

# U.S. troops to stay in Korea—for now

by Lydia Cherry

South Korean Defense Minister Lee Sang-hoon seems to have succeeded in Seoul's mission to garner a pledge from the Bush administration that the withdrawal or reduction of U.S. troops will not be considered at this time. Speaking at the annual security meeting between the two nations in Washington, D.C. on July 19, Defense Secretary Richard Cheney stated that U.S. forces will remain in South Korea as long as they are needed to meet a threat from Communist North Korea. At a joint news conference with Cheney, Defense Minister Lee Sang-hoon affirmed, "Any immediate reduction or withdrawal of U.S. forces in Korea cannot be considered at this time."

But a U.S. Defense Department spokesman told *EIR* that the administration's decision might not end up being as firm as it looks: "If Congress passed a resolution tomorrow directly countering this, I'm not sure what we'd do. And the South Koreans know this," he said.

Indeed, as Arizona Republican Sen. John McCain noted on July 14, "There is enormous pressure for troop withdrawals from Korea." The July 14 *Wall Street Journal* recalled that even though President Jimmy Carter ran into so much opposition in 1977 that he had to back down on the issue, "Now, deficit-conscious lawmakers seem determined to push through cuts that ordinarily would be considered politically unpalatable." The *Journal* added that Pentagon policymakers are actively developing plans to remove thousands of U.S. troops from front-line units along the Demilitarized Zone separating North and South Korea.

Beginning in early June, when Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.), senior member of the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, first proposed reducing troop strength from 43,000 down to about 10,000 over a five-year period, the South Korean government has made every effort to head off the plan. Defense Minister Lee Sang-hoon told the Korean parliament June 12 that Levin's proposal was extremely dangerous and simply reflected U.S. pressure to cut back the budget.

When Sen. Dale Bumpers (D-Ark.) and others followed up Levin's proposal and introduced more mild legislation that would require withdrawal of 10,000 troops rather than 33,000, South Korean President Noh Tae Woo devoted his June 29 press conference with foreign reporters to the matter. "The American troop presence has been maintaining peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and in this part of the world for more than 35 years," he said. "You have an expres-

sion in America: 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it,' and I think it neatly applies in this situation." The South Korean President also emphasized that "recent developments in China affect Chinese ability to restrain North Korea" from possible aggression towards South Korea.

Reflecting the degree of concern on the South Korean end, the Seoul newspaper *Choson Ilbo* noted June 4: "It seems that U.S. public opinion and the U.S. administration's view in connection with the issue of reducing U.S. troops stationed in South Korea are generally similar to Senator Levin's view. Such a fact can be backed up and proven by opinions and views expressed by the U.S. press and individuals in recent months."

What particularly angers the military and conservative politicians in Seoul, is the contention being pushed by many in the United States and by Korean opposition leader Kim Dae Jung, that a U.S. withdrawal can encourage North Korea's regime, arguably the most hostile and unpredictable Communist government in the world, to make peace. The Noh government has extended numerous olive branches to the North, but has now been left with few illusions of any possibility of rapprochement "with the government set on overthrowing us," as the President explained.

## Economic backstabbing

Whether some type of economic trade-off was made while Defense Secretary Lee Sang-hoon was in Washington, has not yet come to light. Korean sources have said that the United States has been using the Noh government's fear of the withdrawals to force economic and trade concessions. An integral part of the Washington talks is known to be that Cheney focused on pressing the South Koreans to purchase U.S. fighter jets off the shelf, rather than follow through on their own plan to co-produce an advanced version of the General Dynamics F-16 or McDonnell Douglas F-18 jets.

Seoul has already made amazing trade concessions to the United States in order to avoid being a victim of the insane "Super 301" trade retaliation. Under U.S. and Australian pressure, the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs recently decided that South Korean beef import restrictions violate international fair trade rules, and trade diplomats in Geneva expect that Korea will knuckle under quickly and open up its \$500 million a year beef market to foreigners. The resulting economic hardships borne by South Korea's cattle farmers, are bound to strengthen the country's liberal opposition parties, similar to what is occurring in Japan.

Other sources, however, say that the reason that the Koreans were successful in getting the Bush administration to hold the line against the pressure to cut back troops was not connected to an economic tradeoff per se. The sources suggest the U.S. administration's acquiescence on the military front may have been connected to how much the Koreans know about the Iran-Contra scandal which continues to engulf the Bush administration.