

FBI: KAs singled out during riots

Gangs most likely arson suspects

By Kay Hwangbo
Korea Times

Korean American merchants were apparently targeted by looters during the L.A. riots, according to the FBI official who directed federal law enforcement efforts during the disturbance.

Field Coordinator Oliver "Buck" Revell said his bureau has tracked several factors such as: rioters' statements, informants' reports, and signs of selective torching. These point to the possibility that Korean Americans were singled out for violence, Revell said.

He added it was most likely gang members that zeroed in on Korean American stores.

"We agree," the FBI official said, "that there is the appearance of...targeting of Korean businessmen that necessitate us pursuing" the possibility of potential civil rights violations against them business owners.

On May 3, Los Angeles County Sheriff Sherman Block called upon federal authorities to prosecute under

civil rights laws people who singled out Korean businesses for damage and who attacked white truck driver Reginald Denny.

Two days later, U.S. Attorney General William Barr announced the formation of a joint federal-state task force to investigate and prosecute riot-related crimes, including damage to Korean businesses and the beating of Denny.

"They should look into it, and they should really do it rather than going through the motions," said Jai Lee Wong, a consultant for the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission and a Korean community leader.

"The Korean community should continue to pressure (governmental authorities), not just investigating what happened but in terms of compensation as well as long-term building," Wong said.

The task force is trying to collect videotapes of local television stations' riot coverage, newspaper photographs and amateur videotapes to find the identities of looters, arsonists and other criminals, the Los Angeles Times reported on May 12. It is doing this by using subpoenas and in one case, a

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search warrant.

So far, three arrests have been made and five warrants issued in the Denny beating, Revell said. Although he did not know whether Korean business owners had been interviewed by the task force, he said he was confident they will be consulted at some point.

One civil rights law that could be used against arsonists and looters prohibits "injuring, intimidating or interfering with" anyone who engages in commerce during a riot or civil disorder.

It may be preferable to invoke non-civil rights laws, Revell said, because it is difficult to prove that looters and arsonists were motivated by racial hate.

"That does not mean you do not consider it a civil rights violation, but the ultimate objective is to penalize those responsible for the crimes," the official said.

Revell said he believed that chances of bringing offenders to justice are good.

"The gang members that engaged in violent acts and arson are likely to be convicted by a jury of any type in that area," he said. "I don't believe any citizen of that area is going to tolerate or condone that type of violation of law."

At the federal level, task force participants include the FBI; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms; and the Drug Enforcement Administration.

Involved state and local agencies are: the Los Angeles Police Department, the county Sheriff's Department, the Compton Police Department, the Inglewood Police Department, the Long Beach Police Department and other cities that were affected by the riot.