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In South Korea, 5 people killed while blockading eviction

by a South Korean activist

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At 6 a.m. on 20th January, people who were asking for solutions to avoid eviction in February in Youngsan-Gu, Seoul lost their lives as a consequence of violent oppression from the police.

1. Summary of the Incidence

At 6 a.m. on 20th January, people who were asking for solutions to avoid eviction in February in Youngsan-Gu, Seoul lost their lives as a consequence of violent oppression from the police. A 1500 strong police force was dispatched to disperse about 50 protesters. The police actions taken toward these protesters were similar to those taken in times war. Less than a day after those facing eviction started protesting and without further conversations or an effort to discuss the issues, the government dispatched a special police force and staged an anti-terror operation. After the police entered the building where the protesters were, a fire broke out and the circumstances became dangerous. However, without taking any safety measures, the police proceeded with the operation which resulted in the death of 5 protesters and 1 police officer.

Dispatching a special police force for an anti-terror operation in less than 24 hours is a rare case even in South Korea. Since the Conservatives took power however, the police have often cracked down on protesters in a violent way. This incidence also happened under this context.

A place to pray for the dead was set up at the spot of the incident. Despite of it being the Korean New Year holiday, visits from people continue. A fact finding committee composed of civilian organizations is carrying out investigations whilst the government is trying to close the case as soon as possible.

2. Background and Characteristics

It is well known that there are many problems coupled to rapid re-development projects in South Korea. Existing solutions (such as compensations, providing temporary place to stay etc) are neither realistic nor properly implemented. It is especially worrisome that forced eviction, which is prohibited under international human rights law, is being pursued under the auspices of the government.

South Korea, who is a signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, was requested twice by the Committee on the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to provide protection to victims of forced evictions. However, as shown in this case, the South Korea government violated its obligation to respect the right to an adequate housing and to not being forcibly evicted. It also violated its obligation to protect the safety and the life of victims of forced evictions.

For over a year, lodgers in the re-development project area demanded the Yongsan-Gu Office for appropriate protection. The Yongsan-Gu Office provided no opportunity for talk or negotiation. Local lodgers went to the Youngsan-Gu Office to file an appeal but got rejected. During this appeal process, private security officers hired by the construction company threatened the lodgers and sexually harassed them. However, the police did not take any action against the private security officer's practices. Despite the fact that eviction in the cold season requires the

taking of special measures prior to the eviction, the Youngsan-Gu Office approved the construction company's request to initiate the re-development from February. Lodgers faced with forced eviction entered the empty building to stage protests against this process and lost their life due to violent police operation.

Lodgers living in re-development areas are excluded from both the process and results of re-development projects as they do not own a property in the area. Re-development to improve the housing condition causes inequality in housing as many lodgers have to move into a place worse than their previous housing. A serious problem is that in the previously re-developed area, only 10~15 % of local residents will get to stay in that same area.

Lodgers suffer a serious violation of their housing rights during the re-development process. The aim of re-development projects should be in improvement of housing conditions and relieving poverty for the people living there. The government is obliged to provide necessary information and guarantee participation for people living there regardless of their ownership of the housing. However, these demands are ignored by the government and the construction companies who get benefits from the re-development in South Korea.

On the other hand, the investigation carried out at the government level is criticized for being biased. The police carried out autopsies of the bodies of the victims without the consent of their families. The police report on the incident was revealed to be false in light of a variety of evidence reported by the major media. The police attitude, which is neither democratic nor transparent, creates deeper mistrust. A fair and impartial system for the investigation is urgently required. Rather than trying to close the case as soon as possible, an effort to prevent this kind of tragedy from happening again and a guarantee of democratic participation are required.

3. Demands

Guarantee participation of civil organizations in the investigation process to secure a fair and thorough investigation.

- Punish those responsible for the incidence.
- Review current re-development projects which do not guarantee the right to housing of the lodgers.
- Guarantee the right to housing as a human right.

4. Action for everyone

We would like to show international support at the second pan-national memorial for the dead. Please email us your supporting messages and let us know whether you would sign our statement by noon of the 30th January. Please also send us a copy of your complaints for those responsible. Sending complaints for those responsible continues until mid February.

Email to Sarangbang Group for Human Rights : [humanrights \[at\] sarangbang.or.kr](mailto:humanrights[at]sarangbang.or.kr)

1) Send us your supporting messages.

2) Please sign the statement below.

We urge the South Korean government to protect victims of forced evictions and to carry out a thorough investigation and punish the responsible for the deaths that occurred during the police action in Youngsan-Gu, Seoul 20th January 2009

We pray for the repose of the deceased who protested to secure the right to housing. With sorrow and anger about the deaths, we send our warmest regards to the family. We feel devastated with the reality that a demand for a living with dignity turned into a death and send our support to the family and people in South Korea who resist against the government.

We pay attention to the fact that this incidence was rooted in the problems of the re-development process in South Korea and resulted from a unilateral over-use of public power. We regret that the South Korean government has attacked its citizens who protested against forced eviction and tried to protect their right to housing. Dispatching a special police force is an act of labeling its citizens as a terrorist group, which is contrary to the state's obligation to respect and protect the rights of its citizens. The government further damaged its fairness and trust by trying to close the case as soon as possible and in carrying out autopsies of the bodies without consent of the family's concerned. We urge the South Korean government to apologize to the families concerned and come up with measures to prevent a similar case happening again in future. We demand the acceptance of responsibility for this incident from Seokgi Kim, the head of the Seoul Police, Sehoon Won, the minister of the Ministry of Public Administration and Security, Jangkyu Park, the head of the Yongsan-Gu Office, Dongsan Baek, the head of Yongsan Police

We confirm that the aim of re-development projects should lie on improving the right to housing. We are concerned that the re-development process in South Korea has become a means to earn more money for certain groups, such as construction companies, rather than follow an approach based on international human rights law. Under the international human rights perspective, forced evictions are a clear violation of human rights. Despite the fact that the South Korean government should, as a signatory to the ICESCR, take steps to prevent forced evictions, the government itself used police force against citizens who tried to realize their right to housing, resulting in the death of five citizens and one police officer. According to human rights organizations in South Korea, for over a year demands by lodgers in the re-development project area for appropriate protection, talks and negotiations were rejected by the Yongsan-Gu Office. They had asked several times to make plans for re-settlement but received no answers back. Out of desperation prior to the forced eviction, these people staged protests that cost them their lives. We urge the South Korean government to review any re-development projects that do not provide protection to the lodgers and that do not guarantee the participation of citizens.

Sending our support and expressing our solidarity to those in South Korea

demanding a thorough investigation and punishment of the responsible, we urge the following:

- * Guarantee participation of civil organizations in the investigation process to secure a fair and through investigation.
- * Punish those responsible for the incidence.
- * Review current re-development projects which do not guarantee the right to housing of the lodgers.
- * Recognize housing as a human right and guarantee this right to housing.

3) Please, send any protesting messages to the following addresses:

Myung-bak Lee, the president of South Korea

<http://www.bluehouse.go.kr/kr/index.php>

1 Sejongno Jonno gu

Seoul Korea(110-820)

Tel +822-730-5800

Fax: +822-770-4943/+822-770-2440

Sehoon Won, the minister of the Ministry of Public Administration and Security

<http://www.mopas.go.kr>

Tel +822-2100-3000

Fax: +822-2100-4001

Seokgi Kim, the head of the Seoul Police

<http://www.smpa.go.kr>

Tel +822-720-3993

Fax: +822-754-7000

Sehoon Oh, the Mayor of Seoul (Metropolis)

<http://www.seoul.go.kr>

Tel: +822-731-6060

Fax +822-737-8688

Jangkyu Park, the head of the Yongsan-Gu Office

<http://www.yongsan.seoul.kr>

Tel: +822-710-3333

Fax +822-718-0333