

The Case of the Korean Hostage Incident

by the Taliban in Afghanistan

Introduction

Twenty short-term workers from Sammool Church left the Incheon International Airport like any other similar teams leaving the country to serve in different parts of the world. Since there were already a number of short-term trips taken by the Sammool Church, it seemed to be no different from other prior trips. There were at least several other short-term teams representing different parties operating within Afghanistan and there seemed to be no imminent danger. There was one single woman worker sent from the same church situated in one locality for almost a year and a number of other NGO workers who had been there for some time—not many could blame them for having sense of false security. Nonetheless, it is necessary to revisit the incident to assess what lessons could be learned from each stage of the incident: pre-hostage stage, the hostage taking stage, and finally, the post-hostage stage.

Pre-Hostage Stage

Sammool Church belongs to the Koshin Presbyterian denomination. It was formed after the liberation from the Japanese annexation of Korea after the Second World War. During the occupation, the Korean Christians were forced to take part in the so called “Emperor (Japanese emperor) Worship.” There were some that resisted bowing to the emperor at the risk of their lives. Koshin was formed among those who refused to bow to the emperor’s image. Sammool Church has been one of the leading churches in that

denomination, well known for social service both within and without of the country. Pastor Un-Jo Park, a staunch evangelical, is considered by many to be one of the preeminent pastors in Korea. The sending out of short-term workers was not something new for the church and not done in impulsive manner. It was the expression of their philosophy of ministry for the local church—doing both evangelism and social service.

During the Hostage Taking

The twenty-member team left Incheon International Airport on July 13, 2007. They arrived in Kabul on the following day. It was reported that the twenty-member team successfully carried out their educational and medical service July 14-18 in the northern region of Afghanistan, where it was comparatively safe. However, on July 19 they were joined by three medical team members that were already in Afghanistan, and they then moved from Kabul to Kandahar. These three were supposed to act as guides. It was during this journey that the hostages were taken.

In hindsight, here is where the former hostages failed to scrutinize the situation and take precautionary measures. First, as the New York Times has appropriately pointed out, they failed to adhere to the safety code. They moved during the wrong time of the day since it was customary to travel only in the early mornings for safety reasons. Additionally, the route from Kabul to

Kandahar is ordinarily too dangerous to travel without an armed escort.

Second, they should have been suspicious when the bus driver was changed, and more suspicious when the bus driver picked up a stranger on the road. The rest is as we already know. The twenty-three were taken as hostages and it was forty-two days later that the remaining hostages were finally released. Two persons were dead and only twenty-one returned home safely, but not without physical and mental scars that are bound to haunt some of them for a long time.

It was only on July 20, a day after the hostages were taken, that the Korean government acknowledged that the Taliban had taken the Sammool Church team as hostages. The Sammool Church quickly set up a contingency committee and the Pastor was informed, who was at the time participating in a seminar in the United States. He subsequently arrived home and made a public announcement apologizing for the commotion caused by the hostage incident. On July 21, the President of Korea, Mr. Moo Hyun Noh went public and pleaded to the Taliban through CNN, a global news network, that they release the hostages as soon as possible. By then, the matter was way out of control and it became a national affair with all the cabinet members, including the President, acting as sort of a contingency committee. The whole nation was kept in suspense and terror as the news alternated from bad to worse. The Korean

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government banned all travel to Afghanistan on July 21. After long hours and days of negotiation, the Taliban finally agreed to let the rest of the hostages loose on two conditions: One, the non-combat Korean troops stationed in Afghanistan would be withdrawn by the end of 2007. Two, all of the Christian workers, including NGO personnel, would leave Afghanistan as soon as possible. There have been rumors that the Korean government negotiation team paid a large ransom in exchange for the hostages. There is, however, no way to confirm this. The Korean government has denied these allegations.

Let me turn our attention to the responses of various factions during and after the hostage situation. The secularists are at one end of the continuum of those who are voicing their opinion about the post-hostage and mission by the Korean church, and the conservatives in theology but radical in their mode of mission are at the other end of the continuum. The secularists have launched the severest attack against Christian mission and the church. Sammool church suffered from the harshest criticism, and it is not completely over yet. The following are samples of the reactions by different groups over the hostage incident, particularly to the Sammool Church and to the Korean church in general.

There is almost unanimous consensus from all spectrums that the hostage situation has affected future hostage negotiations, both nationally as well as internationally. The loss is almost incalculable. Existing rules for hostage negotiation in the past were violated, whereby more frequent hostage taking may occur by terrorists around the globe. The Korean church must take responsibility for this outcome and back off from doing mis-



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sion confrontationally and aggressively and mobilizing masses in demonstrative forms, particularly in sensitive and dangerous countries such as Afghanistan and other Islamic countries with similar hostilities.

Leaders of Yong Dong Presbyterian church and like-minded progressive pastors declared that the days of doing mission by sending in workers are outdated. The majority of the Korean church will not identify with this view, though.

Perhaps the declaration made by Drs. Han Hum Ok, the Pastor, the former pastor of the Love church and Myung Hyuck Kim, Chairman of Korea Evangelical Alliance and others seem to fit the position of the majority of the Korean church who are of the evangelical faith. They would equally protest against aggressive and demonstrative mission modes while agreeing that evangelism and social responsibility are still the core curriculum of mission. They have, in essence, been most accurate in their description of the situation. They named a few radical groups that have been involved in the Afghanistan situation. This group has also been trying to stage a demonstrative approach for mission by sending in thousands of people in previous years in spite of strong protests by both government and major daily media, including the local workers in Afghanistan. They failed to stage their style of mission as the Afghanistan government later changed their mind and stopped issuing the visas and ordered those who were already gathered in Afghanistan to leave the country immediately.

Post Hostage Stage

Nineteen released hostages finally arrived in the Incheon International Airport on September 2, 2007. Two had previously arrived. Out of twenty-three hostages, two were killed and twenty-one were finally released. They were taken to the Sam Hospital in An Yang, a satellite city adjunct



to Seoul, where a debriefing team was ready to meet the former hostages. They spent ten days being debriefed and counseled in a safe environment. Subsequently, they were taken to a remote town in Kang Won Province for a week of group therapy. Most of them have now returned to normal life, but not without scars. For some of them, the scars will remain for a long time. At least two couples have been married among them. Several have changed their jobs. Eight family members have become Christians. The families of the two members who were killed were the hardest hit among them.

The Sammool church is still harassed by anti-Christians picketing in front of the church weekly during their worship services. The Korean government requested that the church reimburse the direct expenses for bringing the former hostages back. The Sammool church gladly consented to do so. The Pastor submitted his resignation after the hostages were returned. Recently, the church voted to call back Rev. Un-Jo Park as their pastor. On the surface, one could not find any traces of the breathtaking events that captured forty-eight million Koreans daily and hourly for forty-two days. Yet one need not dig too deeply underneath the seemingly calm surface to find that there are still residues of unresolved anger, antagonism toward Christianity and mission from not only the public square but also from parts of the Korean church herself, not to mention the grief of the families who have lost their loved ones. The Korean church and the Sammool church will have to work extra hard to resolve this in the days to come. <<