

Evicted Villagers 'Bury' Hope As They Leave To Make Way For U.S. Base

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Seventy-year-old Susan Kim Soon-deuk is distraught. For some 50 years she toiled transforming a tidal mud flat into farmland. And now the South Korean government has taken it from her.

"I feel victimized by the government's plan to convert our village to a U.S. military base. I suffered a lot in reclaiming fertile farmland from the tidal flats," a tearful Kim told UCA News April 7.

Kim and 58 families' 935-day candlelight vigil protesting the eviction order ended March 24, and was ultimately to no avail. "My protest ended in vain and I was kicked out," Kim said.

The families have been moved to Nowa-ri, a 20-minute walk from Daechu-ri, but the government has yet to complete living arrangements there.

Residents of the small farming village in Pyeongtaek, 65 kilometers south of the capital, were forced off their land near Camp Humphreys. The U.S. Army base is being expanded to accommodate 8th U.S. Army and Korea-U.S. Combined Forces Command personnel currently stationed in Seoul.

The government purchased the land, having to take court action against 160 households who refused to sell their property. It then forcibly evacuated villagers who would not leave the area. By March 31, the government was able to buy all the land needed for the expansion, but farmers maintain that this was done forcibly.

On April 7, Kim and about 200 other villagers, along with social activists, organized a ["farewell" ceremony](#)

After burning a written prayer petition, they bowed twice in front of an altar they erected. Villagers also burned a bamboo statue symbolizing their village guardian spirit, after tying ribbons with written promises to return. They then carried a small boat decorated with flowers as a symbol of their life's journey. Some villagers, with tears rolling down their faces, followed the boat. The procession resembled a traditional Korean funeral procession.

Entering the village's Daechu Elementary School playground they dug a hole and buried a jar as a time capsule. The jar contained their seals and identification cards. They also buried wooden plaques on which they wrote their pledge to return. The ceremony ended with the burning of the boat.

An organizer explained to UCA News that such a custom was borrowed from the Buddhist tradition to pray to the sky and land for fortune.

This is not the first time that the farmers in Pyeongtaek were driven off their land. In 1952, during the Korean War (1950-1953), they lost their land to the present Camp Humphreys. They then began to reclaim nearby tidal flats for farming.

For people such as Kim, leaving the land is like turning her back on an entire lifetime. She married a man from Daechu-ri in 1959 and made the village her home. "I carried soil from the mountain, and with fertilizer I got rid of the salt in the land," she recalled.

Her 72-year-old husband suffers from diabetes and cannot work anymore, she continued, and although she has four sons, only one is a farmer living with her, as the others are in Seoul. She lamented that with her rice fields gone, her son has no work. At Daechu-ri she and her family could live comfortably on the produce from the fields, she said.

Kim also worries about life at the temporary settlement. With no income, she still has to pay for utilities such as water and electricity, she said.

The plight of the farming community in Daechu-ri has not gone unnoticed by the Catholic Church. The Catholic Priests' Association for Justice in the country has been closely involved in resisting the evacuation. Some members even stayed with the villagers, while others campaigned in Seoul by shaving their heads and fasting.

"Like innocent Jesus crucified, the evicted villagers symbolize the height of injustice. Like Jesus resurrected, their effort to save their land will eventually come true," [Father Bartholomew Moon](#) told UCA News on April 7.

"Today's tears bear witness to the dark side of a government that subjects itself to U.S. imperialism," said Father Moon of Jeonju diocese, who moved to Daechu-ri in February 2005 and has been living with the farmers to protest the government plan.

Kim Seok-kyeong, 79, a Daechu-ri farmer told UCA News, "Rotten politicians bowed to U.S. demands, sacrificing the poor and weak farmers."

According to an official of the Ministry of National Defense, the government will close the road to Daechu-ri and start construction work in mid-April.

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[Original article](#)

(Accompanying photos available at [here](#))