[Reportage part III] Seeking truth in place of forgetting

The front pages of various Vietnamese news websites covering the visit and apology by a South Korean delegation for the fiftieth anniversary of a massacre of civilians by South Korean troops during the Vietnam War.

Letter by one victim of South Korean soldiers’ massacre details complex feelings about forgiving on behalf of the deceased

The Binh An Massacre refers to killings of civilians by three companies of the Tiger Division (part of the South Korean forces in Vietnam) at 15 sites in the rural commune of Binh An between Jan. 23 and Feb. 26, 1966. A total of 1,004 Vietnamese civilians were reportedly killed in the massacres.

The identity of 728 of the victims has been confirmed. There were 166 children, 231 women and 88 people 60 years old or above. Nguyen’s mother and younger sister were among them.

“I had a bunch of thoughts before the 50th anniversary memorial ceremony,” Nguyen said, when he met the peace delegation at his house. In a voice that was quiet and calm, he proceeded to read a letter he had written in advance.

“A long time has passed, long enough that I can stare at the wounds on my body from that day. Now, it seems that even I will have to make peace with my memories of the past. I also tidied up the graves of my mother and my younger sister. After clearing the weeds, I stood for a long time in front of my mother’s grave. The word ‘forgiveness’ was on the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed it. I felt so confused about whether the living could forgive South Koreans on behalf of the dead,” Nguyen read.
While he was reading the letter, a cool wind intermittently blew into the house from the fields. At the end of February, the weather in Central Vietnam was neither hot nor cold.

The wind blew as chickens clucked and dogs barked and as, inside, wooden chairs scraped on the floor, people blew their noses and cleared their throats, camera shutters clicked, and Ku spoke, interpreting for Nguyen.

In April of last year, Nguyen came to South Korea at the invitation of South Korea’s Peace Museum, on the 40th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. In the letter, he recalled the Vietnam War veterans that he had met on his visit.

“That moment, I made up my mind not to cry anymore,” Nguyen said, as he described seeing the veterans in the distance.

“The people who claim there was no massacre have no way to explain the death of my mother or little sister. These people were unjustly killed, but who were the killers? I don’t even know whom I am to forgive, or how,” Nguyen said.

“Try to imagine that your parents, your spouse, your brothers and your children were murdered before your very eyes. What kind of logic and what kind of reason would be able to control you?”

As Nguyen got further into his letter, he gradually began to speak with more of an edge. He stressed words like “revenge,” “responsibility” and “truth.”

“Even at this very moment, I am struggling with myself, expending all of the energy left in my body so as not to commit some crazy act of revenge. . . .”

“The soldiers of Park Chung-hee are at the same time criminals and victims. I think that the people who decided all of these policies and who drove people like us into the maelstrom ought to be held responsible. . . .”

“To forgive certainly does not mean to forget. As long as the truth is covered up, I cannot utter the word ‘forgive.’ The past is not overcome until [the wrongdoers] are held responsible to ensure that these wrongs are not repeated. . . .”

After reading the entire letter, Nguyen handed it to Roh.

Nguyen had made clear that forgiveness would have to wait, and a few hours later during his official speech for the memorial service on the 50th anniversary of the Binh An Massacre, he stressed his desire for the South Korean government to take responsibility for what happened.

What Nguyen really wanted was truth in place of forgetting; he wanted accountability, so that these wrongs would not happen again.

Can Phum, the village where Nguyen lives, is located in a rural commune that was originally called Binh An. The name derives from Chinese characters that mean “peace and safety” (平安, pingan).

After such a brutal massacre, the people of the village were no longer willing to call it by that name. When they rebuilt the village from the ashes of the massacre, they changed the name to Tay Vinh, a name that means “glory in the west” (西荣, xirong).
“In Feb. 1966, South Korean troops carried out a mopping-up operation that lasted for three weeks,” said Nguyen Thi Nhuan, 34, an employee that we met at the Binh An Museum before visiting Nguyen Tan Lan’s house. “Cruel massacres occurred at every village that they visited. The best-known of these is the massacre at Go Dai.”

Nguyen Thi Nhuan explained that South Korean troops carried out mass killings of the villagers in a variety of cruel ways. They rammed bayonets into women's genitals and burned children alive.

People in the air raid shelters were also burned to death. One dead mother was discovered cradling a newborn infant to her breast.

When those who had fled ventured back to the village a fortnight later, they found a terrible stench from the corpses that had been mangled by wild animals. The survivors did not move back to the village until long after the war was over.

There is no telling how much more time must pass before the village can be called “Binh An” once more, the museum employee explained.

The people of the village have set up memorial stones at every place where massacres occurred. On the site of the massacre at Go Dai Village there is now a huge memorial stone, a commemorative altar and a park.

The mural behind the memorial stone for the victims depicts a soldier who is wearing a military uniform bearing the insignia of the ROK Tiger Division. The mural was created from the memory of the villagers.

It is in front of that mural that the memorial service is held on Feb. 26 of each year.
Civic movement to put up a Vietnam pieta

The peace delegation arrived on Feb. 24 in Ho Chi Minh City, where the members visited the War Remnants Museum and other sites before proceeding into central Vietnam. After attending the Binh An massacre memorial ceremony and rites in Daihan and Go Dai, they spent the days until Feb. 29 traveling to a number of other villages, including Truong Thanh in Binh Dinh Province, Binh Hoa in Quang Ngai Province, and Ha My and Phong Nhi in Quang Nam Province. All were sites of civilian massacres by South Korean troops during the Vietnam War. Most took place in 1966, which means fiftieth anniversary memorial ceremonies are taking place this year in various sites throughout central Vietnam. Go Dai, where the first of the ceremonies was staged, is also a candidate site for the erection of a “Vietnam pieta” - a statue of a mother with a nameless baby, known in Vietnamese as “the last lullaby.” It’s a project by the Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation promotion committee and sculptors Kim Seo-gyeong, 51, and Kim Woo-seong, 52 - creators of a statue of a young girl symbolizing the comfort women that stands across from the Japanese embassy in Seoul - to apologize for the massacres and offer solace to victims.

On the bus ride to Binh Hoa on Feb. 28 (the fifth day of the itinerary), Ku explained about the early process of delving into the civilian massacres in Vietnam. In 1998, a few South Korean artists joined the Japanese group Peace Boat to share about their country’s suffering under Japanese colonial occupation. The activity involved riding a boat to visit various countries around the world and witness the suffering, starvation, and poverty there. The first stop was Da Nang in central Vietnam. It was there that the artists first saw the legacy of the civilian massacres perpetrated by South Korean soldiers during the Vietnam War. Hearing the resident accounts, a Japanese activist said, “You’re just like us.” The artists immediately left the boat. The following year, they became the core members of a new civic group called Nawauri (Me and Us). Ku, who met them around the same time, ended up spending 45 days visiting three villages a day distributing a truckload of ginseng tea as gifts. It was in an article titled “Remember Vietnam’s Spirits” in the Sept. 2 1998 edition of the Hankyoreh 21 magazine that year that Ku first shared the massacre issue with a South Korean audience. She also said she was the first South Korean the villagers of Binh Hoa had met since the massacre.

No official apology from the South Korean government or veterans

The Vietnam War first started in 1960, but it was in the wake of the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964 that it began escalating into a full-scale conflict. After the US, South Korea accounted for the second-largest number of troops in the war, which lasted until 1975. First, it was a group of around 270 medical support team members and taekwondo instructors sent to the city of Vung Tau south of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) in 1964. Between Oct. 1965 and 1973, South Korean soldiers account for 320,000 man-days in Vietnam. In the Hankyoreh 21 report, Ku shared an official tally of 41,450 Vietnamese people killed by South Korean troops, with investigations by Vietnamese authorities identifying around 80 massacres of civilians by South Korean soldiers and a death toll of some 9,000.

Relations between South Korea and Vietnam were severed after war’s end and did not formally resume until Dec. 1992. Afterwards, the Vietnamese government appealed to its public to “close the door on the past and open up the future”; Seoul, for its part, avoided any explicit mention of the issue.
When Kim Dae-jung (in office 1998-2003) and subsequent South Korean presidents visited Vietnam, they expressed messages of regret only in general terms. Amid this lack of interest and attention from either government, dealing with the massacre issue has so far been a matter for exchanges at the civilian level. The contrast with the US - where incidents such as the largest-scale civilian massacre at My Lai have occasionally been the subject of court trials - is apparent. In South Korea, neither the government nor the soldiers themselves have yet acknowledged the massacring of civilians.

“If you shut the door on the past, you have no future”

After the peace delegation attended the memorial service on Feb. 26, all the major newspapers in Vietnam covered the story. But underneath the facts these articles presented, there were signs of a subtle change in their attitude and tone.

“Considering that there was a shuffle of key leaders at the beginning of this year, something different could be happening inside the Vietnamese government,” Ku said.

The group heard something similar from popular Vietnamese poet Thanh Thao, whom we met in Quang Ngai Province on the day after the memorial service. Thanh summed up an article he had read in Vietnam’s largest daily paper, Tuoi Tre, as saying that putting the past aside for a time does not mean shutting the door on the past.

“I think that’s true,” the poet said. “All of us are moving toward the future, but this doesn’t mean that we’re going to forget about the past. If you shut the door on the past, you have no future.”

Perhaps Vietnamese society was responding to the apology offered 50 years later by the South Korean peace travel group in a different way from before.

On Feb. 29, when the six-day trip came to an end, the peace delegation walked through the old downtown of Hoi An.

Earlier that day, the group had met Nguyen Thi Thanh, a survivor of the massacre at Phong Nhi village. Song Pil-gyeong, 61, a member of Medics for Vietnam and Peace who was on the trip, recalled how Nguyen had looked two years ago. Song said that he had been to Vietnam a total of 21 times.

After telling her story, Nguyen asked the South Koreans in the audience, “Why were we shot?” Immediately upon hearing this question, Lee Jeong-woo, a professor emeritus at Kyungpook National University, collapsed to the floor. Lying on the ground and weeping, he said was sorry over and over again.

As Nguyen faced the unexpected wailing of the aged professor, what kind of expression do you think was on her face?

Lots of S. Korean tourists with no consciousness of tragic history

It was nearly midnight, but Da Nang International Airport was bustling with people. Most of the 40 ticket windows were dedicated to passengers headed to Incheon and Busan.
The people who made it through customs first were waiting in a corner for the rest of their groups. One Korean child was whining to his parents because he did not like the chocolate in his hand. The parents tried to console him, but finally they just left him alone.

Throughout our trip, we had hardly seen any South Koreans, but now they all seemed to be gathered in this place.

Where in Vietnam had they all been? How many of them were aware that the South Korean army had massacred 9,000 Vietnamese civilians?

It suddenly occurred to me that peace is the change brought about by each of our awareness and sense of responsibility for the source and basis of the ground on which we stand.

This year, 50th anniversary memorial services will be held at various sites in Central Vietnam where South Korean troops were once stationed. Half a century has passed since then.

I wonder when NKuyen Tan Lan will be able to get his wish for truth in place of forgetting, for accountability that will ensure these wrongs will not happen again.

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[Please direct questions or comments to [english@hani.co.kr]