



Postcard from...Pyongtaek

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Just three hours south of the De-Militarized Zone, the South Korean government is waging alarming levels of violence and repression against villagers in the city of Pyongtaek near the U.S. base Camp Humphrey. For over four years, residents have refused to hand over their homes and farmland to the U.S. military.

Over Thanksgiving, I traveled to Pyongtaek with 18 Americans, including U.S.-mom-turned-peace-activist Cindy Sheehan. Two hundred police in riot helmets and shields stopped our bus at the first of two heavily fortified checkpoints. Fortunately several camera crews and journalists were on hand to capture Cindy Sheehan's grand entry. The National Human Rights Commission ruled the checkpoints illegal and in violation of the villagers' human rights, but police are still routinely harassing residents and denying visitors access.

We joined villagers for their 811th consecutive vigil and heard from elders about the destruction and ongoing violence and harassment. Starting in May, over 20,000 armed riot police have repeatedly marched into the village with heavy machinery to bulldoze homes and to destroy the farmland. In defense, villagers and their supporters have used just their bodies, with some tying themselves to their roofs to save their homes. Since the clashes began, the authorities have injured over 1,000 people and demolished 68 homes and the primary school that the villagers themselves built. The government plans to destroy the remaining 147 homes by 2007.

To further drive away the villagers, police have built trenches, poured concrete in irrigation canals, and laid miles of razor wire fencing to keep farmers from getting to their fields. The authorities have levied over \$500,000 in fines and arrested 828 people, including village leader Kim Ji-Tae on charges of obstructing civil affairs and for his leadership in the demonstrations. On November 30, Amnesty International designated Kim a prisoner of conscience and launched an international campaign for his release.

As our delegation toured the village, we saw half-demolished homes like the one pictured. Roof tiles, electrical wiring, and a blue plastic toy car were mixed in the pile of rubble. The ruins serve as a visible scar and a constant message to the residents: leave now or witness more destruction.

The base expansion is part of the Pentagon's 2003 Global Posture Review, which shifts the U.S.

forces in Korea from their historic role of defending South Korea to a new capacity as a launching pad to strike regional enemies. In effect, the U.S. military will downsize its troops from 37,000 to 25,000 but spend \$11 billion dollars in new military hardware and technology in South Korea. It plans to consolidate some 90 bases in Korea, relocating troops and equipment to Pusan and Pyongtaek. Many South Koreans view this amplified U.S. military presence in Korea as both fueling tensions with North Korea and standing in the way of reunification.

This article was edited by John Feffer of IRC.