

# This week in history: July 1-7

30 June 2024

## 25 years ago: Arrest warrants issued in Sealand Youth Training Center fire

On July 2, 1999, arrest warrants were issued for seven people in connection with a dormitory fire that killed 19 children and four adults at the Sealand Youth Training Center in South Korea the previous week.

The youth center's owner was charged with bribing council officials to obtain a construction clearance. He had been illegally operating the site as a youth centre for more than a year before obtaining approval, and had ignored official directions to correct faults in the center's electrical system.

The fire broke out just after midnight and rapidly engulfed the camp's dormitory building in which 430 children were sleeping. The children were attending a two-day summer recreational program at the center overlooking the West Sea. Most of the victims were between five and seven years of age.

The six arrested Hwasong council officials and its owner were charged with violating construction laws and involuntary manslaughter. A year prior, officials approved the youth center as a structure built of reinforced concrete with a steel frame. In reality it consisted of 52 large containers covered with wood and corrugated iron that were stacked three stories high on top of a single-story concrete structure.

The building was constructed of highly flammable materials, including styrofoam ceilings, a material that is easily ignited and gives off toxic fumes when burning. There was no sprinkler system and most of the fire extinguishers did not work.

The dormitory block had only two narrow staircases as exits, making the rapid evacuation of large numbers of people all but impossible. Those who escaped the blaze claimed that they had not heard any alarm. According to police reports, council inspectors had given the center a safety clearance after carrying out two inspections that year. The access road leading to the site had been approved despite the fact that it was not wide enough for fire engines.

The Sealand fire was the latest in a string of disasters that occurred in the country over the previous decade, not restricted to small operators but including major construction companies and corporations. Four years prior the Sampoong Department Store in Seoul collapsed killing more than 500 people, the worst peacetime disaster in South Korea's history. In 1994, the Songsu Bridge, also in Seoul, caved in under the weight of rush hour traffic, claiming the lives of 32 people.

## 50 years ago: President of Argentina Juan Perón dies in office

On July 1, 1973, the president of Argentina, Juan Perón, died after suffering a heart attack. Perón had taken office less than one year prior, having been elected in October 1973 for the third time.

He was succeeded by his wife, Isabel Perón, who was serving as vice president. Her succession to the office made her the first woman to hold the office of president in any modern nation, though other women had previously served as prime ministers in countries with parliamentary systems.

Juan Perón was first elected president in 1946 in the first open elections following over a decade of military rule. In the period of the postwar economic boom, he put forward a brand of politics that become known as "Perónism" that combined anti-imperialist rhetoric and populist demagoguery infused with intense nationalism and fascistic elements.

Perón initially became a popular figure by ending restrictions on trade unions, bringing them close to the state, and allowing modest gains in wages and conditions for workers, concessions made possible by the economic boom that followed World War II. These policies were most of all intended to block workers from turning to revolutionary politics. At the same time, Perón gave refuge to Nazi war criminals, with Argentina serving as the terminus of the infamous "Ratline" operated by Nazi sympathizers and the Catholic Church hierarchy.

During his first term, the Stalinists in the Communist Party and groups breaking with Trotskyism under the influence of Pabloite revisionism adapted themselves to Perónism and supported Perón's government, backing up illusions in Perón as a friend of workers. Under the influence of arch-Pabloite Nahuel Moreno, Trotskyist organizations in Argentina dissolved themselves into the Perónist parties and unions, leaving the working class defenseless and without revolutionary leadership.

In September of 1955 Perón was overthrown in a coup and replaced by a series of military dictators who ruled until 1973. Perón was forced into exile for 18 years. During the years of the dictatorship, left-wing militant groups grew rapidly and an atmosphere of civil war developed.

In June 1973 Perón returned to Argentina after the first elections in which his Justicialist Party was allowed to run openly. He would take office as president again in October 1973 when a new election was organized specifically to allow him to run. After taking office the second time, it became clear that Perón could no longer offer the working class the limited reforms of an earlier period. Perón established the fascist Argentine Anticommunist Alliance, a faction operating in the police and military which carried out the assassination of hundreds of left-wing leaders during the years 1973-1976.

Perón used the final months of his life to prepare a massive repressive state apparatus and elevated the most right-wing and fascist elements to the highest positions, including José López Rega, the worst of the anti-communist thugs.

As president Isabel Perón would continue the policies of her husband until 1976 when the military would remove her and once again assume direct rule of Argentina.

### **75 years ago: French puppet regime formally established in Vietnam**

On July 2, 1949, the new state of Vietnam was formally proclaimed and rapidly granted recognition by France and other imperialist powers. In reality, the government was a puppet of French imperialism, its formation marking a deepening of the attempts of the major powers to suppress opposition to colonial rule among the Vietnamese masses.

During World War II, Indochina, of which Vietnam was the major part, had been occupied by Japanese imperialism. With the defeat of Japan in 1945, a complex scramble to establish control developed, involving France, Britain, the Chinese militarists of the Kuomintang and American imperialism, all of which deployed troops or other national-security personnel.

Despite the massive anti-colonial movement which had developed during World War II, directed against the Japanese and the French, the policies of Stalin in the Soviet Union, based on collaboration with imperialism, included a recognition of British hegemony over portions of Indochina, and provided room for the major powers to intervene.

By 1946, the intrigues had resulted in open warfare between Vietnamese liberation forces, the Viet Minh, headed by the Ho Chi Minh, and the French, who were seeking to regain control over their old possession. Previous low-level guerrilla fighting gave way to major military conflicts after the breakdown of talks between Ho and the French government, as it became clear that Paris would not grant any concessions.

While the Viet Minh retained major support, not only in the north of the country, but also in the major urban centers in the south such as Saigon, its leadership, despite having proclaimed an independent government, was compelled by French military repression to go underground.

The new French-backed state lacked any popular legitimacy. It was established without even a pretense of elections, and was presided over by Emperor Bao Dai, the last of the Nguyen dynasty. Bao was a hated figure, not only because of the corruption and opulence of his family, but because he had served a similar role as figurehead ruler during the brutal Japanese occupation. The declaration of the new state would be followed by an intensification of fighting that would span years, until the Vietnamese defeat of the French, and decades later, of American imperialism.

### **100 years ago: Philippine soldiers stage mutiny against American military**

On July 6, 1924, members of the Philippine Scouts, Filipino soldiers in the US army organized in special, segregated units, stationed in Fort McKinley outside Manila, refused to leave their barracks in protest over unequal wages to white soldiers. The 380 soldiers,

members of an organization called the Secret Soldiers Union, regarded their action as a strike.

The Philippine Scouts had been formed in 1901 during the Philippine-American War of 1899-1902, a brutal war of imperialist conquest, to help the US army fight nationalist insurgents after the United States annexed the Philippines in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War. The Scouts originally served as guides and engaged in combat but by the 1920s were integrated into the American occupation forces in the Philippines.

In 1924, an American soldier earned \$21 a month but a Filipino soldier only earned \$8. Scouts were forced to supplement their incomes by putting their families to work: wives did laundry for American officers and their children worked as officers' houseboys.

The American Governor-General, Leonard Wood, ran a military government in all but name. Philippine members of his cabinet had resigned as a group in 1923. Wood had been in command of Marines who murdered Filipino men, women and children in the Moro Crater Massacre of 1906.

American President Calvin Coolidge had vetoed a military spending bill on May 3 that would have provided a pay raise to the Philippine Scouts as well as other soldiers. It was after this that the Secret Soldiers Union was formed, very much under the influence of Philippine workers who had organized trade unions since the end of the war. On July 1, there had been a strike of 700 Philippine civilian employees at the Cavite Navy Yard near Manila.

As one historian notes, "They were mostly young, nearly all of them privates. ... They swore an oath of loyalty, and planned a demonstration for July 4, 1924, intending to gather on a hill near Fort McKinley and march five miles to downtown Manila, where they would present their demands to the commander of the Army's Philippine Department."

The demonstration was postponed until August 2, but informants notified the command, and 26 soldiers were arrested in the early morning of July 6. After that, soldiers refused to turn out for reveille. The next day striking soldiers were informed that their actions would be regarded as mutiny. Nevertheless, hundreds of Philippine Scouts again refused to report for duty.

After July 29, hundreds of the men were arrested and court-martialed. Nearly all were found guilty. Leaders were given harsh sentences of up to 20 years and others 2 to 5 years at hard labor.



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