Until this year, South Koreans were not allowed to attend memorial ceremony for Vietnam War massacre victims

The man who suddenly appeared

The next day, Roh’s apology was widely reported in the Vietnamese media. On its online edition that evening, Vietnam’s leading daily newspaper Tuoi Tre ran an article under the headline, “South Korean representative apologizes for Binh An massacre.”

The following day, Lao Dong, another leading Vietnamese daily, reported that “a South Korean professor knelt to apologize to victims of the Binh An massacre,” referring to Roh, who is a chair professor at a South Korean university. Other major newspapers - including Tien Phong, Dan Tri and Bao Dat Viet - also printed similar reports. According to delegation leader Ku, this was “unprecedented.”
It appeared that Vietnamese public opinion was being moved by the apology not of a South Korean government official but by an ordinary civilian.

After this, on the streets, we started running into people who recognized the peace delegation. This was an unexpected development for the delegation, which had been planning to visit not only Go Dai Village, where the 50th anniversary memorial service had been held, but the other four massacre sites as well.

On Feb. 28, two days after the memorial service, an employee at a flower shop in Quang Ngai Province asked if we were the delegation that had attended the 50th anniversary memorial service and threw in a few free bouquets along with the ones we were buying to honor the massacre victims.

“I’ve already heard about you. Lots of people know the news about South Koreans going to the memorial service,” said a taxi driver in Hoi An, a city in Quang Nam Province, on Feb. 29.

There was even one Vietnamese who came to our bus and asked us to come to his village, too. This was after we visited the memorial hall in the village of Truong Thanh in the Cat Dien Commune of Binh Dinh Province, the day after attending the memorial service.

After the group had gotten into the bus to continue to the next stop on our itinerary, a Vietnamese man approached. While we waited, he boarded the bus and said, “I’m here because I heard that South Koreans were coming and I have something to tell you.”

He was born in 1966, and his name was Pandin Rain. His village was located nearby in Gathung Commune. He told us that, three days after he was born, South Korean troops carried out a civilian massacre in his village. That day, he lost his mother and his grandmother in the air-raid shelter.

Rain told us that he had come running because he was upset and thought it unfair that the South Koreans had visited Truong Thanh but were not coming to his village.

“From the moment I was born, I didn’t have a mother. Because of that, my life until now has been very difficult and lonely,” he said. “Since there is a memorial stone here, South Koreans come here and light incense and pay their respects, but there isn’t a memorial stone in my village yet. Please come to my house. We need to comfort each other. I came all the way here to tell you this.”

The group grew solemn. We had just gotten back from meeting an elderly woman named Huyentidao, 87, at the memorial hall in Truong Thanh, who told us that she had lost her five family members in a massacre and lived by herself. Her frail body trembling, she expressed her gratitude to the visitors from South Korea.

As Rain continued his story, a number of people in the bus sniffled. In the end, Rain started choking up as well.

“It was moving to learn that South Koreans had come here to pay their respects. In the past, we were enemies, but now we are friends. If you come, we are completely ready to welcome you and to forgive you. Will you please come to my village?” he said.

In order to set up a memorial stone, there must be an investigation by the Vietnamese government, and the government must give permission for the stone. We had no way of knowing whether there
had been a government investigation, whether an investigation had started but not concluded, or whether the investigation had concluded but there was not enough money to build a memorial stone.

“It’s not common for Vietnamese people to come up to a peace delegation themselves,” said Ku, after the man had gone.

In the past, several hundred South Koreans have visited the sites of civilian massacres by South Korean troops in Vietnam under the name of “peace travel groups.” After Ku brought the issue to public attention for the first time through articles in Hankyoreh 21 magazine in 1999, the Vietnam War Truth Commission was formed by activists. Since then, there have been ongoing efforts to raise awareness about what happened during the war and to bring comfort to the victims.

The late Moon Myeong-geum and Kim Ok-ju, former comfort women for the Japanese Imperial Army, donated 70 million won (US$58,300), which was used as seed money for building the Peace Museum in Seoul. The purpose of the museum is to encourage visitors to reflect on war and violence.

There is reason to think that South Koreans’ sincere efforts over the past 17 years are finally becoming more widely known to the Vietnamese.

‘Vo danh’ means ‘unnamed infant’

South Koreans were also present for the first time at the Daihan ancestral rite event the day before the Binh An massacre 50th anniversary memorial. While the memorials are staged by local governments, rites are organized mainly by bereaved family members. The government may suggest “closing the door on the past,” but the family members most directly impacted by the deaths have historically declined to allow South Koreans to attend. The rites are also not held every year. Local tradition holds that all villagers should partake in the food and drink, and it has been difficult for struggling families to hold the events on an annual basis. The Daihan rite for Go Dai village, where all 380 residents were killed in the space of an hour 50 years ago, wasn't held last year or the year before.

For the rite on Feb. 25, the peace delegation paid respects to the spirits in front of the Go Dai village memorial stone, which bears the text, “May vengeance against the invading enemy be forever inscribed on your heart.” Directly behind it is the site of the massacre that took place 50 years ago. Participants burned incense and repeated the words “vengeful spirit, specter, soul” to a chaotic mix of flute, drum, and string accompaniment. Traditionally, the names of the deceased are recited in Vietnamese memorial rites; here, there seem to be have simply too many, Ku explained. Different types of food were laid out on an altar as tall as a grown person: young pork ribs, fruit, chicken, porridge, a fruit basket in clear plastic packaging. Around the memorial fluttered flags of different colors; the old, faded red tent was unable to hold off the rain that suddenly began to pour. One Vietnamese attendee who had been walking around the altar taking pictures came over to show me images of the South Korean visitors before writing a note to ask my name. His expression seemed cheerful. It was the same expression on his face when he went over to a documentary production team with the visitors’ group and pointed to the names written on the memorial behind the altar, suggesting by gesture that the members photograph them. Many of the 380 names were listed simply as “vo danh” - meaning “name unknown.”
After the rite was over, the visitors and residents enjoyed a pleasant atmosphere as they ate. When asked if he had any memories of the massacre, resident Thanh Cao Long replied, “A lot in the area. I can’t count all the relatives and neighbors.”

Thanh said he was born in 1967, a year after the massacre.

“It was really tough on the villagers when the people’s committee first said they’d be accepting South Koreans at the memorial,” he explained. “But they’ve been coming consistently, and now we welcome them.”


A drinking party was also held that day before the memorial stone bearing the 380 victims’ names. All around, the Vietnamese toast of “mot, hai, ba, yo!” (“one, two, three, drink!”) rang out into the night.

Before the memorial stone the next day, the visitors met Nguyen Tan Lan - perhaps the most visible of the Binh An massacre survivors - at his home. Since they didn’t speak Vietnamese, they wanted to hear his account first. Nguyen was living in the same home he had at the time of the massacre. The visitors transferred from their large bus to a van and took a narrow riverside road into the village of Can Phung. They arrived at a quiet side street and got out to walk the rest of the way.

Nguyen’s home was off the side of a broad field of green rice paddies. It was somewhere in this area that his mother and sister died 50 years ago.

“From early morning, you could hear the shelling and gunshots,” he recalled of the day. He had awoken from his sleep and gone to hide with his mother and sister in an air-raid shelter near their home. His father had left when he was three, and a brother older by three years had gone into the mountains to escape drafting by the South Vietnamese military. The gunshots seemed to miss their house, but returned around 4 pm just in front. The three were finally discovered by the South Korean soldiers and dragged out. Villagers from around twenty families like Nguyen’s were gathered in one of the fields. The soldiers instructed the villagers to lie face down with their heads lowered. An hour or so later, there was shouting, and then the shooting started. The field erupted in chaos. Amid the thick smoke of gunfire, arms and legs were shorn off, bodies blasted into pieces. Nguyen’s mother clutched her two children. A grenade struck his heel and landed on the ground. He ran three or four steps before falling down. The grenade went off. Riddled with shrapnel, Nguyen lost consciousness. When he woke again, it was to the darkness of night. From the blackness nearby, he could hear groans, intermittently stopping only to start over again. Time passed, and people came to clear away the bodies.

Nguyen was also moved. It was at his uncle’s home that he managed to regain consciousness. His mother had been moved with him, but little was left of her lower body. His sister's head was severely fractured. Her frenzied screaming and moans stopped; she was the first to die. It was after the villagers came back from burying her that Nguyen's mother also passed away. He lost consciousness once again.

Continued in part III
By Park Ki-yong, staff reporter in Vietnam

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