

# Police panel hears K-town gripes on riot response

By Richard Reyes Fruto  
Korea Times

Korean American merchants shared words of anger and advice for police when a special panel investigating the Los Angeles Police Department's riot response held a hearing in Koreatown.

"In case the next riots happen, don't be nice to the looters," said John Rhee, whose market was looted on the first night of the riots. "Next time it happens, please be tough to the rioters the first day. Then they will stop."

According to Rhee, police said they could do nothing when he reported that the store alarm had gone off. Rhee said a neighbor saw police officers drive by as looters were breaking into his store in South Central Los Angeles.

Fire destroyed Song Ho Jo's store at 51st and Alvarado streets in South Central on the first night, but he blamed the police.

"It's not Blacks who took everything from us. It is you people," said Jo, addressing the panel headed by former FBI and CIA Director William Webster.

Rhee and Jo were among scores of residents who turned out for six public meetings the Webster panel held in riot areas. The last meeting will be held in East Los Angeles on Sept. 22.

About 100 people attended the meeting on Sept. 11 at Berendo Junior High School in Koreatown. A dozen members of the Revolutionary Communist Party occasionally interrupted the meeting with jeers in English and Spanish.

"What worked? They succeeded in protecting Beverly Hills and the Westside," said Jin Ho Lee, administrator of the Association of Korean American Victims of the L.A. Riot. "What didn't work? They didn't protect people like myself."

Raising an oft-repeated criticism, Lee asked why police officers withdrew when trouble broke out at Florence and Normandie avenues, one of the flashpoints of the civil disturbance.

Lee, who lost his grocery store in Compton, said the unrest would not

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have spread if police had suppressed the rioting at Florence and Normandie.

Bong Hwan Kim, executive director of the Korean Youth Center, echoed the sentiments of numerous citizens who have used the meetings to denounce police brutality and racism.

The Los Angeles Police Department needs more Asian American and bilingual officers and multiethnic civilian review boards, said Kim, who lobbied for police reform in the past.

Kim warned that many Korean Americans have been arming themselves and forming vigilante groups since the riots.

"If you don't take any action, in 10 to 20 years, everybody is going to be armed. That's the situation you are faced with," he said.

Elliott Park, who borrowed a shotgun to defend businesses in Koreatown, demanded to know how many people who targeted Korean American-owned stores have been arrested.

The panel is expected to issue its final report by October, officials said.

Webster and Hubert Williams, a former police chief of Newark, N.J., were appointed to conduct an independent probe of the LAPD's preparations and performance during the riots.

Webster's staff has conducted more than 200 interviews with LAPD officers, the Fire Department, other law enforcement agencies, community leaders and public officials.