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[Obituary]

A “worker for life and peace” breathes his last breath

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The body of deceased farmer Baek Nam-ki is moved from intensive care to a mortuary at Seoul National University Hospital in Seoul’s Jongno district, Sep. 25. (by Kim Bong-kyu, staff photographer)

Baek Nam-ki dedicated his life to cultivating land, and fighting for democracy, before perishing from state violence

The burning heart of a man called a “worker for life and peace” has made its last beat.

Baek Nam-ki, 69, was admitted to critical care at Seoul National University Hospital last November after being struck by a cold jet from a water cannon while participating in a popular indignation protest. On Sep. 23, his condition began to rapidly deteriorate. His kidneys weakened, preventing the administration of drugs, and family members and

acquaintances rushed to his site after the medical team informed them he was unlikely to survive the weekend. Baek‘s family held out slim hopes, recalling his recovery from similar symptoms in July. But Baek finally passed away at 1:58 pm on Sep. 25 - one day after his birthday.

“Police still have the funeral home surrounded, but we thank everyone for their condolence wishes and are preparing to give our father a proper farewell. We will win,” daughter Doraji tweeted.

Baek Nam-ki was born in 1947 in Buchun, a village in the Ungchi township of South Jeolla Province’s Boseong County where his family had lived for nine generations. Admitted to Chung-Ang University as a public administration student in 1968, he was twice expelled for taking part in the democracy movement against the dictatorial policies of the Park Chung-hee administration, including its amendment of the Constitution to allow a President to run for a third term and its adoption of the Yushin Constitution. Returning to school in 1980 amid the Seoul Spring following Park’s assassination on Oct. 26 the year before, Baek once again joined the campaign for democratization. But he eventually found himself under arrest for violating a martial law decree by the Chun Doo-hwan administration (1980-88) after it took power in a coup d’etat. He suffered torture, including having red pepper water poured in his nose. He was sentenced to three years in prison and permanently expelled from Chung-Ang University.

Baek was freed in 1981 through a special March 1st Movement Day pardon. Soon afterwards, he married Park Gyeong-suk, now 63. The newlyweds settled in Buchun, the same village Baek‘s family had lived in for generations. Perhaps it was a way of following the spirit of Jesus Christ - with whom he shared the Catholic baptismal name of Emmanuel, meaning “God is with us” - by serving in low places. It was a period when rapid economic growth was leading young people to flock to the cities, but Baek chose the opposite direction. He began farming with Korean wheat seeds, collected from all over South Korea, and gained a reputation as the top wheat farmer in Boseong County. In 1994, he joined in forming the Gwangju/South Jeolla chapter of the Movement to Save Our Native Wheat and was elected co-chairman. He gave his two daughters - now 35 and 30, respectively - the names Doraji, meaning “bellflower,” and Minjuhwa, meaning “democratization”; his son, now 33, was named Baek Du-san, after Baekdu Mountain. The family’s two dogs were named “523” and “818,” after the respective dates of death of former Presidents Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) and Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003). While serving as vice chairman of the Corea Catholic Farmers‘ Movement (CCFM) in 1992, he was described by longtime colleagues as a “worker for life and peace” for abandoning his livelihood battle to lead movements for peace, life, and community.

Members of the public block police from entering Seoul National University Hospital‘s funeral home in Seoul’s Jongno district, during a funeral for farmer Baek Nam-ki, Sep. 25. The police and prosecutors wanted to do an autopsy on Baek, but members of the public were blocking police from seizing Baek‘s body, out of concern that the police would claim his death was caused by a preexisting ailment. This morning, Seoul Central District Court refused a warrant request to conduct an autopsy. (by Kim Bong-kyu, staff photographer)

On Nov. 14 of last year, Baek ate breakfast at home before traveling to Seoul with around 120 other farmers to take part in the popular indignation protest. His aim was to call on President Park Geun-hye to honor her election campaign pledge to maintain stable rice prices. Park had promised to guarantee rice prices of at least 210,000 won (US$190) per 80-kg bag, but the amount had fallen from 170,000 won (US$154) in 2013 to 150,000 won (US$136) at the time.

Baek was on his way to the demonstration at around 7 pm when he approached a police vehicle barricade in front of Jongno District Office and was struck by a water cannon jet shot by police, suffering a severe blow to his head on the asphalt. He was transported to a hospital and underwent four hours of surgery to treat the resulting cerebral hemorrhage. Despite those efforts and subsequent brain surgery, he never recovered consciousness, and remained on a respirator in critical care for the rest of his life.

Soon after his injury, Baek’s family and CCFM members spearheaded the establishment of the Pan-National Countermeasures Committee for the Recovery of the Farmer and Worker for Life and Peace Baek Nam-gi and the Denunciation of State Violence, which set about demanding an investigation and punishment of those responsible. The following Nov. 18, the committee filed a complaint against former National Police Agency chief Kang Sin-myeong, former Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency chief Goo Eun-su, and five others on charges of attempted murder. In March, they filed suit against the state and Kang for 240 million won (US$217,400) in damages. A hearing was held by the National Assembly Security and Public

Administration Committee on Sep. 12 at the request of three opposition parties, but Kang denied legal responsibility, claiming the use of water cannon was justified and arguing that it was “inappropriate to apologize unconditionally simply because someone was injured or died.”

Residents of Baek’s home village of Buchun grieved at the news of his death, which came in the middle of the autumn harvest.

Mourners pay their respects to farmer Baek Nam-ki, who died on Sep. 25, at Seoul National University Hospital’s funeral home in Seoul’s Jongno district. (pool photo)

“It’s truly awful. I‘m so upset,” said Lee Mi-ja, 62, whose husband Seon Yeong-hwan, 69, was a lifelong friend born the same year as Baek. The Gwangju/South Jeolla alliance of the Korean Peasants’ League made plans to set up memorial in different cities and counties, while officials with the league headed to Seoul to discuss countermeasures.

It was last June that younger colleagues and wife Park harvested the last wheat sown by Baek the preceding November. Prior to his injury, Baek‘s yield had been in the range of 50 to 60 40-kg bags; this time, it came out to just 32.5. Family members dubbed the harvest “Baek Nam-gi wheat” on Sep. 25 and made plans to distribute the seeds. This fall, they plan to sow them once again in their field.

By Kim Ji-hoon, staff reporter and Park Im-keun, North Jeolla correspondent
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