

Asia Pacific Pivots for Peace
The Anti-base, Antiwar Movement on Jeju Island

WAMM Q & A with Barry Riesch

The Gangjeong villagers should never regard their efforts to stop the Jeju Island naval base as a failure. They have the strength, the resilience, and commitment that is an inspiration to the international community in our struggle for peace and justice.

—Barry Riesch



Graffiti on a Gangjeonj Village wall Born on Jeju Island, artist Gillchun Kohn states that his work is “focused on the historical perspective of Jeju” and its “ecology, politics and environment” which he sees as all connected.

The following is a Q & A with Barry Riesch, longtime antiwar activist who participated in a 12-member delegation of Veterans for Peace when they traveled to Jeju Island in December of 2015 in international solidarity with the people of Gangjeong Village in their resistance to the creation of a South Korean naval base to be used by the U.S. Navy as part of the U.S. military Pivot to the Pacific. In addition to the factual learning experience, Riesch said that “for many members of the delegation, the experience was personally transformative—seeing the base, connecting with the people, and the way we were treated so well.” He was supported in his delegation participation by Women Against Military Madness and the local peace community.

Island of Resistance, Island of Peace

Q: How long have people in the village of Gangjeong on Jeju Island, South Korea, been resisting the establishment of a naval base there?

A: There have been more than 3,000 consecutive days of resistance to the construction of a naval base in the village of Gangjeong. It has been ongoing since 2007, when people there created their anti-base committee to oppose the base. And though the naval installation is now nearly complete, due to the persistence and

determination of the villagers and others in solidarity with them the resistance will continue, though it probably will take a different form.



Photo: Jeju Weekly

Q: Is there something about the Jeju Islanders that makes them particularly capable of nonviolent resistance and for so long?

A: Resistance to foreign military occupation is familiar to Jeju Island. The Wind of Peace Park commemorates an estimated 25,000 to 30,000 people killed following the end of World War II. (Some estimates are even higher than this shocking number, which was one-tenth of Jeju Island's population at the time.) Most of the people were civilians—men, women, and children massacred with bullets, hanging, or by being buried alive. Some people were tortured. Citing the desire to wipe out perceived communist influence among independent-minded Jeju Islanders, the U.S., as the occupying administrator of Korea, played a role, along with mainland Korean forces and ultra-rightist youth squads that were empowered to suppress an uprising that broke out in 1948. (The tragedy is referred to in Korean history as The April 3 Incident, as it is the spark in 1947 which ignited what followed.)

Years later, in 2005, the massacre was recognized in a Truth and Reconciliation Commission based on the South African model. The dead were finally honored, and the island was declared "The Island of Peace."

UNESCO-Designated Unique Environment

Q: Are there any other factors that have captured the attention of people from all over the world in regard to the inadvisability of building a base on Jeju?

A: In addition to being the Island of Peace, Jeju has enormous environmental value and is the only place on the planet with three UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) natural science designations: World Natural Heritage, Global Geopark, and Biosphere Reserve. Tourists visit from all over the

world; many Chinese are among them. The creation of a massive U.S. military installation on the island ignites the concern of people throughout the world.

Q: Aren't three UNESCO designations on one island enough to prevent the building of the base?

A: UNESCO has been powerless to prevent the military from proceeding with plans. But given Jeju's history, it's no wonder that the Navy met with resistance in attempting to build military bases at two other locations on Jeju Island prior to Gangjeong.

Q: How did anyone get sold on the idea of a base at Gangjeong and what effect did it have on the shoreline?

A: When the Navy eventually settled on Gangjeong, a small fishing village on the southern coast with 2,000 inhabitants, as a location it marketed the idea as a "Civilian Military Port Complex for Tour Beauty," but villagers were not deceived about its real purpose and began to organize opposition. Nevertheless, construction crews moved in and concrete was poured over the unique Gureombi volcanic rock formation along the coastline that is considered sacred. Soft coral reefs, home to some vanishing species, became casualties when a deeper harbor was dredged. The 100 dolphins that used to make friends with the island women, famous for their deep sea spear-diving, departed to become refugees somewhere else in the sea.

Persistence Resistance

Q: The dolphins left, but what about the people?

A: Gangjeong villagers did not depart, but stayed, and a dedicated group tried to protect their natural environment against the destruction of the shoreline and encroachment of the base on their village. The natural environment is a source of their livelihood and also holds spiritual meaning to them. The people have been struggling to defend their land and way of life. I observed their morning rituals when they made 100 bows at the entrance of the construction site at 7:00 a.m. every day. Later in the afternoon for an hour-and-a-half daily they held a Catholic mass there. Anyone could participate. Exuberant dancing followed.



Police remove Barry Riesch as he participates in a blockade to base construction at Gangjeong Village on Jeju Island, Korea.

Photo: Ellen Davidson

Q: What effect do the village protesters and internationals have on each other?

A: As internationals, we looked to the local resistance for their strength, and got inspiration from their resilience and dedication. They had set up an impressive structure. There was a kitchen where cooking was done for the meals of the resistance. (It was said that it would be the next thing destroyed by the base builders.) There was medical assistance available, too; I became concerned about a possible blood clot in my leg while I was there and came to trust something other than Western medicine when I was given acupuncture to relieve the problem. Housing accommodations are provided to internationals and people from out of the area. Two Catholic clergy were able to build the St. Francis Peace Center, which houses artworks, community space, and sleeping accommodations. That's where I stayed when I was there. One of the clergy, Father Mun, had it built with money he received through a lawsuit when he was injured by a fall of 16 meters (53 feet) when base builders disrupted rock.

International peace activists, antiwar activists have made common cause with the villagers over our opposition to the base. We come to demonstrate our solidarity and give them encouragement and support. They look to us for that. In the case of U.S. citizens, the concern is felt deeply as a responsibility because it is our government that has pressured their government to build the base.

Q: Is there a specific action that the Veterans for Peace took while you were there?

A: Veterans for Peace attempted blockades of trucks carrying materials to build the base by sitting in plastic chairs in the road at the entrance to the base with other people in the resistance. Police picked us up, while we were still sitting in the chairs, and moved us out of the way so the vehicles could get through. After the vehicles passed, they left us alone, and we went back again and resumed our position. We did

this every day. When I first arrived some people were fasting in protest of a truck running over the foot of one of the women protesters; she needed surgery as a result.

Q: Can you tell us something about who was in your delegation?

A: The twelve of us came from states all across the United States from Maine to Minnesota to California. Many of us were veterans of the Vietnam War. We were privileged to have two younger veterans of the Iraq War with us. We also had one Korean War veteran. My roommate at the Peace Center was an 86-year-old veteran who had been involved as a young man in night missions in North Korea; he was so determined to participate that it didn't matter that he now needed a walker to get about. Ann Wright, a former colonel and ambassador to Afghanistan, who became a full-time peace activist, was also with our delegation. At other times delegations of antiwar internationals: women's groups, religious groups—many of them Catholics, Korean reunification activists, archeologists, artists, various groups and individuals from all over the world have come to show solidarity with the villagers of Gangjeong in their struggle against the base.

U.S. Military-Economic Strategy

Q: What is the overall strategy of the U.S. wanting the base at Gangjeong?

A: Bruce Gagnon, a Veteran for Peace, has been active with Gangjeong solidarity for several years and was an organizer of this delegation, along with Taruk Kauff, who is on the Veterans for Peace National Board. Bruce described the strategy and danger behind the placement of the base in his "Organizing Notes" blog:

These deployments on Jeju would put U.S. warships right in the middle of the Yellow Sea shipping lanes that China utilizes to import 80 percent of the resources, particularly oil, to run its economy. It will also make Gangjeong Village a prime target in the event of hostilities.

The U.S. "pivot" into the Asia-Pacific is expensive, dangerous to world peace, and highly provocative...The goal is "full-spectrum dominance" over China and Russia, and the profits to U.S. weapons corporations are an expected side benefit.(1)



*The Veterans for Peace delegation to Jeju Island display their banner in solidarity with Gangjeong villagers in opposition to a naval base on the coast.
Photo: Ellen Davidson*

Q: What benefit does Korea have from building the port?

A: Samsung and Daelim, headquartered in Seoul, are the transnational corporations with construction, engineering, and electronic divisions that profit from building the port. (While the Korean state owns and will maintain the port with its navy and military, under the Status of Forces agreement that the U.S. has with Korea, the U.S. can use the base at Gangjeong, as it can any other base in the country.) These corporations wield such enormous power that they are able to sue the Korean government for the equivalent of USD millions for loss of profit due to delays in construction of the base because of the anti-base protests. In turn, the South Korean government threatened to have the common people: Gangjeong villagers and Jeju Islanders compensate them because of this—in other words, those whose livelihood and land are damaged or destroyed by the base were supposed to pay.

Infuriating as this is, it's evidence quantifiable by monetary means that the resistance was effective in delaying base construction.

The Real Struggle Begins Now

Q: With the Gangjeong base nearly complete, what were people of the resistance thinking about? (The Jeju Weekly reported that the first of the battleships, an Aegis destroyer, sailed into the Gangjeong harbor on December 22.)

A: There was a lot of discussion in the Gangjeong resistance about "What happens now?" In addition to the port, housing is being built for 7,000 military personnel—I believe that they are for South Korean military—and that is encroaching on the village. The way things once were has ended. But people shouldn't regard the resistance as a failure. They have shown such strength and resistance, and people see them as examples.



The Asia-Pacific Peace Pivot

Q: What will happen now to the movement to resist bases?

A: Activists are engaging in a different kind of pivot than the Asia Pacific military pivot—with the Jeju Island experience as a springboard, they are moving to create a Peace Pivot connecting islands in solidarity to resist the web of military bases that the U.S. is pressuring governments to expand in Japan, Australia, South Korea, the Philippines, and elsewhere in the Pacific Rim. Koreans, Taiwanese, and Okinawans already have gathered for Peace for Sea International Camps first in Gangjeong Village and then in Henoko, Okinawa. The December 2015 Veterans for Peace delegation went on to Henoko to join with the people who are resisting the base there. In addition, National Veterans for Peace will be setting up a chapter there and has begun one in Okinawa. 2016 should see the network develop further.

Q: What can we do to pivot to peace?

A: Call your congressional representative and tell them no to new U.S. agreements to use bases in the Pacific or anywhere. Keep informed to find out about actions you can take to challenge U.S. militarization of the Asia Pacific.

Barry Riesch was in the U.S. Army 1968-1970, one year in Vietnam as a motorman. He first participated in an antiwar protest on May Day, 1971, when 500,000 people gathered to shut down Washington, D.C. He joined Veterans for Peace in 1991 at the buildup to the first Gulf War and has been an active member ever since. He returned to Vietnam on an amends mission in 1992 and was part of the first VFP Iraq Water Project in 2000 (the project continues). He served as the local vice president and president of Veterans for Peace for two years, on the National VFP board for six years, and for one year as National VFP president.

Endnote:

1. Source: Organizing Notes. Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space. space4peaceblogspot.org

On the Side...

Philippines: People Resist U.S. Militarization



Gross violation of human rights is being systematically carried out by the Philippine Government as part of its internal security program, the Oplan Bayanihan, which was patterned after the counter-insurgency program of respondent government of the United States...It is also clear that Oplan Bayanihan, was devised and is being implemented with the assistance of the defendant Government of the U.S. either through technical assistance and actual participation of its military personnel in combat operations. The Philippine military is also being propped up through the continuous military aid from the U.S.

— Findings from [The International People's Tribunal](#) on Crimes Against the Filipino people convened July 16-18, 2015, in Washington, D.C.

The Philippine Supreme Court ruled that a military accord with the United States that allows increased U.S. military presence in the Philippines is constitutional, as tensions in the South China Sea continues to rise. On Tuesday, while anti-U.S. protests took place outside, the court voted 10-4 to deny the petition of some lawmakers and activists to declare the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) unconstitutional because it surrenders Philippine sovereignty to a foreign power.

—“Philippine Court Upholds Military Accord with the U.S.”, [Telesur tv.net](#), January 12, 2016

Read It and Weep

The Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) announces sales of \$47.085 billion for fiscal year 2015. Sales under the government-to-government Foreign

Military Sales Program totaled \$35.359 billion. Along with sales executed using U.S. government appropriations under various security cooperation and security assistance authorities such as Foreign Military Financing (FMF), and DoD programs, totaled \$11.726 billion, totaling \$47.085 billion for fiscal year 2015.

Demand for U.S. defense products and services remains strong, as the U.S. share of total global arms transfer agreements has increased over the last decade. With a number of partner countries looking to modernize and expand a full spectrum of capabilities, the U.S. share of transfers to partners and allies in emerging defense markets in Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America continues to increase.
—News Release, Defense Security Cooperation Agency, October 22, 2015

Coming By Stealth



photo: DoD

The Pentagon has said the LRS-B bomber [Long Range Strategic Bomber] will cost close to \$550 million per airplane, projecting a \$55 billion price total. Defense Secretary Ash Carter said the new aircraft will help the U.S. "project power across the globe now and into the future...Officials have been tight-lipped as to the specific capability expectations for the LRS-B, but indications are that it will be stealth, able to carry conventional and nuclear weapons and could possibly operate both with and without a pilot. (emphasis: editor)
—CNN, October 29, 2015

And Now for Some Good Environment News

No More Selling Out to Shell

The Science Museum will not renew a controversial sponsorship deal with Shell in which the oil company provided significant funding for its high-profile climate change exhibition...The lapsing of the deal will be seen as a blow to Shell after it was forced out of the Prince of Wales's climate change project earlier this year because of its efforts to drill for oil in the Arctic. Last year, toy firm Lego also ended its partnership with the oil company after a sustained campaign by Greenpeace, which said Shell's polar plans were at odds with the Danish company's green image.

—“Science Museum Ends Sponsorship with Shell,” The Guardian, November 12, 2015

No GMO Here

The final tally of the massive European anti-GMO wave has been reached now that the Oct. 3 deadline to notify the European Commission has passed. A total of 19 EU countries have “opted out” of growing genetically modified (GMOs) crops within all or part of their territories.

— [Eco Watch](#), October 15, 2015