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South Korea: Elderly farmers forcibly evicted for US army base

Several human rights activists are being detained after protesting at the forced eviction by riot police of elderly villagers in Pyongtaek, in the north west of South Korea. Their village is subject to an eviction order to allow for the expansion of a neighbouring US army base, Camp Humphreys.

The residents of Daechuri village, mostly farmers in their 60s and 70s, suffered bloodied noses and were pushed over while resisting the latest eviction attempt on 15 March and during an earlier attempt to evict them on 6 March. They say the compensation offered will not be enough to buy equivalent land elsewhere and their livelihoods are at stake.

"Most of these villagers are very old and it is distressing to hear of force being used against them," said Rajiv Narayan, East Asia researcher at Amnesty International. "Given their age, the police should take special care to ensure they are not hurt and to allow prompt medical treatment if they are -- which does not appear to have been the case so far."

Several protesters were arrested on 15 March, including prominent human rights activist Park Lae-goon of Sarangbang Group for Human Rights and Cho Baek-ki of the Catholic Human Rights Committee. Park Lae-goon was arrested while sitting in front of the village school; Cho Baek-ki was trying to stop a forklift truck being used in the evictions. Both men are still detained in local police stations, charged with preventing government officials carrying out orders.

"The government must release all those detained for peacefully protesting against these forced evictions," said Rajiv Narayan.

A consultation carried out before the eviction did not result in the farmers' concerns being taken into account, and appeared to be mainly for show, according to those protesting the eviction. Protesters have complained that the Ministry of National Defence, which initiated the request for an eviction order, acted unilaterally in deciding on an eviction deadline and was not prepared to listen to the needs of the residents.

"Any eviction on the current terms would leave the farmers in an extremely vulnerable position with few opportunities to make a living," said Rajiv Narayan. "We urge the government to carry out a fresh consultation. It should ensure the villagers are not left homeless and give them reasonable compensation and alternative farming land close to their new homes."

There were reports of at least 50 police buses being present during the forced evictions, but it was not

clear how many riot police officers were deployed to evict the residents of Daechuri, who number over 1,000. Protesters requested ambulances when some of the elderly villagers were injured after being pushed to the ground, but the riot police ignored their request.

Background

In December 2004 the Korean government planned to give an extra 2,851 acres to the US Army base Camp Humphreys in Kyonggi province. In December 2005 the government's Land Expropriation Committee approved the 'imminent domain' seizure of the village of Daechuri, a move which made the farmers' existence on their land illegal.

After a consultation led by the Ministry of National Defence, the residents of Daechuri were offered a lump sum in compensation, determined on a low estimation of the value of their land. The area is reclaimed from tidal flats, meaning the land price was already low compared to other farming areas. It would be almost impossible to buy equivalent areas of land for subsistence farming with the lump sum offered.

In February 2006 a national campaign protesting the forced eviction of the farmers was launched. For more information, please see <http://www.geocities.com/savePTfarmers/home>.

Public Document

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