

City panel to review black-KA tension

Boycott hits grocer in controversial shooting

By Richard Reyes Fruto
Korea Times

Concern about a perception of worsening black-Korean tensions prompted Mayor Tom Bradley and Councilman Robert Farrell to call for a study of current interethnic relations in the city.

Bradley and Farrell announced at a news conference June 14 that they have asked the city Human Relations Commission for a report that would include options on how the city can intervene.

The two top city officials were acting in response to three shootings in south Los Angeles since Memorial Day weekend. Two Koreans and two blacks died in the shootings.

In a later development, angry blacks have launched a boycott against a Korean liquor store owner who police said shot and killed a man who tried to rob the store.

The picketers believe that Lee Arthur Mitchell, 42, was not robbing the store and that Tae Sam Park, 46, shot him in cold blood. They want the district attorney's office to re-open the case.

The district attorney's office has determined the shooting was a justifiable homicide. The shooting took place at Chung's Liquor Store at 7919 S. Figueroa St. in south Los Angeles on June 4.

Farrell, who represents south Los Angeles, referred to the number of deaths as a body count. He included Latasha Harlins, the black teen-ager shot to death in March in a dispute with a Korean grocer.

"I think the entire city can benefit from such an inquiry," Bradley said.

The commission will deliver the report in 60 days.

According to Farrell, this report sends

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a signal to the Korean community that the city has recognized formally that a problem exists.

"There is a perception in the Korean community that we are doing nothing," he said.

The study will include a report on current efforts by various community organizations to improve relations among different ethnic groups, said Ron Wakabayashi, executive director of the commission.

The answer to the problem in black-Korean relations could include more city-sponsored mediation, efforts and community meetings, Farrell said.

Other options include hiring Korean-speaking people and asking Korean and black churches to help with "transcultural communications," he said.

The Brotherhood Crusade, Mothers in Action and other African-American community groups announced the boycott at a news conference on June 17, across the street from the store.

Rev. Edgar Boyd, pastor of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, said they want the store to close down.

They drew a parallel between Mitchell's death and the shooting of Latasha Harlins in a dispute with grocer Soon Ja Du last March. The Harlins shooting was recorded on a store camera videotape, and Du now faces a murder trial.

Danny Bakewell, president of the Brotherhood Crusade, said that once again a Korean grocer shot an African American and claimed the victim was robbing the store. But this time, no store camera videotaped the incident.

"We had the same situation in that incident as we had here," Bakewell said. "We believe this was also murder."

About 40 people picketed. They carried signs that read, "We do not shop with killers," and "Do not shop with those who kill us." They chanted, "No justice, no peace."

Park, still nursing three ribs broken in a scuffle with Mitchell, accused the picketers of racism against Koreans. The black community said nothing when two Korean liquor store employees were killed in a robbery last May, he said.

According to police, Mitchell held up the store by saying he had a gun in his jacket. Park shot him five times as Mitchell advanced even after Park told him to put his hands up, police said.

Jap Sunoo, president of the city Human Relations Commission, released the following statement in response to the boycott:

"While we grieve for the loss of another life in the African American community, let us remember that Lee Arthur Mitchell was killed in the course of assaulting and attempting to rob a merchant, his wife and employee."