

On the Jeju 4.3 Tragedy in South Korea

The Presbytery of Cayuga-Syracuse respectfully overtures the 227th General Assembly (2026) to:

1. Acknowledge and grieve, during a worship service at this General Assembly, the loss of life and destruction of property during the Jeju 4.3 Tragedy, seven years of repression, killing and persecution on the South Korean island of Jeju.
2. Direct the advocacy offices of the Interim Unified Agency to advocate with the United States government for an investigation into U.S. responsibility for, and complicity in, the Jeju 4.3 Tragedy with attention to the role of the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK);
3. Direct staff persons from the Interim Unified Agency to consult electronically with Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PC(USA)) mission partners in the South Korea, including the Presbyterian Church in Korea (PPCK), the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK), and the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK) to:
 - a) offer condolences on behalf of the PC(USA) to the survivors and their descendants of the Jeju 4.3 Tragedy;
 - b) coordinate shared observances in 2028 of the 80th anniversary of the Jeju 4.3 Tragedy that include study, worship, and action;
 - c) organize a pilgrimage visit to Jeju Island in 2028 for the 80th anniversary of the Jeju 4.3 Tragedy involving representatives of the PC(USA), PCK, PROK, and the NCCK;
 - d) create a video report on the pilgrimage visit in English and Korean;
 - e) create a study guide about the events on Jeju Island in English and Korean that includes voices of people impacted by the events;
 - f) create a bibliography of resources in English and Korean about the events on Jeju Island;
 - g) create worship materials in English and Korean to remember the people impacted by the events on Jeju Island;
 - h) share the video report of the pilgrimage, study guide, bibliography, worship materials, and this overture and rationale electronically with the congregations and mid councils of the PC(USA) and to PCK, PROK, and NCCK; and
 - i) explore possibilities for joint prayer and witness regarding peace on the Korean peninsula.

RATIONALE

Jeju Island, off the southern end of the Korean Peninsula, is a UNESCO Global Geopark because of its beauty. The South Korean government has designated Jeju as the “Island of Peace.” It is a popular tourist destination. However, Jeju bears a painful history

From March 1, 1947 to September 21, 1954, the island was wracked by violence that resulted in the death of 14,000 – 30,000 people, about 10% of Jeju’s population. Every family lost a member. Different names are used to describe these events including the Jeju Uprising, the Jeju 4.3 Incident, the Jeju Massacre and the Jeju April 3 Tragedy.

The Korean peninsula obtained independence from Japan after World War II ended. As the Cold War began, the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) officially controlled the part of the peninsula that would become the Republic of Korea – South Korea until August 15, 1948. Many believe that events on Jeju could not have happened without at least the USAMGIK’s tacit approval.

At the time, some people, including the U.S. government and the person who would become South Korea’s first President, wanted to divide the Korean Peninsula into two countries, one in the North, one in the South.

Others, including many people on Jeju, wanted to establish a unified country. Jeju Islanders opposed the division of the peninsula and the 1948 election intended to create the Republic of Korea in the south.

Commemorations of the March 1, 1919 Independence Day Movement occurred in various places in Korea on March 1, 1947. As a peaceful commemoration ended on Jeju, a mounted police officer injured a boy. Those attending the commemoration responded with anger and threw rocks at the police. Police fired on the crowd, killing 6 and wounding 8 unarmed civilians.

As tensions escalated, the USAGMIK labeled Jeju a “Red Island.” In the name of restoring order, large numbers of mainland police and members of the Northwest Young Adults League (NWYL) were deployed on the island. The NWYL—whose legal status was ambiguous—seized control of police organizations and administrative and educational systems under the pretext of “hunting communists.” Their violence and terror against civilians are considered major factors contributing to the tension.

The election to divide Korea and establish South Korea was scheduled for May 10, 1948. On April 3, 1948, concerned about the peninsula’s permanent division and responding to the suppression of their views and protests, the Korean Labor Party’s Jeju branch launched an armed uprising. Police stations on the island were invaded and several police officers killed. Resistance continued in the period up to the election and beyond.

After South Korea was established on August 15, 1948, the new government initiated military suppression operations on Jeju. The military proclaimed that anyone found more than five kilometers inland from the coastline would be considered a “rebel” and could be summarily executed. “Scorched-earth operations” destroyed more than 300 villages—95% of mountain villages—and over 20,000 homes. Numerous testimonies affirm that the NWYL played a leading role in these operations. September 21, 1954, when martial law was lifted on the island and the last remnants of resistance were suppressed, is considered the end of the Jeju 4.3 Tragedy.

After the Korean War, information about the Jeju 4.3 Tragedy was suppressed by authoritarian governments and military regimes in South Korea. The uprising is little known in the United States. The U.S. military has never made a public accounting of the military government’s involvement.

With the establishment of democratic government in South Korea in the 1990s, truth-seeking and reconciliation have been legislated and institutionalized.

South Korea's National Committee for Investigation of the Truth about the Jeju April 3 Incident notes, “The Jeju 4.3 Incident was a tragic incident, the casualties for which are second only to the Korean War in modern Korean history. In the time of great tumult following the liberation from Japanese colonial rule, the Jeju people suffered a terrible loss of life and property.”

The Special Act on Discovering the Truth on the Jeju April 3 Incident and the Restoration of Honor of Victims adopted by the Republic of Korea’s government as revised in 2021, states: “the term “Jeju 4.3 Incident” means an incident in which the lives of inhabitants were sacrificed in the riot that arose on April 3, 1948 starting from March 1, 1947 and in the process of armed conflicts and suppression thereof that took place in Jeju-Do until September 21, 1954.”

Mass graves have been uncovered and the remains reverently re-interred. Memorials and museums have been established. In 2013, the Jeju 4.3 Bereaved Families Association and the Jeju Police Veterans and Families Association issued a Joint Declaration of Unconditional Reconciliation and Coexistence, committing to healing, restoration, and unity.

Reconciliation and peace on the Korean Peninsula constitute a major concern of today’s global community. For Christians, peace and reconciliation requires learning, teaching, and confronting the truth about the past.

In October 2025 the Korea Peace Journey of the Presbyterian Peace Network for Korea visited Jeju and the Jeju 4.3 Peace Park and Museum and talked with survivors of the Jeju 4.3 Tragedy and family members of people who had been killed.

Yang Bong-cheon, a family member of a victim, testifies that the Jeju 4.3 Tragedy was intertwined with the Cold War and led to the Korean War which produced three million casualties and the enduring division of the peninsula. He reminds us that reconciliation and peace on the Korean Peninsula begins with facing the truth of the Jeju 4.3 Tragedy.

God asked Cain: ““What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground.” (Genesis 4:10).

The church today faces a similar question. The cries of those who perished in the Jeju 4.3 Tragedy still rise from the ground before God. When the church responds to that cry—breaking its silence, confronting the truth, and walking the path of repentance—it can expand concrete ministries of reconciliation for all affected by the event. In 2018, the 70th anniversary of April 3, 1948, our partners, the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea and the National Council of Churches in Korea, issued statements concerning Jeju 4.3 which can be read at bit.ly/PROK and bit.ly/NCKK. A more recent action by PROK is at bit.ly/PROK1.

Through shared ministry between the PC(USA) and our Korean partners, we can deepen the peace consciousness of Americans regarding Korea and ultimately establish a foundation to extend peace and reconciliation to the people of North Korea.

We pray for the day when the church’s ministry hastens God’s reconciliation and lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula.

FOOTNOTES:

The National Committee for Investigation of the Truth about the Jeju April 3 Incident, “The Jeju 4·3 Incident Investigation Report,”
https://transitionaljusticedata.org/public_files/reportTCID213.pdf

Republic of Korea. “Special Act on Discovering the Truth of the Jeju 4·3 Incident,”
https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_mobile/viewer.do?hseq=56409&type=sogan&key=15

Memorial Committee for the 70th Anniversary of the Jeju April 3rd Uprising and Massacre, “The Jeju April 3rd Uprising and Massacre: Truth and Justice for the Unforgettable Past,” March 2018
<https://www.jejudarktours.org/en/about-jeju-april-3rd-uprising-and-massacre/>

Noble laureate Kang Han’s novel *We Do Not Part* (2021, translated into English in 2025) features the Jeju 4.3 Tragedy

Bruce Cummings, *The Korean War: A History* (Modern Library: 2011)