

Fifth grocery store firebombed in 6 months in South Central

By Kay Hwangbo
Korea Times

Ace Liquor Store was firebombed early in the morning Nov. 26, marking the fifth time in six months a Korean American liquor store in South Central Los Angeles has suffered arson.

Korean American community leaders said the incident appeared related to blacks' anger over the light sentence given merchant Soon Ja Du on Nov. 15 for killing a black teen-ager.

"I think Koreans are a target now," lawyer Angela Oh said. "We have to recognize that (Judge) Joyce Karlin did not do anything to quell tensions. The easiest targets are individual merchants that are sitting out there."

Black-Korean relations were further strained by the accidental shooting of an African American man by Korean American merchant Haeng Kim on Nov. 21.

Los Angeles Police say they do not believe the firebombing was racially motivated and have classified it as an arson fire. As a result, the Los Angeles Fire Department will investigate the crime.

Store owner Ho Taek Kwon, 45, received no racial threats prior to Nov. 26, police explained. Kwon said he has



KT Photo by Kun Yoo

Ho Taek Kwon inspects damage on the roof of his Ace Liquor store with LAPD officer.

always enjoyed good relations with his customers.

But some customers angered by Kwon's business policies have made threats, said store manager Willie Jones, who is black.

"We hear (comments) like, 'We're going to do blah, blah,'" Jones said. "Sometimes it gets sticky."

Derrick Bodiford, a customer, said,

both Kwon and his wife were "cool" and doubted racial animosity was the reason for the crime.

But another African American man, who would identify himself only as Mr. White, said Kwon's wife "talks to people like they're nothing."

His son, an angry-eyed man in his 30s, said: "I wouldn't care if they burned the m—f— down."

The theory that the arson was race-related is supported by two factors: It fits a pattern of recent attacks on other Korean liquor stores, and it comes at a time of increasing tensions between some African American customers and Korean Americans storekeepers.

On the other hand, the incident may have sprouted from an individual merchant-customer dispute, random violence, or something else altogether.

Whatever the underlying reason, someone or some group intended harm when they hurled a bottle filled with gasoline-soaked rags onto the roof of the store at around 1 a.m. on Nov. 26, according to fire department officials and store manager Jones.

The fire burned out quickly and caused little to no damage, according to Patrick Marek, public service officer for

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the Los Angeles Fire Department.

A witness told police he saw a black Toyota pulling away from the store shortly after the firebomb smashed into the roof, but said he did not see who was in the car, Officer Javier Lozano said. Police have no suspects in the arson fire.

The possibility of future violence was on some Korean leaders' minds.

"I know a certain sector of the (African American) community is very upset," said lawyer T.S. Chung. "I don't know how widespread it is or what form the anger will take. I hope that if they are upset they will take a rational approach and not resort to wanton violence."

But at least one Korean organization head downplayed that danger:

"The majority of the black community doesn't support that kind of violence," said Charles Park, president of the Koreatown Crime Task Force. "I don't think law enforcement will tolerate that either. If it happens more in the future, it will be isolated and will not be very frequent."

"I don't think we should worry too much about it— just be courteous to our customers and conduct business in as professional a manner as possible."

Lawyer Angela Oh said merchants should take steps to protect their stores by hiring security guards and find ways to become more involved in their local communities.

But few liquor store owners can afford the cost of such protection, according to Yumi Jhang-Park, executive director of the Korean American Grocers Association of Southern California.

"It costs \$50 an hour, while they make \$15 or less an hour. There's nothing they can do to protect their store, other than their own physical body being there. Even then it's a very helpless situation."

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