

Beheading of Kim Sun-il fuels South Korean protests over troop deployment

John Chan
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The brutal beheading of 33-year-old South Korean translator, Kim Sun-il, in Iraq on Wednesday has polarised public opinion and deepened the crisis surrounding the administration of President Roh Moo-hyun. While right-wing groups have seized on the murder to promote anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment, public outrage has also been directed at the government's plans to dispatch another 3,000 South Korean troops to bolster the US-led occupation of Iraq.

Immediately after news of Kim's death, Roh called an emergency meeting of the National Security Council at 2 a.m., on Wednesday to discuss the government's reaction. The president condemned the savagery of Kim's murder but declared that there would be "no change" to plans to send troops to Iraq. He insisted the government would not give in to "terrorism"—a statement that was immediately praised by the White House.

The beheading provoked immediate anti-government protests. On Wednesday evening, some 2,000 people took part in a candlelight vigil in Seoul, holding up placards such as, "Bush and Roh killed Kim Sun-il" and "Korean troops get out."

One protester told the *Washington Post*: "This was not our war. We are there out of responsibility to our alliance with the United States. But the truth is the Iraqi people don't want us there—it is that simple. Yes, I blame the militants for what happened. But I also blame George Bush for pressuring South Koreans to go against our will. Now, an innocent South Korean is dead."

According to recent opinion polls, more than 60 percent of South Koreans oppose the sending of troops to Iraq. Prior to Kim's murder, hundreds of emails—both in English and Korean—were sent to the Arab TV network Al-Jazeera, to make clear that not all South Koreans supported the war. South Korea's small Muslim community also sent a petition urging Kim's captors—the Al Qaeda-aligned Jama'at al-Tawhid and Jihad group—to

free him.

Various antiwar groups are planning rallies over the weekend in cities across the country. A joint statement by 365 organisations declared: "We, the South Korean people are standing at a door towards hell—a door that the US administration of President George Bush has opened. We know the Iraqi people are suffering under the occupation of US soldiers who abuse human rights there. That's why we are trying to halt the government from sending troops there."

The Korean Federation of Trade Unions (KCTU) warned that it would call an "all-out struggle" of its 500,000 members to stop troops being dispatched to Iraq. Pilots from the country's two main commercial airlines—Korean Air and Asiana—issued a statement declaring they would boycott flights transporting troops to Iraq.

Roh's stance has opened up divisions among his supporters. More than 50 legislators—20 from the pro-Roh Uri Party—submitted a resolution to parliament on Wednesday urging Roh to reconsider the military involvement in Iraq. "South Korea is the only nation in the world that wants to dispatch such large numbers of troops to a war that is generally seen as without a cause," Uri Party member Kim Won-Woong said.

Roh won the December 2002 presidential election by appealing to fears over Washington's aggressive stance toward North Korea and outrage at the acquittal of two US soldiers whose armoured vehicle ran over and killed two South Korean schoolgirls earlier in the year. His popularity slumped as his administration implemented economic restructuring measures and last year agreed to dispatch troops to Iraq. But attempts by right-wing parties to remove him through impeachment in March backfired badly, leading to the formation of the Uri Party and its victory in parliamentary elections in April.

Roh defends the dispatch of troops as providing

“humanitarian assistance” to the Iraqi people. Already, 660 South Korean military medics and engineers have been deployed. Hoping to avoid clashes with Iraqi resistance fighters, Roh is sending the 3,000 additional troops to the Kurdish north of Iraq where, to date, anti-occupation sentiment has been less evident. If the soldiers are dispatched, the South Korean contingent will be the third largest in Iraq, after the US and British forces.

Roh’s decision has nothing to do with humanitarian concerns. The president declared in the course of his 2002 campaign that he would not “kowtow” to Washington. Since his election, however, Roh has been very careful to preserve South Korea’s alliance with the US and to maintain close relations with the Bush administration. In response to pressure from the US, Roh agreed to provide troops last year in return for assurances that Washington would tone down its aggressive stance on North Korea’s nuclear program.

Growing opposition in South Korea to the troop deployment has compounded Roh’s political problems. Having come to power on the basis of anti-US hostility and opposition to deteriorating living standards, the president is implementing policies that are alienating South Koreans. The reactionary decision of the Jama’at al-Tawhid and Jihad group, said to be led by Abu Mussab Al-Zarqawi, to behead its captive, and declare the murder to be retribution against South Korean people as a whole, has only served to strengthen Roh’s hand.

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An editorial in the country’s largest-circulation newspaper *Chosun Ilbo* set the tone: “This incident was shocking and tragic, but it mustn’t shake our decision and principle to send troops to Iraq. In times like this, the president and the government must focus and not allow the deployment issue to once again divide the public.”

Kim’s murder has encouraged right-wing groups to urge the dispatch of troops and to whip up racist sentiment. A small protest of some 50 people in Seoul burned a portrait of Zarqawi and held up placards calling for a “war on terrorists”. Middle Eastern embassies in Seoul and the city’s main mosque have reported receiving a number of threatening calls. The defence ministry claimed that their website crashed after receiving a flood of email messages demanding revenge for Kim’s death by fighting “terrorists” in Iraq.

Broader anti-government sentiment has been further fuelled, however, following revelations that the South Korean foreign ministry may have misled the public over

Kim’s kidnapping. Foreign ministry officials claimed that the first that they knew of the abduction was when Al Jazeera broadcast a tape showing Kim and his captors on June 18. It now appears that Seoul was informed of Kim’s disappearance nearly three weeks earlier.

Associated Press revealed on Thursday that its reporters had telephoned the foreign ministry in Seoul in early June and asked whether a South Korean had been kidnapped or not. The agency had a copy of an earlier videotape showing Kim with his captors, which it has now released. Kim’s employer, Gana General Trading Co, has confirmed media reports that the translator had been missing since May 31. Agence France Press cited reports in Baghdad that a company representative visited the South Korean embassy in Baghdad on at least four occasions between that date and the Al Jazeera broadcast.

At this stage, it is not clear who knew what and when but the possibility that the government was silent about Kim’s abduction for weeks has provoked further discontent and outrage. Roh has been compelled to announce a full audit inquiry of the South Korean foreign ministry, intelligence agency, defence ministry and National Security Council over the case. Accusing the government of incompetence, the right-wing Grand National Party (GNP) is demanding the sacking of Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon and National Security Council head Lee Jong-seok.

The entire episode has served to highlight the lack of solid public trust in, and support for, the government and the political establishment as a whole.



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