

Hate crime: DA attacks store boycott



Picketeers march in front of John's Liquor Store after the recent arson fire.

Reiner blames boycott for spawning firebombs at two Korean markets

By Richard Reyes Fruto
Korea Times

District Attorney Ira Reiner blamed the two-month-old boycott of a Korean liquor store for last weekend's arson fires at the store and another market.

"The consequences are simply inevitable," Reiner said. "As surely as night follows day, when you have this type of activity, the irresponsible people in the group will do something violent."

"The boycott is responsible for the firebombing. The boycott is dangerous because it encourages irresponsible people to do violent things," he said.

Fluctuating black-Korean tensions worsened further recently when arsonists tried to torch a boycotted liquor store and a market owned by a grocer accused of murdering a black teen-ager.

The arson fires in south Los Angeles

caused little damage to the stores, but the incidents spotlighted the seriousness of the crisis.

"This has to stop now because it's getting out of control," said Marcia Choo, spokeswoman for the Koreatown Task Force on Community Relations. "This should give us more resolve to work harder and find reasonable people to sit down with and put an end to this."

The current crisis in black-Korean relations started in March when grocer Soon Ja Du fatally shot Latasha Harlins in a dispute over a bottle of orange juice.

Relations deteriorated further in June after authorities said a Korean shopkeeper Tae Sam Park killed a man who tried to rob John's Liquor Store. In protest, black activists launched a boycott of the store.

Task force member Bong Hwan Kim

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said the community must take "drastic" action because the John's Liquor Store boycott produces an environment that foments violence.

"The two stores being firebombed is proof of the true extent of the problem," Kim said. "The real sentiment in South Central is that they want the Korean stores out, and now it's turning violent."

Mayor Tom Bradley and an organizer of the boycott condemned the arson fires. Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas, who represents the area, could not be reached for comment.

"The mayor is certainly concerned about the heightened tensions between the Korean American and African American communities, and he condemns any acts of violence that have been perpetrated against store owners in that community," said Val Bunting, a Bradley spokeswoman.

"We do not approve of violence, and we are not condoning this at all," said boycott organizer Rev. Edgar E. Boyd told the *Los Angeles Times*.

But Kim showed frustration with the lack of progress in defusing the situation, and he blamed Bradley and black leaders.

The task force has been calling on Bradley and the city council to take a position on the boycott, but they haven't done so thus far.

"He really hasn't done anything substantive. He at least needs to help us bring the black leadership to the table," Kim said.

Kim said nothing came out of the summit of Korean and black leaders that the mayor convened two weeks ago after a liquor store was heavily damaged in another

arson fire.

At a news conference after the summit, Bradley said black and Korean leaders pledged to work together in resolving the crisis.

Korean leaders must continue to put pressure on City Hall to intervene and mediate an end to the crisis, Choo said.

"They have a responsibility, and they need to do something. We certainly can't leave them out of the discussion," she said.

The suspects in the weekend arson fires remained at large early this week.

Police beefed up patrols in the neighborhoods of the two stores immediately after the incidents, said Deputy Chief Matthew Hunt, commanding officer of the South Bureau.

"We are trying to do the best we can particularly in the night and early morning hours. We are obviously concerned about the firebombings," Hunt said.

Hunt also said he doesn't believe boycott organizers are connected to the fires.

According to authorities, someone set fire to Du's Empire Liquor Market at 91st and Figueroa at about 1:50 a.m. on Aug. 17. The fire burned itself out and caused no damage, Fire Department spokesman Pat Marek said.

At 2:15 a.m., someone poured kerosene under the front door of John's Liquor and lit it, setting fire to bags of charcoal inside the store, Park said. The fire scorched the wall and door before firefighters put it out.

Damage was estimated at \$200. Marek would not comment on whether the fires were related. Police have made no arrests.

Empire Liquor has been closed since the Latasha Harlins shooting. Du pleaded not guilty to first-degree murder and her trial starts Monday.

The incident last weekend was the second time someone tried to set John's Liquor on fire. Someone threw a Molotov cocktail on the roof the day after the boycott. The incendiary device caused no damage.