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The great peace movement in South Korea

John Dear | May. 8, 2012 On the Road to Peace

Fifty miles off the southern tip of South Korea lies Jeju Island, one of the world's most beautiful islands, known for its glorious rocky coast, coral reefs and sacred vista. But as far as the United States is concerned, its sole purpose is its strategic location next to China, Japan and Taiwan. The United States has asked South Korea to build a major naval base there for U.S. Aegis destroyers -- U.S. nuclear-powered aircraft carriers that carry cruise missiles. These missiles, kept on U.S. destroyers and submarines at the proposed Jeju Island naval base, could be used someday to destroy Chinese ICBMs.

But contrary to all expectations, a magnificent campaign of daily nonviolent resistance against the base has grown in the last five years. What's even more inspiring is that church leaders are at the forefront of the campaign. Everyone who cares about peace needs to know what is happening on Jeju Island.

The base is being built near Gangjeong Village. These heroic villagers have maintained an impressive public stand against nuclear weapons, U.S. imperialism, environmental destruction and basic injustice. They've been arrested, imprisoned and had their land and civil rights taken from them. Nonetheless, they keep at it. They are demonstrating one of the most brilliant instances of active, engaged nonviolence on the planet, but they have to: South Korea, at the request of the Pentagon, is about to destroy one of the world's natural wonders.

Recently, my friend Dennis Apel of Beatitude House Catholic Worker in Guadalupe, Calif., visited Jeju Island and Gangjeong Village. He called me to tell me about his inspiring visit.

"I knew I respected the people of the village before I went there," Dennis said, "but I didn't foresee that I would fall in love with them. Never in my life have I witnessed the level of commitment and dedication to a cause that I saw in Gangjeong Village. These people love their land on a spiritual level and have fought an epic nonviolent fight to preserve it. And they have waged their resistance day in and day out for the past five years. It is truly a modern-day David and Goliath story."

Jeju Island is a volcanic island about the size of Oahu, Hawaii. The proposed naval base is being built where a lava flow enters the sea, a mile-long area known as Gureombi Rocks. This beautiful rocky coast is sacred to local villagers and has been declared a Natural Heritage Site by UNESCO. Natural freshwater springs bubble up through the surface and soft coral reefs lie off the shore. It's also the only home for the endangered Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphin.

Recently, a construction company began to dynamite Gureombi Rocks to make way for the U.S. nuclear vessels. Waves of villagers continue to sit in, speak out, block equipment and get hauled off in protest.

Apparently, this is not a new story for Jeju Island. This remote paradise has a long history of war and resistance. Beginning on April 3, 1947, until the early 1950s, the South Korean government, under the direction of the United States, maintained a systematic slaughter of the residents of Jeju Island. The people had preferred a united Korea and refused to participate in the fight over the country's political system; this nonviolent stand was perceived as a serious threat by the United States and South Korea, so the people were attacked and massacred.

During those years, more than 30,000 islanders were killed. They were buried in unmarked mass graves.

Then, in the mid-1990s, while excavating for a new runway at the public airport in Jeju City, officials uncovered one of these mass graves. After a massive outcry, South Korea admitted to the massacre and made a public apology. They dubbed Jeju Island "The Island of Peace." A beautiful, large museum was built on the island and called "The 4.3 Peace Museum," named after the date the genocide began. The museum was created to remind everyone about the atrocity and to make sure such violence never happened again.

Then came the 2007 announcement by the South Korean government that they intended to build a huge naval base at Gangjeong Village to port U.S. Aegis destroyers and nuclear-powered aircraft carriers. Their intention was obvious: South Korea's new base would give the United States the immediate capacity to take military action, with nuclear weapons if necessary, against China. South Korea would continue to serve as a pawn for the United States and its imperial strategy to surround China. In exchange, the U.S. would continue to protect South Korea.

A 15-foot-high wall was constructed to keep villagers away from the proposed base. But contrary to government expectations, the people rose up. They began to occupy the land and use their bodies to get in the way of construction equipment. Their steadfast resistance to the construction of the base continues to this day.

One of the most astonishing aspects of this ongoing protest is the active involvement and public leadership of priests and nuns. Five years ago, the bishop of the Diocese of Jeju Island issued a call urging all priests and nuns to stand with the people of Gangjeong Village. Thousands of priests and nuns have been involved.

One day, 80 nuns were arrested. At another protest, 3,400 of the nation's 4,000 priests joined in. According to Dennis, some priests have slept on the rocks for months at a time; others have been arrested for obstructing construction equipment. Others have celebrated Mass on the coast as an act of resistance and a way to continue the centuries-long reverence for the rocky coast as a sacred site. Every day, they join the villagers in speaking out, sitting in, fasting, praying and taking nonviolent risks to stop the destruction of this holy seascape.

While he was there, Dennis joined one of the daily acts of civil disobedience. He was arrested, interrogated, threatened, held and eventually released. He says he has never seen such widespread, steadfast, organized, determined nonviolent resistance -- and on top of that, the involvement of so many priests and nuns in the cause of peace and disarmament.

"I am moved and impressed that the residents near the coastline have been waging a fierce nonviolent struggle to stop the base," actor Robert Redford wrote in a recent essay [1] about Jeju Island for onearth.org. "They've used their bodies to block bulldozers and cement trucks, sacrificed their personal freedom, been beaten and imprisoned, and paid heavy fines for 'obstructing' the business of the navy and construction companies ... all to protect their homeland and an irreplaceable treasure on this planet Earth. Though 94 percent of the villagers voted against the base, the South Korean government is proceeding with construction. It is also bound by treaty to let the U.S. military use all its bases."

"I think the least that environmentalists, peace activists and supporters of democracy can do is express our outrage," Redford continued. "You can take action by visiting the Save Jeju Island Campaign website [2]. As individuals, tourists, professionals and citizens, you may have added access to pressure points that only you know. For example, the International Union for Conservation of Nature will be holding its World Conservation Congress on Jeju Island from September 6 to 15, 2012. ... Secrecy and hypocrisy have let this military base get under way. Facts and activism can stop it before it's too late."

The brave people of Jeju Island, including their heroic priests and nuns, need our support and prayers. For more information, go to savejejuisland.org [2], onearth.org [3], and space4peace.blogspot.com [4].

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John Dear will speak May 8 at Glastonbury Abbey in Hingham, Mass.; May 9 in Brookline, Mass.; and May 10 in Hartford, Conn. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [5], explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website [6]. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire* [7]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [8] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* *[9]*; *Put Down Your Sword* *[10]* and *A Persistent Peace* *[11]*, are available from Amazon.com.

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