

Korea: Women Walk for Peace across the De-Militarized Zone

by Christine Ahn

One year ago, I wrote to the renowned American feminist author Gloria Steinem asking if she would consider walking with other women across the De-Militarized Zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea to help bring peace to Korea. She promptly replied, “Yes. *My high school classmates went to war there.*”

On May 24, 2015, 30 international women peacemakers from around the world will walk with Korean women, North and South, to call for an end to the Korean War and for a new beginning for a reunified Korea. Along with Gloria Steinem, our delegation includes Nobel peace laureates Mairead Maguire from Ireland and Leymah Gbowee from Liberia, Patricia Guerrero from Colombia, former U.S. Army Colonel Ann Wright, Code Pink co-°©-founder Medea Benjamin, and so many more courageous women peacemakers. We will listen to Korean women about how war and militarism impacts their families, lives, and dreams and hold international peace symposiums in Pyongyang and Seoul where we can share our experiences and ideas of mobilizing women to bring an end to the danger of violent conflict. Our hope, as a symbolic act of peace, is to cross the 2-mile-wide DMZ that separates millions of Korean families and bring an end to the state of war in Korea.

The year 2015 marks the 70th anniversary of Korea’s division into two separate states by Cold War powers, which precipitated the 1950-53 Korean War. More bombs were dropped by the U.S. on Korea in these three years than on all of Asia and the Pacific islands during World War II; the deployment of an atomic bomb was even threatened. One year into the Korean War, U.S. Major General Emmett O’Donnell Jr. testified before the Senate, “I would say that the entire, almost the entire Korean Peninsula is just a terrible mess. Everything is destroyed. There is nothing standing worthy of the name... There [are] no more targets in Korea.”

After nearly 4 million people, mostly Korean civilians, were killed, fighting was halted when North Korea, China, and the United States representing the United Nations Command signed a cease-fire agreement. All three powers promised to sign a peace treaty within three months, as well as withdraw all foreign troops and introduce no new weapons. While China removed its troops from North Korea within the first few years, Washington still has 28,500 U.S. troops on approximately 100 bases and installations across South Korea. Over 60 years later, the signatories to the armistice have yet to deliver on the promise to sign a peace treaty.

Many ask: If there has been no peace treaty over the span of an entire lifetime, why is it so urgent to sign one now? Here’s why: In 2013, after North Korea tested its third nuclear weapon, Washington deployed nuclear bombers across Korean skies. The United States was “within an inch of war” with North Korea, according to former U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta. To help defuse tensions on the Korean Peninsula, Pyongyang announced in early January that it would forego testing nuclear weapons if Washington agreed to halt joint military exercises with Seoul. Most Americans don’t realize that the U.S. and South

Korea regularly conduct war games simulating the invasion and overthrow of North Korea. Imagine if Russia regularly staged military exercises with Mexico in the Gulf of Mexico simulating an invasion of the White House. Americans would not accept it, and North Koreans shouldn't have to either. There is wide consensus that replacing the armistice with a peace treaty would go a long way to de-escalate tensions that have long plagued Korea and the region.



At the Pyongyang Children's Center.

In a 2011 paper, the U.S. Army War College warns that the only way to avert a catastrophic confrontation is to “reach agreement on ending the armistice from the Korean War” and “giv[e] a formal security guarantee to North Korea tied to nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction.” Across party lines, U.S. ambassadors to Korea since the 1980s have argued for engagement and a formalized peace process. James Laney, U.S. ambassador to South Korea under Bill Clinton, reflected, “ [I]n order to remove all unnecessary obstacles to progress,” [we need] “a peace treaty to replace the truce that has been in place since 1953. One of the things that have bedeviled all talks until now is the unresolved status of the Korean War.... Absent such a peace treaty, every dispute presents afresh the question of the other side's legitimacy.”

Not only must we formally resolve the Korean situation to prevent war from breaking out, but also millions of Korean families remain divided by the DMZ. Every year, thousands of Korean elders die waiting on a government list to see their children or siblings living on the other side of the DMZ. In her Dresden speech last spring, South Korean President Park Geun-hye said, “It has been 70 long years. Last year alone, some 3,800 people who have yearned a lifetime just to be able to hold their sons' and daughters' hands-- just to know whether they're alive-- passed away with their unfulfilled dreams.”

Another cost of the unended war on human lives is most visible in North Korea where crippling embargoes against the government make it difficult for ordinary people to access the basics needed for survival. While most Americans make a mockery of the North Korean

leader and deride the regime for starving the people, what most don't understand is how the sanctions policy of their very own U.S. government—intended to deprive the Kim regime—has served as a chokehold on the North Korean economy and ordinary people. The ability of the people to access the basics—from food to seeds to medicine to technology—is greatly strained by U.S.-led international sanctions against the DPRK. On his last trip to North Korea, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter said, “In almost any case when there are sanctions against an entire people, the people suffer the most and the leaders suffer least.” In the case of North Korea, Carter said, “the last 50 years of deprivation of the North Korean people of adequate access to trade and commerce have been very damaging to their economy.”



At the Pyongyang Children's Center.

The unresolved Korean conflict gives governments in the region justification to further militarize and prepare for war, using funds that could be used instead for schools, hospitals and the welfare of the people and the environment. Pyongyang even acknowledged last year how the unended war has forced it “to divert large human and material resources to bolstering up the armed forces though they should have been directed to the economic development and improvement of people’s living standards.” North Korea plays a perfect villain for the Obama administration to justify its pivot to Asia, which will shift 60 percent of the U.S. Navy and Air Force to the Asia Pacific by 2020. At a March 25 Senate Defense Committee hearing on the 2015 budget, the commander of the U.S. Forces in Korea (USFK), General Curtis Scaparrotti, argued that while the 28,500 U.S. troops based in South Korea were “fully resourced,” he was concerned about the readiness of “follow-on” forces needed if fighting erupted, suggesting the need for more resources to Korea. In fact, half of the world’s top 10 military spenders are regional powers—the United States, China, Russia, Japan, and South Korea—amounting to \$1 trillion in “defense.” The U.S. takes the cake with \$640 billion.

These are the reasons why women are walking for peace in Korea, to help reunite families, improve human rights in North Korea, and end the state of war for 70 million Koreans living on the peninsula.

The North Korean government has approved this peace walk, as has the UN Command, pending confirmation from South Korea, which we are still awaiting. Given that President Park is the first female president and that she has already granted two other delegations permission to cross the DMZ—New Zealanders on motorbikes and Korean-Russians retracing their migration—we believe we have a good chance of being granted authority in the name of peace.



Christine Ahn and her daughter, Jeju, at the children's center in Pyongyang.

We have decided, however, that in case we are denied by President Park, we would still do the peace walk and just go back from Pyongyang through China and fly to Seoul. Our peace walk has already generated so much enthusiasm and enlivened hope to so many Koreans everywhere that we must go forward and continue to bring light and hope to Korea.

As Gloria Steinem put it, “If this division can be healed even briefly by women, it will be inspiring in the way that women brought peace out of war in Ireland or Liberia.” Our women’s peace walk across the DMZ can play a very important role in de-escalating tensions and renewing the Korean people’s belief that peace and the peaceful reunification of Korea are indeed possible, and within their lifetimes.

We are calling for women to organize solidarity vigils with us on May 24, 2015, International Disarmament Day, the day we plan to cross the DMZ. We also need financial support to make this peace walk possible, and that includes small and large donations. Please help us amplify women’s voices calling for peace and the reunification of Korea by making a donation now to Women De-Militarize the Zone, which is sponsoring this peace walk. womencrossdmz.org.

Christine Ahn is the founder and international coordinator of Women DeMilitarize the Zone and co-founder of the Korea Policy Institute and National Campaign to End the Korean War. She’s testified at the United Nations, U.S. Congress, and ROK National Human Rights Commission and has led several peace and humanitarian aid delegations to North and South Korea. She is a columnist for Foreign Policy in Focus and has been widely published, including in The New York Times, International Herald Tribune, CNN, The Nation, and San Francisco Chronicle.