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Prominent South Korean hunger striker released

Claire Schaeffer-Duffy | Jun. 3, 2011

Bishop Peter Kang U-il, president of the Korean Catholic Bishops Conference visits recovering hunger striker (photo by Lee Seung-rok/ used with permision from The Voice of Jeju.)

Responding to international pressure, South Korean authorities released from prison on Wednesday a well-known film critic who waged a 60-day hunger strike to protest the construction of a South Korean naval base on the Korean island of Jeju.

Professor Yang Yoon-Mo, former chair of the Korean Association of Film Critics, was given a suspended jail sentence of one and a half years and two years probation.

Still unable to eat, Yoon-Mo, 56, is recovering in a Jeju hospital where he was visited today by Peter Kang U-il, president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea and bishop of the diocese of Jeju.

Yoon-Mo protested a South Korean base where U.S. warships are expected to port. In the past, the South Korean Navy has admitted U.S. warships can visit the port but has denied it will be a permanent station for U.S. forces, or part of a missile defense program. Critics of the base say otherwise. Kyoungeun Cha of the Institute for Policy Studies, a Washington D.C.-based think tank, writes that "Seoul plans to dock Aegis-equipped destroyers at Jeju. These warships are the main military component of the U.S. missile defense system." For more on the U.S.-South Korean alliance at Jeju see Cha's article [1].

Yoon-Mo was arrested April 6 while he and other residents of Gangjeong village impeded construction of the base by locking themselves to earth-moving equipment.

The Nuclear Resister, an Arizona-based quarterly that chronicles anti-nuclear and anti-war resistance, reported Yoon-Mo was imprisoned for violating a restraining order imposed after his release from jail last winter, following an earlier protest. Upon his arrest in April, he refused food and declared his willingness to fast until death unless plans for the base were abandoned.

In an interview given earlier this spring [2], Yoon-Mo, a native of Gangjeong, criticized the "unjust construction" of the navy base.

"It was a one-way process without any communication," he said in the interview. "The Navy plundered the village and plundered the farms. That they did these things illegally and violently, in order to build their naval base, brings a complaint from me."

The South Korean academic is among the more prominent people joining the islanders' three-year campaign to halt construction of the South Korean naval base on Jeju, a volcanic island located off the southern coast. Home to three World Heritage sites, Jeju is renowned for its pristine beaches and unique geology. The U.S. Navy has long sought a port here due to its strategic location in the South China Sea.

Although the decision to build the base remains a somewhat contentious issue on the island, opposition to its construction has gained momentum and international attention. In March, peace groups from the Korean mainland and abroad offered their support to the no-base campaign.

Eight activists were arrested May 19 during a protest including activist Sung-Hee Choi who was taken into custody while holding a banner that read: "Do not touch any stone or flower." Choi, who maintains the blog *No Base Stories of Korea* fasted for two weeks in solidarity with Yoon-Mo until health concerns compelled her to stop. Still in jail, she is scheduled to be tried June 10.

Earlier this week, American feminist Gloria Steinem, accompanying a delegation of Korean women, visited Jeju to express support for the no-base campaign. According to *The Nuclear Resister*, opponents of the base are asking for an end to its construction, the release of prisoners arrested during demonstrations, and reinstatement of the preservation law that was annulled to open Jeju's coast to massive development.

American anti-nuclear activist Bruce Gagnon has been single-handedly publicizing the Jeju campaign which has received little to no coverage in the mainstream U.S. press. He said the fight in Jeju is one of many going on throughout Korea where the construction of military bases is on the rise.

Gagnon is the founder of the Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space and a resident of Bath, Maine, home to Bath Iron Works which manufactures Aegis warships.

"The Aegis warships are being outfitted with so-called 'missile defense' systems and are today being used by the Navy to surround China and Russia. A new arms race is on the way. As more Aegis warships are built, more ports of call are needed for them," Gagnon said, later adding, "China transports 80 percent of its oil on ships that pass through the Yellow Sea alongside Jeju Island. A base on Jeju Island would give the U.S. Navy greater access, and thus, potential control, of those shipping lanes."

Deeply affected by Yoon-Mo's experience, Gagnon now vigils for an hour every week outside the gates of Bath Iron Works where he distributes leaflets informing the men and women who manufacture Aegis warships about the campaign in Jeju.

Apparently, some of the workers have taken an interest in the fate of the islanders. Referring to Yoon-Mo, one Bath Iron Works' employee recently asked Gagnon, "How's your friend?"

[Correction: An earlier version of this story identified the naval base as operated by the United States. It is a South Korean naval base.]

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[1] http://www.ips-dc.org/articles/jeju_and_a_naval_arms_race_in_asia
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