death that nobody wants to watch," says Wolfsthal. "We're not likely to see any progress any time soon." He sees those favoring regime change in North Korea as "on the ascendancy".

Washington hardliners, he believes, are proud of the impact on Pyongyang of economic restraints imposed on banks and trading companies dealing with North Korea in retaliation for that country's counterfeiting and still hope for collapse of the regime.

"The United States is back into isolation and [it's] a waiting game," says Wolfsthal, while "North Korea is content with its nukes." In the meantime, the Pentagon sees the base relocation as part of a "global repositioning plan" in which forces here would be free to deploy anywhere in the region, possibly, in some unforeseen war, against China, a short hop across the Yellow Sea.

At this village, Moon and other activists see the whole military issue as irrelevant.

"South and North Korea are reconciling with one another," says another priest visiting the village. "We don't need US forces in Korea at all."

That's a view that US officials fear may come to dominate the outlook of a South Korea government already seen as left of center as thousands of police face the unpleasant task of finally removing the diehards from their homes - and the troublesome priest from the village chapel.

*Journalist **Donald Kirk** has been in and out of Korea since 1972.*

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