

# Black-Korean Alliance may chart new mission

## Interethnic alliance to play stronger role as facilitator

By Richard Reyes Fruto  
Korea Times

The six-year old Black-Korean Alliance is alive and well, thank you. So say its core members whose bridge-building interethnic panel that remained in the back seat during the recent riots.

It seemed to fade at the time when relations between blacks and Korean immigrant merchants had entered its worst crisis during the pre-riot boycotts.

But according to co-chair Bong Hwan Kim, the BKA is alive and well after surviving a crisis of its own.

The boycotts, organized by African American activists, had thrown the group into disarray much as the protests polarized the two communities, some BKA members said.

To survive, Kim said, the BKA has moved away from taking positions on controversial issues and adopted a role as

facilitator in developing concrete initiatives that could improve ties between the two ethnic groups.

"A lot of what BKA is doing is constantly being redefined as we move along," Kim said. "There is an opinion

among the leadership in the BKA that we must reexamine our role in black-Korean relations."

Formed in 1986 after four Korean American merchants



Bong Hwan Kim

were killed in one month, the BKA is made up of community leaders from both sides, and for many observers, it served as a vehicle for building better relations.

When grocer Soon Ja Du shot teenager Latasha Harlins in March 1991, the BKA became highly visible, calling a news conference and a community forum that drew media attention outside the Korean and African American

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communities.

But, Kim said, the BKA fell apart when the boycotts started last June. The protests became a divisive issue because African Americans in the BKA refused to speak out against them, Korean American members said.

The BKA did not meet for six months until an all-day retreat one weekend last January. Kim, the director of the Korean Youth Center, said the BKA had no Korean American co-chair for six months until he was elected at the retreat.

Dennis Westbrook, a former BKA co-chair, disagrees that the BKA has done little in the past 12 months. The BKA took an active role, albeit behind the scenes, in talks to end the boycott of John's Liquor Store, he said.

Westbrook also said he doesn't recall that Korean and African American members split on the issue of taking a stand on the boycott.

But Westbrook agrees that BKA needs restructuring. Except for developing a code of ethics for merchants and customers, the group's other efforts failed because it was always reacting to crises, Westbrook said.

"The expectation from the media and the community was we should come down on one side of the fence or the other," he said. "There was a push to speak out stridently against things happening to merchants and the black community."

Jai Lee Wong, a consultant to the county Human Relations Commission, said BKA members are struggling to form a consensus about the group's role in the wake of the riots when many Korean American-owned stores were targeted.

"Things have changed drastically," said Wong, who works closely with the group. "People are not satisfied with dialogue anymore."

But as it seeks a new role, BKA can find no model to follow, not in New York, Washington, D.C., or other metropolitan areas where blacks and Korean immigrants have come into conflict.

Race relations will not improve just because the BKA exists, Kim said. For him, the solutions and BKA's future lie in joint economic ventures, jobs programs and cultural exchanges.

"We must bring the Danny Bakewells, John Macks and the Nation of Islam to talk with the Korean chamber of commerce, Korean banks and KAGRO," Kim said. "Then we must have the mayor, Pete Wilson and George Bush listening in."

Danny Bakewell is the controversial president of the black charity Brotherhood Crusade. John Mack is



Dennis Westbrook

president of the Urban League. KAGRO is the Korean grocers association that has entered peace talks with black street gangs.

Despite the commitment of its members, the BKA's chances for success already are limited. Wong and Westbrook said that the group does not enjoy the support of both communities.

Unlike Kim, Wong is less optimistic about whether the BKA has a role beyond a mere forum for dialogue. She feels that many Korean Americans simply give lip service to the idea of living in harmony with African Americans.

She relates that one prominent Korean community leader said the BKA resembles the unification talks in the homeland. North and South Korean representatives hold negotiations when neither side really wants it, she said.

"People say they need dialogue with blacks, that they need the BKA," Wong said. "But to make BKA viable, it takes a lot of work. People are more concerned with their own businesses and organizations."

Westbrook said that African American views about the BKA range from those who commend the group for its efforts to those who reject it as irrelevant.

"No single voice represents all the interests of the community, and that's certainly the case with BKA," Westbrook said.

BKA members were not surprised that Korean American-owned businesses were targeted during the riots, Kim said.

"You think this is bad. There is no reason to think the targeting of Korean businesses will stop," Kim said. "The level of resentment in South Central is still very strong."