South Korean hostage crisis in Afghanistan ends

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The long-drawn out saga involving 23 South Korean missionaries held hostage by the Taliban in Afghanistan since July 19 finally ended late last month. But the political reverberations will continue. The episode has again provoked popular opposition to the South Korean government's support for the US "war on terror" and its occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

After the brutal murder of two male captives, the South Korean government reached a deal with the Taliban to free the rest. Two women were released on August 13. On August 28, after more than 40 days of painful waiting by family and friends, the Taliban announced the remaining 19 would be freed in return for guarantees that South Korean troops would be removed from Afghanistan and further Christian missionaries would be barred.

For South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun, the capture of the missionaries travelling by bus from Kabul to Kandahar created an immediate crisis. He was desperate to quell domestic resentment and sympathy for the hostages and their families. Public anger had already flared in 2004 over the capture and beheading of a South Korean translator in Iraq. In February this year, a South Korean soldier died in a suicide bombing in Afghanistan—the first overseas military death since South Korea's involvement in the Vietnam War.

The Roh government and sections of the South Korean media attempted to deflect attention by blaming the hostages themselves and their associated churches for the tragedy. The nation's largest daily *Chosun Ilbo* declared: "All of this happened simply because some young Koreans travelled to Afghanistan totally unprepared and ended up getting kidnapped." *JoongAng Ilbo* commented: "This crisis raised grave questions about the divide between the country's responsibility and the responsibility of the individuals."

Enormous political pressure was exerted on family members to formally apologise for the situation. Cha Sung-min, a representative for the families expressed "deep gratitude" to the Seoul government for its efforts to free their loved ones. "We want to apologise once more," he said, "for the worry we have caused the country". Since their release, most of the hostages have expressed similar apologies.

Without condoning the Taliban's callous actions, the responsibility rests above all with the Bush administration and its various allies, including the South Korean government, for imposing a neo-colonial occupation on Afghanistan. Former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung sent medical and engineering units to Afghanistan in 2002 as part of the so-called reconstruction of the country.

Kim's successor, Roh, broke from the Millennium Democratic Party (MDP) and formed the current ruling Uri Party. He won a shock victory in 2002 by riding the tide of mounting anti-US sentiment in South Korea, sparked by the failure to prosecute US soldiers stationed in the country who had run over and killed two school girls with an armoured vehicle. The opposition also reflected broader fears over the Bush administration's aggressive stance towards North Korea, which was undermining attempts at reunification.

After winning the election, however, Roh maintained close relations with the US. In early 2004, he sent 3,600 troops to Iraq—the third largest contingent in the "coalition of willing" after the US and UK—to the relatively safe Kurdish region in the north. While his popularity slumped as a result of his support for the US war in Iraq and his economic restructuring measures, Roh was able to stave off an impeachment challenge by the right-wing, openly pro-US opposition and win the general election in 2004.

The Afghan hostage crisis simply added to Roh's political problems. Small protests took place outside US embassy in Seoul. On August 15, the anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II, a group of students criticised the Bush administration's position of "not

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negotiating with terrorists" as hypocritical, pointing out that an American journalist had been freed in Iraq after the release of Iraqi prisoners. They declared that the ultimate responsibility for such hostage taking rested with the US-led interventions.

People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, a civic group based in Seoul, issued a statement criticising the US for its indifference to the plight of the South Korean hostages, watching "as if it were a fire across the river". The statement criticised the Seoul government for sending troops to Iraq under the US alliance, but failing to demand that the US meet its obligations to save South Korean lives.

A statement by the Korean Action against the Dispatch of Troops, a coalition of 351 non-government organisations, declared: "The current crisis involving 23 human lives is a direct outcome of the wrong policy of the Korean government partaking [in] foreign occupation with the use of its own military forces in Afghanistan." It called for an immediate government announcement withdrawing troops from Afghanistan.

Roh was under strong pressure from Washington not to negotiate with the Taliban, but was eventually forced by public pressure to do so. South Korea will pull all its troops out of Afghanistan by the end of the year—a move that the government claimed had already been decided. Predictably, the Bush administration has responded coolly to the freeing of the hostages on the Taliban's terms. "I'd simply reiterate that the long-standing US policy is... not to make concessions to terrorists," State Department spokesman Tom Casey commented.

In the South Korean ruling circles, there are divisions over the wisdom of being aligned too closely with the US and its wars. By listing North Korea as part of an "axis of evil" with Iran and Iraq in 2002, the Bush administration virtually scuttled Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine policy" of rapprochement with Pyongyang. Although the US reached a deal with North Korea at six-party talks this year over its nuclear programs, the Bush administration could quickly switch course towards a renewed confrontation.

Reflecting this debate, the liberal *Hankyoreh* argued on August 23 for South Korea to distance itself from the US "war on terror" that had resulted in tens of thousands of civilian deaths. "Sadly, South Korea has been caught up in Afghan anger directed primarily at the United States. This was a predictable danger when Seoul sent troops to Afghanistan... For the Roh government and its successor, the lesson is that the ROK-US alliance should no longer be global in scope. During the Cold War, Seoul could not escape being dragged into the Vietnam War... But now the alliance is rapidly losing its relevance even on the Korean peninsula, and it should never again become a pretext for Korean involvement in any new US imperial adventures."

Over the past two years, South Korea has cut its troop numbers in Iraq to 1,200 due to the growing controversy at home. The "Zaytun" division is still stationed at Irbil in the Kurdish-controlled region of northern Iraq. The troops have been placed in this oil-rich location not to carry out "humanitarian" work, as the government claims, but to stake a claim in Iraq's vast oil wealth.

Highlighting the economic interests involved, *Chosun Ilbo* commented in March: "For this reason [economic interests], military officers have stressed the importance of plans to carry out development after the Korean troops are brought home. There is support for a gradual troop pull-out, rather than a quick one, so that the development projects can build on the foundation of trust the Zaytun Division has created."

In January, the South Korean government sent a trade mission, including oil company representatives, to the region to seek out business opportunities. In March, a consortium of leading businesses, including the Korean National Oil Corporation, Samsung Corporation and SK Corporation, sent a geological unit to Iraq to survey the potential oil sites.

In the same month, Roh visited the Middle East to sign deals with the major oil producing states. He was accompanied by 200 corporate leaders, including from Samsung Electronics, Hyundai Motors, LG Electronics, SK Corp and Hyundai Heavy Industries. South Korea is now the world's fifth largest oil importer, with the Middle East accounting for nearly 80 percent of its oil needs. Saudi Arabia, for example, is South Korea's fourth largest supplier of oil and the largest market for the South Korean construction industry, with cumulative orders of $58 billion.

These are the real material interests behind South Korea's support for the "war on terror" that resulted in the deaths of two hostages in Afghanistan and the terrifying ordeal suffered by the remaining 19.

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