

# Flatbush impact nationwide

## KAGRO convention focuses on Korean/black relations

By **Sophia Kyung Kim** and **Kay Hwangbo**  
Korea Times

The black-led Flatbush boycott of two Korean stores is adversely affecting almost every struggling Korean mom-and-pop store in the United States.

Working 14-hour days in the inner cities' battle zones, these urban warriors acknowledge experiencing clashes with customers—similar to the ones that triggered the New York boycotts. They say no one is immune.

Said Ki Pung Chun, president of the Philadelphia Grocery Association: "There is more tension because of New York. Merchants face the same kind of situation. But they are more afraid. When customers steal, you cannot touch them. We smile and tell them to not do it."

The backdrop of the Korean-black tension in Brooklyn provided a sense of urgency as the second annual meeting of the National Korean American Grocers Association (KAGRO) convened over breakfast Oct. 4 at the Rotex Plaza Hotel in Los Angeles Koreatown. About 50 people were present.

In New York, the black boycotters' strength is dwindling, asserts a grocers' association leader. The same leader bristled at the suggestion that the association could have done more to prevent the boycotts.

In Philadelphia and Washington D.C., Korean and black community leaders serve on police advisory councils that work to promote racial harmony.

In Atlanta, the "fragmented" Korean community has "many self-proclaimed leaders." But they are afraid to talk about the issue, so

preventive measures aren't being taken to avert a possible crisis.

In Seattle, the local grocers association worked out a compromise with the African American

community, concerned about the hoodlums hanging out at a Korean grocery store, which allowed the store to remain open.

Leaders from grocers' associations across the nation, as well as Canada, conducted a four-hour dialogue on how to prevent tensions from escalating into boycotts like

**"We have to change our attitude. We have to understand black customers."**

**Kyoung K. Kiel,**  
general secretary of the Korean American Food Dealer Association of the Greater Washington Area.



State Sen. David Roberti aide **Mel Ilomin** (left) presents legislative commendation to **Yang-II Kim**, president, Korean American Grocers Association of Southern California.



**Joon Nam Lee**, Atlanta



**Kyoung Kiel**, Washington D.C.



**Myong Yong Juch**, New York



**Ki Pung Chun**, Philadelphia

Some of the findings:

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## KAGRO

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the ones in New York.

The boycott in the Flatbush community of New York was precipitated after a verbal and physical encounter Jan. 18 between Red Apple employees and a Haitian customer, who said she was assaulted after being accused of theft. The owner said she became belligerent after she was asked to pay the full amount for her purchases.

At the KAGRO meeting, a handful of invited local African American leaders was given an opportunity to share their views. They represented such organizations as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the YMCA.

Asian representatives from the Los Angeles City and County Human Relations Commissions, the Asian Pacific American Dispute Resolution Center and the U.S. Department of Justice also participated.

Five Korean delegates from different corners of the nation gave these views on their communities' efforts to help defuse a potential explosion of racial hatred.

## New York

The boycott in Brooklyn is headed for defeat, predicted Myong Yong Juch, executive vice president of the New York Association of Korean Grocers.

"They are tired," Juch said. "It's not community people. The community people want to end it."

The association has actively supported the Red Apple and Church Fruits stores. It donated \$6,400 to help keep their stores open and participated in the Sept. 18 rally at City Hall, where protesters called upon Mayor David Dinkins to take strong action against the boycott.

Although no one at the KAGRO meeting openly criticized the general population of New York for failing to foster communications that might have prevented the boycott, some commented that they thought New Yorkers could have cared more.

"You can see why L.A. is not a New York," said Stephen Thom. "You have people here who care, who communicate."

Thom works in the community relations office of the U.S. Justice Department.

Juch said that his organization had attempted to communicate with the black community before the boycott, and that a boycott could happen anywhere, despite the best efforts of social and business organizations.

## Washington D.C.

Several years ago, the nation's capital was a hotbed of racial tension for Korean storeowners, who were being killed. Now, the at-

## A feeling of hope at KAGRO dinner

By Stephen W. Yum  
Korea Times

LOS ANGELES—As the son of a Korean merchant who had been involved in a grocery store and a produce market, I was curious about what KAGRO was exactly going to do. The minute I entered, there was an unmistakable mood in the air. The boycotts in New York had cast a foreboding shadow on all the Korean grocers in Los Angeles as well as those in other cities around the nation where there are significant numbers of Koreans.

Was there tension in the Los Angeles area between the black community and the Koreans? And what was KAGRO of Southern California going to do in the wake of the Flatbush conflict? Considering the fact that the Los Angeles area houses the largest population of Koreans in America, what had ignited into a series of protests from New York might either explode into a crisis or simply end here.

Therefore, a great responsibility rested on KAGRO's shoulders to set an example to Korean grocers around the nation.

But, unlike New York, the mood in L.A. was different, especially that evening. There was hope and flexibility toward the ideals of peaceful coexistence, and the desire to understand the diversity of our fellow minority groups.

mosphere is much calmer, said Kyoung K. Kiel, general secretary of the Korean American Food Dealer Association of the Greater Washington Area.

These days, when storeowners are victimized by crime or confronted by unruly customers, they call the police before anyone else, said Kiel.

Korean American merchants'

close ties with politicians and the police, in particular, have played a significant role in alleviating racial conflict, according to Kiel. The police department sponsors several community relations programs that affect Koreans. It will distribute Korean-language crime-prevention brochures later this month, with help from Korean community groups.

In June, the association held a seminar on race relations, conducted by Brenda Irons, head of the Center for Dispute Settlement. It also surveyed 800 Korean merchants about their business practices and published the results in its newsletter.

Television and radio spots have been utilized to educate merchants on the importance of good customer relations. A delegation also recently visited the two boycotted Flatbush merchants to offer moral support.

As for the Flatbush incident, Kiel said, "We have to change our attitude. We have to understand black customers."

Kiel said Korean businesses are not doing too well. The Bush Administration's aggressive war-

Yang Il Kim, the president of the Southern California chapter of KAGRO, and his staff had done a tremendous job in setting the tone for the evening, and in defining the objectives of KAGRO nationwide during the meeting earlier that day.

In a candid interview after the party, Kim assured me that the Korean grocers in Los Angeles did not have any serious problems with the black community. "The Koreans, as well as the whole Asian population, have a lot of political power here," he said. "The black community and the Koreans have mutual respect; we know that we can learn a lot from each other."

All the black businessmen I talked to that evening echoed this desire for a better relationship. Glen Gaither of Bacardi Imports, one of the sponsors of the evening, put it best: "There is misunderstanding. Though the gap is getting smaller, we need to close it. And something like this KAGRO meeting is doing a lot to accelerate that process."

In that way, the night was successful for both KAGRO and the community. Everything from Bill Robinson (the field representative for L.A. Councilman Nate Holden), a son of a Korean mother and a black father, who did an excellent job of narrating everything in Korean, to the finale of rhythm and blues by the '50s group, The Coasters, spelled fellowship between Koreans and blacks.

Korean organizations donate turkey to low-income residents. Scholarships are also awarded to minority students.

African Americans have demanded that Koreans hire their youths, said Chun. But Koreans' efforts to employ blacks haven't always been successful, he said, noting that many have been fired.

Chun felt that African Americans are imposing too many demands on them. "They say donate to the black community. Give. Give. It's too much," he complained.

## Seattle

When black neighbors pressured a Korean grocer to close his shop because young hoodlums hung out there, the Korean Grocers Association of Washington State stepped in to help deal with the conflict.

The association and neighbors, using a local police department as a communications channel, forged a compromise: The Korean grocer agreed to cut back on his late-night hours of operation, and a telephone outside his shop was changed from touch tone to rotary dial to make it more difficult for drug traffickers to use it for deals.

Despite the initial success, Yongsu Kim, director of the KA Grocers' Association, said he wanted to learn more about how his colleagues were dealing with racial tensions in their cities.

"We're trying to educate our members as to how bad the situation is nationally—to prepare," Kim said.

"We don't have that much of a problem right now," between blacks and Koreans in Washington state, said Kim. He observed that the black population there is small.

He deplored some people's characterizations of Koreans as

discriminating against blacks, saying that Koreans learned to distrust some blacks from experience.

## Atlanta

This Southern city—the spiritual homeland of the black civil rights movement—is celebrating. Their city will host the 1996 Olympics. But Korean merchants in this economically booming town are feeling edgy these days, said Joon Nam Lee, executive secretary of the National Korean American Grocers Association.

They are hoping what happened in Flatbush wouldn't happen in Atlanta, he said. But rather than take preventive measures, these merchants are more inclined to "hush" up the problem, said Lee.

Afraid to publicly talk about it, they are "acting like no problems exist," he said.

But while claiming that Koreans are "covering up a problem" that could "blow up," Lee could not cite current cases of racial tension.

The last crisis occurred in November 1988 when several blacks picketed two Korean stores because of alleged rude treatment of their customers. Though it lasted only a few hours, "it was enough to scare the Korean community," said Lee.

Frantic that the news of the pickets might leak out into the larger black community, Korean merchants and pastors moved immediately to defuse a potential time bomb: They attended the politically powerful Concerned Black Clergy meetings, where black community problems were brought before religious leaders.

Lee pointed out that there have also been three previous cultural exchanges between Korean and African American churches.

If the Korean-black tension is to be addressed, some Korean merchants should be more frank about their prejudice toward African Americans, Lee said. "If we do not admit it, we will continue to have the same problems. We must change our attitude from the heart."

Lee said the Korean and black communities are both fragmented and plagued by too many "self-proclaimed" leaders. The situation is not conducive "to a true means of dialogue," he said.

"There are many merchants who are doing what is good for business—donating to local black churches, organizations," he pointed out.

As for joint black-Korean ventures, Lee was pessimistic. "In my mind, Koreans will never be partners. Koreans cannot be partners with Koreans. How can they be partners with someone else?"

Lee expressed "surprise" over the presence of several L.A. city and county government representatives officials at the breakfast meeting. "They are showing such strong interest," he said. "We don't have anything like that in Atlanta."

"They say donate to the black community. Give. Give. It's too much."

Ki Pung Chun  
Philadelphia Grocery  
Association president.

## Philadelphia

Earlier this year, the son of a Korean deli owner in the City of Brotherly Love killed a black customer who allegedly pulled a gun and threatened to kill him.

The neighborhood became tense as a handful of outside agitators immediately organized a picket. But after a few days, the demonstrators were "driven out" by local residents and black leaders who condemned their racially inflammatory rhetoric, said Ki Pung Chun, Philadelphia Grocery Association president.

Korean merchants, however, are afraid that even a minor incident with a customer could ignite a boycott similar to Red Apple's, according to Chun. In the past, customers caught stealing were ejected. But now, "We say, 'Don't touch. Don't do that.' Everybody just calls the cops," he said.

As do the D.C. merchants, the Philadelphia Koreans maintain close ties with the city's police. Both Koreans and African Americans serve on community relations boards, said Chun, who sits on the 22nd district board.

There has been scattered attempts at dialogue over dinner between Koreans and blacks. Every Thanksgiving, a coalition of