Document emerges linking Chun Doo-hwan to suppression of
Gwangju Democratization Movement

Former president received reports on death penalty convictions for key demonstrators

A military document titled “Joint Investigation Headquarters Measures,” states that progress on investigations of the Gwangju Democratization Movement were reported to then President Chun Doo-hwan.

Former President Chun Doo-hwan, 88, received reports on death penalty decisions regarding individuals involved in the Gwangju Democratization Movement following the event’s suppression, a document states.

The document is further evidence that Chun, as then head of the Defense Security Command (DSC), was directly or indirectly involved in the events of May 1980, despite claims in his memoirs that he was unconnected with the situation in Gwangju at the time.

Acquired by Hankyoreh on May 13, a military document titled “Joint Investigation Headquarters Measures” states that directions for handling of the “Gwangju incident” were examined and reported to Chun as head of the Joint Investigation Headquarters at the time. The document reports that four people, including two prosecutors and two Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) investigators, had “traveled to Gwangju to review the investigation’s progress.” The document’s suggestions include “setting scope of punishments at around 500 persons” and “death penalty for 30 to 40 persons who executed major duties.” Indeed, the first martial law command military trials on Oct. 25, 1980, resulted in five of 255 implicated individuals being sentenced to death, seven to life in prison, 163 to prison time, and 80 to suspended sentences.

The document also provides circumstantial evidence that the Joint Investigation Headquarters received reports on framing operations in “conspiracy to rebellion” charges against Kim Dae-jung. Established according to Martial Law Decree No. 5 on Oct. 27, 1979, to investigate the assassination of President Park Chung-hee the day before, the Joint Investigation Headquarters held a monopoly on intelligence operations at the time. According to the document, the South Jeolla investigation headquarters ordered the inclusion of details about an individual surnamed Jeong being given 5 million won (US$4,212) at Kim Dae-jung’s home after relating a plan to overthrow the government – an attempt to portray the Gwangju Democracy Movement as a rebellion orchestrated by Kim. Indeed, it subsequently emerged that the guestbook for an inn in Wando Township on May 29, 1980, which Jeong presented as evidence to deny allegations of having conspired with Kim, had been torn apart and falsified.

The South Jeolla investigation headquarters carried out an investigation on individuals involved in the Gwangju Democracy Movement, with a group of around 80 investigators taken from its security team as well as the KCIA, prosecutors, Army criminal investigation corps, and military
Police. In his 1998 book “I Could Not Let Myself Be a Cowardly Father,” Heo Jeong-hwa, former senior officer of the 505 DSC unit, wrote, “The thing we were most concerned with during the investigation was linking crimes to Kim Dae-jung. Among those not in political power, we made attorney Hong Nam-soon into the ringleader, and Jeong Dong-nyeon – then a student who had just begun resuming his studies at Chonnam National University – into the student ringleader.”

The book also stated that “the 505 unit, military prosecutors, and military court decided on the sentences for those delivered before the hearings even took place.”

Evidence of attempts to frame Kim Dae-jung for rebellion

The document also includes evidence of attempts during the investigation to link Kim Dae-jung to the student movement with charges of rebellion. Among the South Jeolla investigation headquarters’ recommendations is a “policy decision on whether to charge with rebellion or sedition,” with an added note that “Gwangju citizens will only accept if Kim Dae-jung is the rebellion leader.” The document further includes a characterization of activities by students and other prior to May 17 as “rebellion,” as well as the disturbances that took place after May 22.

Jeong Su-man, a former head of the May 18 Family Members’ Association, said the document was “evidence that Chun [Doo-hwan], who served as head of the Joint Investigation Headquarters established to investigate the Park Chung-hee assassination in addition to his role at Security Commander, received reports on plans for the handling of Kim Dae-jung and individuals implicated in May 18.”

The document also states that a report was provided to the Joint Investigation Headquarters head on plans for “investigating individuals involved in disturbances during the Gwangju incident.” Notably, it includes a reference to former South Jeolla Provincial Police Agency Commissioner Ahn Byeong-ha, who was arrested and tortured for refusing the New Military Bloc’s orders to open fire on civilians.

“Mr. Ahn and other figures in important positions should be investigated directly by the joint investigation department,” it recommends.

Lee Jae-ui, co-author of the book “Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of an Era,” called the document “important evidence that Chun Doo-hwan – who ascended to de facto power through the coup d’état of Dec. 12, 1979, and the rebellion of May 17, 1980 – was also deeply involved in the after-the-fact handling of May 18.” Chun has consistently denied involvement in the events in Gwangju in May 1980, claiming in his memoirs published in April 2017 that he had “been cleared of the false accusations of being a ‘murderer’ after it was proven that I did not issue the order to open fire.”

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