

Hostages' Pastor: 'Remorse Is the Face of the Church'

Interview with Park Eun-jo: 'I don't want this to be a stumbling block for missions.'
Sarah Pulliam | posted 9/04/2007 08:49AM

The 19 South Koreans freed by the Taliban returned to Seoul Sunday as the church that sent the group fields critical remarks for sending members to such a volatile country. The return ends a 43-day ordeal in which two hostages were killed, including Bae Hyung-kyu, an associate pastor at Saemmul Church.

Before they left Afghanistan, the hostages apologized at a press conference for the trouble they had caused South Korea. "I've had sleepless nights, thinking of what we have caused the country. I am deeply sorry," Yu Kyeong-sik said at a press conference.

"Remorse is the face of the church," said Park Eun-jo, senior pastor of Saemmul Church. The Presbyterian congregation that sponsored the trip, in the Seoul suburb of Bundang, has a weekly attendance of about 5,000 people.

"Koreans, particularly those who are not receptive to Christianity, are very emotional and critical about this incident," he told Christianity Today. "Because of the hostage situation, people withheld their opinions, but since they are released, people are now really letting us have what they think." The hostages did not know until after they were released that two male hostages, including the associate pastor of the church, were killed.

Park said that 20 South Koreans traveled to Afghanistan for a short-term trip to volunteer at a school and provide medical aid. He said that three of the hostages were missionaries who had already been in Korea when the group arrived. Before it had left for the country, the group was told to be cautious in the dangerous area.

As they traveled through the country, their bus driver picked up two people without asking permission, which the pastor called a mistake. The two fired guns before taking the group hostage.

"I feel deep responsibility, strong responsibility, for the two lives that were lost," the pastor said.

Saemmul Church has decided to identify the two killed hostages as martyrs, Park said. The church will hold a funeral service September 7 for Bae Hyung-kyu, the associate pastor killed by the Taliban.

When the hostages were first taken, the church had prayer services throughout the day. At night, more than 1,000 people would attend.

"During those times, we were in shock. We were not able to pray anything clearly but for their safe return," the pastor said. "A week later, we began to calm down, and then we started to pray for Afghanistan."

After the hostages' release, Taliban spokesman Qari Yousef Ahmadi told the Associated Press that the group plans to abduct more foreigners.

"We will do the same thing with the other allies in Afghanistan, because we found this way to be successful," he said.

His statement reinforced international fears that South Korea's decision to negotiate directly with the militants would create more hostage situations "I understand that this has created a huge problem and it has become an international issue," Pastor Park said. "Personally I have to be grateful for their effort."

The pastor said that the church will pray that hostage issues will not happen again.

"That is what we can do at this moment," he said. The church will cover the cost to bring the hostages back to South Korea.

After the hostage situation began, South Korea banned its citizens from traveling to the country. Park said that the 180 Korean missionaries currently serving in the country have been told to leave by the end of September.

The pastor said that because of the situation, he wants the church to send more missionaries to Muslim countries and Afghanistan after the ban is lifted.

"We believe that this is God's providence leading us to other Muslim countries," he said. "I don't want this to be a stumbling block for missions."

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