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South Korea: US base demonstrator attacked and detained by police

A prominent human rights activist, Park Lae-goon, will appear in court tomorrow having been beaten up and detained after peacefully demonstrating against the forced eviction of farmers in the northwestern region of Pyongtaek.

"Park Lae-goon is a prisoner of conscience and must be released immediately," said Rajiv Narayan, East Asia researcher at Amnesty International. "He has been detained for over a week solely because of his peaceful campaigning for the Pyongtaek farmers."

Park Lae-goon was arrested on 9 July. He had been demonstrating for the rights of farmers in Pyongtaek, whose land is subject to an eviction order to make way for the expansion of a US army base. According to witnesses, Park and other demonstrators were attacked by another group wielding wooden staffs, but police officers monitoring the demonstration did nothing to stop the attackers. One protester suffered a severe head injury and had his teeth broken, according to a local human rights group.

Some of the demonstrators, including Park, went to the police station to complain about the lack of action on the part of the police. They also complained that the police had blocked the road into the village of Daechuri, preventing residents from getting into their own homes. Rather than consider their complaints, the demonstrators say the police beat up Park and other protesters and arrested them. Most have now been released, but Park Lae-goon remains behind bars.

"Everyone has the right to demonstrate peacefully and the police should be upholding this right, not attacking and arresting people who exercise it," said Rajiv Narayan. "The dispute over villagers' land around Pyongtaek should be settled by means of a fresh consultation that takes account of the farmers' concerns -- not through force."

On Thursday 20 July, the court will either formalise or drop the charges against Park and will decide if he should stay in detention or be released on bail.

Background

Daechuri village in Pyongtaek is subject to an eviction order to allow for the expansion of a neighbouring US army base, Camp Humphreys. The residents of the village, mostly farmers in their 60s and 70s, have been resisting eviction attempts since February 2006. They say the compensation offered will not be enough to buy equivalent land elsewhere and their livelihoods are at stake.

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. Amnesty International is concerned that the current settlement leaves the farmers in a precarious situation, with few opportunities to make a living.

For more information, see:

South Korea: Elderly farmers forcibly evicted for US base:

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA250012006>

South Korea: Thousands of riot police in bloody eviction for US base:

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA250042006>

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