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Koreans resume hunger strikes opposing proposed naval base

by Claire Schaeffer-Duffy

NCR Today

The gutsy and persistent campaign to oppose the construction of a South Korean naval base on Jeju Island continues.

Bruce Gagnon reports that Professor Yang Yoon-Mo, former chair of the South Korean Film Critics Association, and Sung-Hee Choi, a member of the Korean peace organization SPARK, have resumed their hunger strike in protest of the base.

Gagnon, a Maine-base peace activist and founder of Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space, has been chronicling the Jeju campaign on his blog, <http://space4peace.blogspot.com>.

In a June 3 article for *NCR* I reported that Yoon-Mo concluded a 57-day hunger strike after his release from jail on June 1. But he and Choi, who was arrested during an anti-base protest and is still in jail, are now fasting again, says MacGregor Eddy, a Californian activist who is participating in the demonstrations at Gangjeong Village, site of the planned naval base.

?[Choi] looks terrible. It is shocking. Weeping mother begged her to eat. Professor Yang is also fasting again. He looks skeletal,? wrote Eddy in an email that Gagnon posted June 11.

According to Eddy, activists over the past week have daily tried to block construction at the naval base which is ongoing despite strong local opposition. Protestors have held banners, prayed, laid in front of machines at the construction site, and even gone out in inflatable rafts to demonstrate aboard ships clearing the Gangjeong coastline.

A self-governing province of South Korea, Jeju Island lies south of the Korean mainland and between China and Japan. Because of the island's strategic location in Northeast Asia, the South Korean government wants to build a base here that will port South Korean and U.S. Aegis destroyers equipped with missile defense systems.

Jeju is a designated World Heritage site. Critics fear the base will damage the island's unique eco-system, escalate a naval arms race in Northeast Asia, and place Jeju residents in the crosshairs of a U.S./China stand-off.

Catholic religious have been at the forefront of the no-base campaign, according to the Union of Catholic Asian News (UCAN). A quick perusal of the news agency's reports reveal a remarkable account of Catholic leaders speaking out against militarism and environmental destruction, and speaking up for those whose voice has been ignored for the sake of national security interests.

Nuns and priests have been arrested during no-base protests, some repeatedly. Priests have also gone on hunger strikes. In June 2007, the year the South Korean government announced plans to build the navy base at Gangjeon (two other villages had successfully fought locating the port in their environs), the Jeju diocese launched the Special Committee for the Island of Peace to actively oppose the port's construction.

The committee's early efforts included distributing Catholic teaching on peace to every parish in Jeju, which is home to more than 60, 000 Catholics.

More recently, Jeju's Special Committee hosted Christmas Mass at the construction site for the navy base. Bishop Peter Kang U-il of the Cheju diocese presided. Three days later, four priests, two Protestant pastors, and twenty-nine activists and villagers were arrested during a demonstration there.

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In January, the Catholic Priests Association for Justice held their three-day annual plenary assembly on the island and issued a statement calling for an end to the base's construction. UCAN reports that the statement highlighted the examples of Okinawa, Guam and Saipan as beautiful islands with military bases whose native culture declined after the establishment of military bases. There were more arrests of priests later that month.

Catholic involvement in the Jeju conflict prompted the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCKK) to join the no-base campaign in May. Last week representatives of hundreds of civic and religious leaders in South Korea held a press conference in Seoul to express their solidarity with the residents of Gangjeong. Among those present was Reverend Kim Young-ju, secretary general of the NCKK.

Shortly after his release for one of his arrests during a no-base demonstration, Fr. John Ko Byeong-soo, chair of Jeju diocese's Special Committee for the Island of Peace, told UCAN that he felt obliged to continue the anti-base campaign "as we need to follow Catholic teaching to be peacemakers . . . Since the Gangjeong villagers have decided to maintain their opposition to the plan, we will accompany the people to the end."

American activists are asking that you call the South Korean Embassy in Washington, D.C. at 202-939-5600 to express your opposition to the naval base. For more information, contact Bruce Gagnon at:

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