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Summer of Terror: At least 100,000 said executed by Korean ally of US in 1950 [with interactive video]

Charles J. Hanley & Jae-Soon Chang

This is the first of a multi-part article on the South Korean massacres of 1950, the US direct and indirect involvement in those massacres, and the subsequent cover up of the events in South Korea and the United States.

Grave by mass grave, South Korea is unearthing the skeletons and buried truths of a cold-blooded slaughter from early in the Korean War, when this nation's U.S.-backed regime killed untold thousands of leftists and hapless peasants in a summer of terror in 1950.

With U.S. military officers sometimes present, and as North Korean invaders pushed down the peninsula, the southern army and police emptied South Korean prisons, lined up detainees and shot them in the head, dumping the bodies into hastily dug trenches. Others were thrown into abandoned mines or into the sea. Women and children were among those killed. Many victims never faced charges or trial.

The mass executions — intended to keep possible southern leftists from reinforcing the northerners — were carried out over mere weeks and were largely hidden from history for a half-century. They were "the most tragic and brutal chapter of the Korean War," said historian Kim Dong-choon, a member of a 2-year-old government commission investigating the killings.

Hundreds of sets of remains have been uncovered so far, but researchers say they are only a tiny fraction of the deaths. The commission estimates at least 100,000 people were executed, in a South Korean population of 20 million.

That estimate is based on projections from local surveys and is "very conservative," said Kim. The true toll may be twice that or more, he told The Associated Press.

In addition, thousands of South Koreans who allegedly collaborated with the communist occupation were slain by southern forces later in 1950, and the invaders staged their own executions of rightists.

Through the postwar decades of South Korean right-wing dictatorships, victims' fearful families kept silent about that blood-soaked summer. American military reports of the South Korean slaughter were stamped "secret" and filed away in Washington. Communist accounts were dismissed as lies.

Only since the 1990s, and South Korea's democratization, has the truth begun to seep out.

In 2002, a typhoon's fury uncovered one mass grave. Another was found by a television news team that broke into a sealed mine. Further corroboration comes from a trickle of declassified U.S. military documents, including U.S. Army photographs of a mass killing outside this central South Korean city.

Now Kim's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has added government authority to the work of scattered researchers, family members and journalists trying to peel away the long-running cover-up. The commissioners have the help of a handful of remorseful old men.

"Even now, I feel guilty that I pulled the trigger," said Lee Joon-young, 83, one of the executioners in a secluded valley near Daejeon (Taejon) in early July 1950.

The retired prison guard told the AP he knew that many of those shot and buried en masse were ordinary convicts or illiterate peasants wrongly ensnared in roundups of supposed communist sympathizers. They didn't deserve to die, he said. They "knew nothing about communism."

The 17 investigators of the commission's subcommittee on "mass civilian sacrifice," led by Kim, have been dealing with petitions from more than 7,000 South Koreans, involving some 1,200 alleged incidents — not just mass planned executions, but also 215 cases in which the U.S. military is accused of the indiscriminate killing of South Korean civilians in 1950-51, usually in air attacks.

The commission last year excavated sites at four of an estimated 150 mass graves around the country, recovering remains of more than 400 people. Working deliberately, matching documents to eyewitness and survivor testimony, it has officially confirmed two large-scale executions — at a warehouse in the central South Korean county of Cheongwon, and at Ulsan on the southeast coast.



Government excavation team in cobalt mine near Daegu

In January, then-President Roh Moo-hyun, under whose liberal leadership the commission was established, formally apologized for the more than 870 deaths confirmed at Ulsan, calling them "illegal acts the then-state authority committed."

The commission, with no power to compel testimony or prosecute, faces daunting tasks both in verifying events and identifying victims, and in tracing a chain of

responsibility. Under Roh's conservative successor, Lee Myung-bak, whose party is seen as democratic heir to the old autocratic right wing, the commission may find less budgetary and political support.

The roots of the summer 1950 bloodbath lie in the U.S.-Soviet division of Japan's former Korea colony in 1945, which precipitated north-south turmoil and eventual war.

In the late 1940s, President Syngman Rhee's U.S.-installed rightist regime crushed leftist political activity in South Korea, including a guerrilla uprising inspired by the communists ruling the north. By 1950, southern jails were packed with up to 30,000 political prisoners.

The southern government, meanwhile, also created the National Guidance League, a "re-education" organization for recanting leftists and others suspected of communist leanings. Historians say officials met membership quotas by pressuring peasants into signing up with promises of rice rations or other benefits. By 1950, more than 300,000 people were on the league's rolls, organizers said.

North Korean invaders seized Seoul, the southern capital, in late June 1950 and freed thousands of prisoners, who rallied to the northern cause. Southern authorities, in full retreat with their U.S. military advisers, ordered National Guidance League members in areas they controlled to report to the police, who detained them. Soon after, commission researchers say, the organized mass executions of people regarded as potential collaborators began — "bad security risks," as a police official described the detainees at the time.

The declassified record of U.S. documents shows an ambivalent American attitude toward the killings. American diplomats that summer urged restraint on southern officials — to no obvious effect — but a State Department cable that fall said overall commander Gen. Douglas MacArthur viewed the executions as a Korean "internal matter," even though he controlled South Korea's military.



MacArthur at the landing of US forces at Inch'on

Ninety miles south of Seoul, here in the narrow, peaceful valley of Sannae, truckloads of prisoners were brought in from Daejeon Prison and elsewhere day after day in July 1950, as the North Koreans bore down on the city.

The American photos, taken by an Army major and kept classified for a half-century, show the macabre sequence of events.

White-clad detainees — bent, submissive, with hands bound — were thrown down prone, jammed side by side, on the edge of a long trench. South Korean military and national policemen then stepped up behind, pointed their rifles at the backs of their heads and fired. The bodies were tipped into the trench.



Daejeon prisoners before execution

Trembling policemen — "they hadn't shot anyone before" — were sometimes off-target, leaving men wounded but alive, Lee said. He and others were ordered to check for wounded and finish them off.

Evidence indicates South Korean executioners killed between 3,000 and 7,000 here, said commissioner Kim. A half-dozen trenches, each up to 150 yards long and full of bodies, extended over an area almost a mile long, said Kim Chong-hyun, 70, chairman of a group of bereaved families campaigning for disclosure and compensation for the Daejeon killings. His father, accused but never convicted of militant leftist activity, was one victim.



Daejeon mass grave

Another was Yeo Tae-ku's father, whose wife and mother searched for him afterward.

"Bodies were just piled upon each other," said Yeo, 59, remembering his mother's description. "Arms would come off when they turned them over." The desperate women never found him, and the mass graves were quickly covered over, as were others in isolated spots up and down this mountainous peninsula, to be officially "forgotten."

When British communist journalist Alan Winnington entered Daejeon that summer with North Korean troops and visited the site, writing of "waxy dead hands and feet (that) stick through the soil," his reports in the Daily Worker were denounced as "fabrication" by the U.S. Embassy in London. American military accounts focused instead on North Korean reprisal killings that followed in Daejeon.

But CIA and U.S. military intelligence documents circulating even before the Winnington report, classified "secret" and since declassified, told of the executions by the South Koreans. Lt. Col. Bob Edwards, U.S. Embassy military attache in South Korea, wrote in conveying the Daejeon photos to Army intelligence in Washington that he believed nationwide "thousands of political prisoners were executed within (a) few weeks" by the South Koreans.

Another glimpse of the carnage appeared in an unofficial U.S. source, an obscure memoir self-published in 1981 by the late Donald Nichols, a U.S. Air Force intelligence officer, who told of witnessing "the unforgettable massacre of approximately 1,800 at Suwon," 20 miles south of Seoul.

Such reports lend credibility to a captured North Korean document from Aug. 2, 1950, eventually declassified by Washington, which spoke of mass executions in 12 South Korean cities, including 1,000 killed in Suwon and 4,000 in Daejeon.

That early, incomplete North Korean report couldn't include those executed in territory still held by the southerners. Up to 10,000 were killed in the city of Busan alone, a South Korean lawmaker, Park Chan-hyun, estimated in 1960.

His investigation came during a 12-month democratic interlude between the overthrow of Rhee and a government takeover by Maj. Gen. Park Chung-hee's

authoritarian military, which quickly arrested many then probing for the hidden story of 1950.

Kim said his projection of at least 100,000 dead is based in part on extrapolating from a survey by non-governmental organizations in one province, Busan's South Gyeongsang, which estimated 25,000 killed there. And initial evidence suggests most of the National Guidance League's 300,000 members were killed, he said.

Commission investigators agree with the late Lt. Col. Edwards' note to Washington in 1950, that "orders for execution undoubtedly came from the top," that is, President Rhee, who died in 1965.

But any documentary proof of that may have been destroyed, just as the facts of the mass killings themselves were buried. In 1953, after the war ended in stalemate, after the deaths of at least 2 million people, half or more of them civilians, a U.S. Army war crimes report attributed all summary executions here in Daejeon to the "murderous barbarism" of North Koreans.

Such myths survived a half-century, in part because those who knew the truth were cowed into silence.

"My mother destroyed all pictures of my father, for fear the family would get an image as leftists," said Koh Chung-ryol, 57, who is convinced her 29-year-old father was innocent of wrongdoing when picked up in a broad police sweep here, to die in Sannae valley.

"My mother tried hard to get rid of anything about her husband," she said. "She suffered unspeakable pain."

Even educated South Koreans remained ignorant of their country's past. As a young researcher in the late 1980s, Yonsei University's Park Myung-lim, today a leading Korean War historian, was deeply shaken as he sought out confidential accounts of those days from ordinary Koreans.

"I cried," he said. "I felt, 'Oh, my goodness. Oh, Jesus. This was my country? It was true?'"

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission can recommend but not award compensation for lost and ruined lives, nor can it bring surviving perpetrators to justice. "Our investigative power is so meager," commission President Ahn Byung-ook told the AP.

His immediate concern is resources. "The current government isn't friendly toward us, and so we're concerned that the budget may be cut next year," he said.

South Korean conservatives complain the "truth" campaign will only reopen old wounds from a time when, even at the village level, leftists and rightists carried out bloody reprisals against each other.

The life of the commission — with a staff of 240 and annual budget of \$19 million — is guaranteed by law until at least 2010, when it will issue a final, comprehensive report.

Later this spring and summer its teams will resume digging at mass grave sites. Thus far, it has verified 16 incidents of 1950-51 — not just large-scale detainee killings, but also such events as a South Korean battalion's cold-blooded killing of 187 men, women and children at Kochang village, supposed sympathizers with leftist guerrillas.

By exposing the truth of such episodes, "we hope to heal the trauma and pain of the bereaved families," the commission says. It also wants to educate people, "not just in Korea, but throughout the international community," to the reality of that long-ago conflict, to "prevent such a tragic war from reoccurring in the future."

This and the following two Associated Press Reports were published on May 18, 2008.

Hidden history: Families talk of Korean War executions, say US shares blame in deaths

Jae-Soon Chang, Daejeon, South Korea

The young father, wanted and on the run, slipped back home one midnight to share a few fleeting minutes with his year-old daughter. But his joy was short-lived, as police burst in, kicked away the crying child and hauled him off.

Jun Jae-hung, wanted for helping his leftist brother flee to North Korea, never returned after that night in 1949.

Before even facing trial, he became one of tens of thousands of victims of hurried mass executions carried out in mid-1950 by South Korean authorities, bent on ridding the nation of communists in the early days of the Korean War. They feared that southern leftists might help the invading North Korean troops.

Jun's baby girl, Sook-ja, now 60 years old, was one of a dozen daughters, sons, sisters and brothers of victims who gathered one gray morning this spring in the secluded valley where their loved ones were shot and buried en masse, to recount their individual family tragedies in interviews with The Associated Press.

For decades, before right-wing dictatorship gave way to democracy, the wholesale executions were a forbidden subject in South Korea. Now a government Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Korea is investigating the bloodbaths, including a possible U.S. role.

The commission estimates as many as 7,000 were summarily killed by military and civil police in Daejeon, 90 miles south of Seoul. In small, preliminary digs, its teams have begun unearthing remains.

Jun Sook-ja said she heard from grandparents that her father had worried about her as a baby because she was slow to grow, due to what was later found to be a congenital heart problem.

When his wife, bringing him food in his hiding place in the hills, told Jun their baby had stood on her own for the first time, he couldn't resist venturing back home for a quick visit, despite the risks.

"I heard he woke me up and had me on my feet in a corner of the room, and was so happy," Jun Sook-ja said. Then the police, evidently keeping watch, stormed the house, grabbed him and kicked away the baby as she clung crying to his leg.

"I don't remember his face, but I miss him so much," Jun said.

Ordinary convicts, like Moon Yang-ja's father, also were swept up in the anticommunist slaughters. All Daejeon prison inmates sentenced to 10 years or more were trucked off to the killing fields, former prison guard Lee Joon-young told the AP in a separate interview.

"I followed him out of the room crying," Moon, now 64, said of the snowy day in 1950 when police took her father away. "One of the police officers patted my back saying, 'Your father will come back in a couple of days.'"

Instead he was sentenced to 10 years in prison for fraud, and perished in the mass executions. Others were believed to be victims of fabricated charges.

Yoon Jung-hee, 62, said her father was forced at gunpoint to put his fingerprint on a document saying he was leader of a leftist group unknown to him.

The father, Yoon Yeo-byung, then 31, was sentenced to three years in prison, but was taken away and executed in the summer 1950 carnage.

"They should have released him three years later. Why the hell did they kill him?" daughter Yoon asked.

Surviving family members hold not only President Syngman Rhee's right-wing regime of 1950 responsible for their loved ones' deaths. They believe the mass killings wouldn't have been possible without tacit support from the Americans, who were advisers to South Korean military units, supplied weapons and ammunition used in the executions, and took photographs at some sites.

South Korea was a weak country, Jun said. "It was just after we regained our nation after Japanese colonial rule. I believe the U.S. strongly influenced" the executions, she said.

Fear, Secrecy Kept 1950 Korea Mass Killings Hidden

Families' fears, official secrecy and lies kept 1950 Korea mass killings hidden from history

Charles J. Hanley

One journalist's bid to report mass murder in South Korea in 1950 was blocked by his British publisher. Another correspondent was denounced as a possibly treasonous fabricator when he did report it. In South Korea, down the generations, fear silenced those who knew.

Fifty-eight years ago, at the outbreak of the Korean War, South Korean authorities secretly executed, usually without legal process, tens of thousands of southern leftists and others rightly or wrongly identified as sympathizers. Today a government Truth and Reconciliation Commission is working to dig up the facts, and the remains of victims.

How could such a bloodbath have been hidden from history?

Among the Koreans who witnessed, took part in or lost family members to the mass killings, the events were hardly hidden, but they became a "public secret," barely whispered about through four decades of right-wing dictatorship here.

"The family couldn't talk about it, or we'd be stigmatized as leftists," said Kim Chong-hyun, 70, leader of an organization of families seeking redress for their loved ones' deaths in 1950.

Kim, whose father was shot and buried in a mass grave outside the central city of Daejeon, noted that in 1960-61, a one-year democratic interlude in South Korea, family groups began investigating wartime atrocities. But a military coup closed that window, and "the leaders of those organizations were arrested and punished."

Then, "from 1961 to 1988, nobody could challenge the regime, to try again to reveal these hidden truths," said Park Myung-lim of Seoul's Yonsei University, a leading Korean War historian. As a doctoral student in the late 1980s, when South Korea was moving toward democracy, Park was among the few scholars to begin researching the mass killings. He was regularly harassed by the police.

Scattered reports of the killings did emerge in 1950 — and some did not.

British journalist James Cameron wrote about mass prisoner shootings in the South Korean port city of Busan — then spelled Pusan — for London's Picture Post magazine in the fall of 1950, but publisher Edward Hulton ordered the story removed at the last minute.

Earlier, correspondent Alan Winnington reported on the shooting of thousands of prisoners at Daejeon in the British communist newspaper The Daily Worker, only to have his reporting denounced by the U.S. Embassy in London as an "atrocious fabrication." The British Cabinet then briefly considered laying treason charges against Winnington, historian Jon Halliday has written.

Associated Press correspondent O.H.P. King reported on the shooting of 60 political prisoners in Suwon, south of Seoul, and wrote in a later memoir he was "shocked that American officers were unconcerned" by questions he raised about due process for the detainees.

Some U.S. officers — and U.S. diplomats — were among others who reported on the killings. But their classified reports were kept secret for decades.

U.S. Okayed Korean War Massacres

Charles J. Hanley and Jae-Soon Chang

SEOUL The American colonel, troubled by what he was hearing, tried to stall at first. But the declassified record shows he finally told his South Korean counterpart it "would be permitted" to machine-gun 3,500 political prisoners, to keep them from joining approaching enemy forces.

In the early days of the Korean War, other American officers observed, photographed and confidentially reported on such wholesale executions by their South Korean ally, a secretive slaughter believed to have killed 100,000 or more leftists and supposed sympathizers, usually without charge or trial, in a few weeks in mid-1950.

Extensive archival research by The Associated Press has found no indication Far East commander Gen. Douglas MacArthur took action to stem the summary mass killing, knowledge of which reached top levels of the Pentagon and State Department in Washington, where it was classified "secret" and filed away.

Now, a half-century later, the South Korean government's Truth and Reconciliation Commission is investigating what happened in that summer of terror, a political bloodbath largely hidden from history, unlike the communist invaders' executions of southern rightists, which were widely publicized and denounced at the time.

In the now-declassified record at the U.S. National Archives and other repositories, the Korean investigators will find an ambivalent U.S. attitude in 1950 — at times hands-off, at times disapproving.

"The most important thing is that they did not stop the executions," historian Jung Byung-joon, a member of the 2-year-old commission, said of the Americans. "They were at the crime scene, and took pictures and wrote reports."

They took pictures in July 1950 at the slaughter of dozens of men at one huge killing field outside the central city of Daejeon. Between 3,000 and 7,000 South Koreans are believed to have been shot there by their own military and police, and dumped into mass graves, said Kim Dong-choon, the commission member overseeing the investigation of these government killings.

The bones of Koh Chung-ryol's father are there somewhere, and the 57-year-old woman believes South Koreans alone are not to blame.

"Although we can't present concrete evidence, we bereaved families believe the United States has some responsibility for this," she told the AP, as she visited one of the burial sites in the quiet Sannae valley.

Frank Winslow, a military adviser at Daejeon in those desperate days long ago, is one American who feels otherwise.

The Koreans were responsible for their own actions, said the retired Army lieutenant colonel, 81. "The Koreans were sovereign. To me, there was never any question that the Koreans were in charge," he said in a telephone interview from his home in Bellingham, Wash.

The brutal, hurried elimination of tens of thousands of their countrymen, subject of a May 19 AP report, was the climax to a years-long campaign by South Korea's right-wing leaders.

In 1947, two years after Washington and Moscow divided Korea into southern and northern halves, a U.S. military government declared the Korean Labor Party, the southern communists, to be illegal. President Syngman Rhee's southern regime, gaining sovereignty in 1948, suppressed all leftist political activity, put down a guerrilla uprising and held up to 30,000 political prisoners by the time communist North Korea invaded on June 25, 1950.

As war broke out, southern authorities also rounded up members of the 300,000-strong National Guidance Alliance, a "re-education" body to which they had assigned leftist sympathizers, and whose membership quotas also were filled by illiterate peasants lured by promises of jobs and other benefits.

Commission investigators, extrapolating from initial evidence and surveys of family survivors, believe most alliance members were killed in the wave of executions.

On June 29, 1950, as the southern army and its U.S. advisers retreated southward, reports from Seoul said the conquering northerners had emptied the southern capital's prisons, and ex-inmates were reinforcing the new occupation regime.

In a confidential narrative he later wrote for Army historians, Lt. Col. Rollins S. Emmerich, a senior U.S. adviser, described what then happened in the southern port city of Busan, formerly known as Pusan.

Emmerich was told by a subordinate that a South Korean regimental commander, determined to keep Busan's political prisoners from joining the enemy, planned "to execute some 3500 suspected peace time Communists, locked up in the local prison," according to the declassified 78-page narrative, first uncovered by the newspaper *Busan Ilbo* at the U.S. National Archives.

Emmerich wrote that he summoned the Korean, Col. Kim Chong-won, and told him the enemy would not reach Busan in a few days as Kim feared, and that "atrocities could not be condoned."

But the American then indicated conditional acceptance of the plan.

"Colonel Kim promised not to execute the prisoners until the situation became more critical," wrote Emmerich, who died in 1986. "Colonel Kim was told that if the enemy did arrive to the outskirts of (Busan) he would be permitted to open the gates of the prison and shoot the prisoners with machine guns."

This passage, omitted from the published Army history, is the first documentation unearthed showing advance sanction by the U.S. military for such killings.

"I think his (Emmerich's) word is so significant," said Park Myung-lim, a South Korean historian of the war and adviser to the investigative commission.

As that summer wore on, and the invaders pressed their attack on the southern zone, Busan-area prisoners were shot by the hundreds, Korean and foreign witnesses later said.

Emmerich wrote that soon after his session with Kim, he met with South Korean officials in Daegu, 55 miles (88 kilometers) north of Busan, and persuaded them "at that time" not to execute 4,500 prisoners immediately, as planned. Within weeks, hundreds were being executed in the Daegu area.

The bloody anticommunist purge, begun immediately after the invasion, is believed by the fall of 1950 to have filled some 150 mass graves in secluded spots stretching to the peninsula's southernmost counties. Commissioner Kim said the commission's estimate of 100,000 dead is "very conservative." The commission later this month will resume excavating massacre sites, after having recovered remains of more than 400 people at four sites last year.

The AP has extensively researched U.S. military and diplomatic archives from the Korean War in recent years, at times relying on once-secret documents it obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests and declassification reviews. The declassified U.S. record and other sources offer further glimpses of the mass killings.

A North Korean newspaper said 1,000 prisoners were slain in Incheon, just west of Seoul, in late June 1950 — a report partly corroborated by a declassified U.S. Eighth Army document of July 1950 saying "400 Communists" had been killed in Incheon. The North Korean report claimed a U.S. military adviser had given the order.

As the front moved south, in July's first days, Air Force intelligence officer Donald Nichols witnessed and photographed the shooting of an estimated 1,800 prisoners in Suwon, 20 miles south of Seoul, Nichols reported in a little-noted memoir in 1981, a decade before his death.

Around the same time, farther south, the Daejeon killings began.

Winslow recalled he declined an invitation to what a senior officer called the "turkey shoot" outside the city, but other U.S. officers did attend, taking grisly photos of the human slaughter that would be kept classified for a half-century.

Journalist Alan Winnington, of the British communist *Daily Worker* newspaper, entered Daejeon with North Korean troops after July 20 and reported that the killings were carried out for three days in early July and two or three days in mid-July.

He wrote that his witnesses claimed jeeploads of American officers "supervised the butchery." Secret CIA and Army intelligence communications reported on the Daejeon and Suwon killings as early as July 3, but said nothing about the U.S. presence or about any U.S. oversight.

In mid-August, MacArthur, in Tokyo, learned of the mass shooting of 200 to 300 people near Daegu, including women and a 12- or 13-year-old girl. A top-secret Army report from Korea, uncovered by AP research, told of the "extreme cruelty" of the South Korean military policemen. The bodies fell into a ravine, where hours later some "were still alive and moaning," wrote a U.S. military policeman who happened on the scene.

Although MacArthur had command of South Korean forces from early in the war, he took no action on this report, other than to refer it to John J. Muccio, U.S. ambassador in South Korea. Muccio later wrote that he urged South Korean officials to stage executions humanely and only after due process of law.

The AP found that during this same period, on Aug. 15, Brig. Gen. Francis W. Farrell, chief U.S. military adviser to the South Koreans, recommended the U.S. command investigate the executions. There was no sign such an inquiry was conducted. A month later, the Daejeon execution photos were sent to the Pentagon in Washington, with a U.S. colonel's report that the South Koreans had killed "thousands" of political prisoners.

The declassified record shows an equivocal U.S. attitude continuing into the fall, when Seoul was retaken and South Korean forces began shooting residents who collaborated with the northern occupiers.

When Washington's British allies protested, Dean Rusk, assistant secretary of state, told them U.S. commanders were doing "everything they can to curb such atrocities," according to a Rusk memo of Oct. 28, 1950.

But on Dec. 19, W.J. Sebald, State Department liaison to MacArthur, cabled Secretary of State Dean Acheson to say MacArthur's command viewed the killings as a South Korean "internal matter" and had "refrained from taking any action."

It was the British who took action, according to news reports at the time. On Dec. 7, in occupied North Korea, British officers saved 21 civilians lined up to be shot, by threatening to shoot the South Korean officer responsible. Later that month, British troops seized "Execution Hill," outside Seoul, to block further mass killings there.

To quiet the protests, the South Koreans barred journalists from execution sites and the State Department told diplomats to avoid commenting on atrocity reports. Earlier, the U.S. Embassy in London had denounced as "fabrication" *Winnington's Daily Worker* reporting on the Daejeon slaughter. The Army eventually blamed all the thousands of Daejeon deaths on the North Koreans, who in fact had carried out executions of rightists there and elsewhere.

An American historian of the Korean War, the University of Chicago's Bruce Cumings, sees a share of U.S. guilt in what happened in 1950.

"After the fact — with thousands murdered — the U.S. not only did nothing, but covered up the Daejeon massacres," he said.

Another Korean War scholar, Allan R. Millett, an emeritus Ohio State professor, is doubtful. "I'm not sure there's enough evidence to pin culpability on these guys," he said, referring to the advisers and other Americans.

The swiftness and nationwide nature of the 1950 roundups and mass killings point to orders from the top, President Rhee and his security chiefs, Korean historians say. Those officials are long dead, and Korean documentary evidence is scarce.

To piece together a fuller story, investigators of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will sift through tens of thousands of pages of declassified U.S. documents.

The commission's mandate extends to at least 2010, and its president, historian Ahn Byung-ook, expects to turn then to Washington for help in finding the truth.

"Our plan is that when we complete our investigation of cases involving the U.S. Army, we'll make an overall recommendation, a request to the U.S. government to conduct an overall investigation," he said.

Charles J. Hanley and Jae-Soon Chang write for The Associated Press. This article was published on July 4, 2008.

The two articles by Hanley and Chang were published at Japan Focus on July 23, 2008.

See the AP interactive, including the [testimony](#) of a 1950 South Korean prison guard.

See also the accompanying article by Bruce Cumings, [The South Korean Massacre at Taejon: New Evidence on US Responsibility and Coverup](#).

See the Hanley [interview](#) at Democracy Now.