

Context: South Korea and the construction of a naval base on Jeju Island:

Since 2011, the main focus of my work as the Columban JPIC coordinator in Korea has been highlighting the issue of the Gangjeong Naval Base construction on the Island of Jeju (Island of World Peace) and helping promote and build international solidarity in opposition to the base and the militarization of Jeju Island. With the installation of the base perimeter fence in Sept 2011 and the subsequent blasting of Gureombi rock in March 2012 I have engaged in numerous protests, prayer vigils and direct actions to help highlight the adverse environmental impact of the construction on the UNESCO designated biosphere reserve which includes soft coral communities located near Beom Island.

It is widely acknowledged that the base is a U.S. driven project aimed at containing China rather than enhancing SK security. In July 2012, the South Korean Supreme Court upheld the base's construction. It is expected to host US Aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines and US Navy Aegis destroyers which are warships outfitted with Nuclear Defense Systems (key element of US First Strike strategy). Therefore, what was once labeled by the Korean Government as an Absolute Preservation Area and a National Cultural Asset-the Gangjeong Village, the living rocky coast and offshore waters was conveniently delisted to make way for the base construction. Official environmental designation has been literally washed away in the quest to build a naval base to facilitate the US military and its China containment policy in the Asia Pacific region.

President Obama's 2012 announcement of a 'pivot' and the projection of US foreign and military power into the Asia Pacific region serves as the backdrop to the doubling of US military operations in the region as well as the deployment of US troops to Darwin, Australia and base expansions in Guam, the Philippines and Okinawa all with the goal of strategically encircling and containing China. Since the US is unable to contain and compete with China economically; through using its military might it will be able to control China's importation of vital resources such as oil, natural gas and minerals needed to fuel its vast economic engine. This is a highly dangerous and provocative strategy by the Pentagon with the prospect of Gangjeong village not only

acting as a port of call for US warships but also potentially becoming a target in this superpower war game.

On Sept 2, 2011, the beautiful Geurombi Rock and the Gangjeong coastline was closed off to Gangjeong villagers in order to prepare the coastline for demolition and lay the ground work for base construction. A massive crackdown operation was undertaken by approximately 1,000 police mostly deployed from the mainland resulting in 36 arrests and 3 people imprisoned. Access to Gureombi Rock was closed off once and for all and a 15-foot-high wall was subsequently constructed to keep villagers away from the proposed base. But contrary to government expectations, the people rose up. They began to occupy the land and use their bodies to get in the way of construction equipment in order to protect sacred Gureombi rock.

There are stories of peace activists, villagers, Catholic priests and supporters sleeping on the rocks for months at a time and stories of others having been arrested for obstructing construction equipment.

Priests and supporters celebrating mass on Gureombi Rock have become a potent symbol of nonviolent resistance and their witness is a continuation of the centuries-long reverence for the rocky coast as a sacred site and an integral part of the communal life of the village.

With daily mass being celebrated in front of the naval base many peace activists have been joining in speaking out, sitting in, fasting, praying and taking nonviolent action to stop the destruction of this beautiful and pristine coastline.

Inspired by Jeju's Bishop Peter Kang U-Il's prophetic stance in voicing opposition to the base from the very beginning and Fr. Mun Jeong Hyen's brave witness and constant presence at the gate and Prof Yang Yoon Mo, a Catholic and Jeju native who was first arrested in April 2011 for pitching his tent on Gureombi and living there for years in order to impede construction work, many others have followed suit and joined the peace movement in Gangjeong.

Strengths

Throughout the 9 years of struggle and opposition to the base there has been a strong spirit of collaboration between the various faith groups. International delegations and solidarity visits from international activists have been a mainstay of the struggle and this support continues to arrive and will help sustain the nonviolence resistance to the militarization of Jeju island now that the base has been completed. The Columban missionaries have helped sponsor a 25 min documentary “Jeju’s Aching Heart” (by Irish Production Company for RTE TV) touching on the many themes above.

The people of Okinawa's struggle for justice, peace and human rights continues against the backdrop of the “Asian pivot” and continued U.S. military base expansion in Okinawa where approximately 50,000 US soldiers and civilian employees occupy 18.4% of the main island of Okinawa alone. Inter island solidarity reflected in peace camps and peace walks held in Jeju and Okinawa have provided important opportunities for collaboration in resisting the growing militarization of the NE Asia region.

Pat Cunningham