

## **South Korean Bishop Apologizes for War Crimes in Vietnam**

XUAN LOC, Vietnam – A Korean bishop attending the 10<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) here has apologized for war atrocities committed by South Korean troops during the conflict that Americans refer to as the Vietnam War and Vietnamese call the American War.

In a private intervention at the assembly on Dec. 13, Bishop Peter Kang U-il of Cheju, South Korea, apologized to the Vietnamese people for the 5,000 civilians whom Korean troops summarily killed between 1968 and 1974. According to various sources, the South Korean forces also killed more than 40,000 Vietnamese in military actions.

Bishop Kang later explained in an interview that this was his first trip to Vietnam, so he felt he must apologize for the war crimes committed by Korean troops who fought here decades ago. "The statement I made was personal and not in the name of our bishops' conference, but I am confident my fellow bishops would support what I did," he said.

According to the bishop, NGO's in Korea only recently discovered documentation of the killings over a period of years, but there have long been rumors about them.

"We long heard some of our soldiers confess about their participation in the killings, but most Koreans were unaware of what our army did. Only recently NGO's got proof and made trips here to the places where the killings took place."

When South Korea's President Kim Dae-Jung visited Vietnam in 2001, he apologized for the pain, albeit unintended, that his country inflicted on the Vietnamese during the war, but most Koreans remain unaware of those crimes or the former president's apology.

According to Bishop Kang, whose diocese serves Cheju Island, 100 kilometers off South Korea's southern coast, if the Church does not speak out on issues such as this, no one will. Governments hide behind the screen of "national security," he added.

As an example of hiding events from the people, he spoke of the slaughter of 30,000 Koreans that took place on his island in the years before the Korean conflict six decades ago. "Until today, 90% of the Korean people are unaware of what took place on Cheju," he said. "The government has covered up the story. It becomes the responsibility of the Church to speak out – if we do not speak out, who will?"

In Cheju, the Korean army killed some 30,000 Koreans from 1948 to 1952. The American army ordered Korean troops onto the island to end the chaos triggered by the killing of six supposedly "leftist" opponents to the March 1947 election. Korean soldiers carried out the slaughter, but they were under American command.

Meanwhile, the 67-year-old bishop has been in a six-year battle against a new navy base being built on his island. He maintains that it is supposedly for the South Korean navy but is actually designed to house carriers of the United States navy. He says its existence can only increase unnecessary tension in East Asia as well as America.

Bishop Kang asserts that the base will only worsen the fears of people in the area. He cited Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth, 1963), which states:

“...if one country increases its military strength, others are immediately roused by a competitive spirit to augment their own supply of armaments.”

In his intervention, he told his fellow bishops, “Popes of the modern era have continuously appealed for disarmament. I believe it is our duty to proclaim and remind the Asian people of the social teachings of the Magisterium on world peace.”

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