

# KAGRO leaders meet Bloods, Crips

Merchants and gang members explore cooperative efforts

By **Sophia Kyung Kim**  
Korea Times

It was a historical meeting no one expected in black-Korean relations.

Seated stiffly beside two Korean grocers were four leaders of the dreaded Bloods and Crips gangs.

The unlikely gathering of two sides from different worlds provided a stark contrast. David H. Kim and Yang Il Kim of the Korean American Grocers Association came to the meeting dressed in business suits and ties.

The gang members wore caps, earrings and clothes that flaunted their gang colors of red and blue. One of them shielded his face with a red bandanna and sunglasses during the press conference that followed the meeting.

Inside the closed-door meeting at a mid-Wilshire hotel, the atmosphere was understandably tense. But the dialogue was conducted in "a business-like" manner, with no one raising their voices, said Tong Soo Chung, National KAGRO legal counsel.

At a press conference following the meeting, the two Kims announced that



KAGRO leaders **Yang Il Kim**, right, and **David H. Kim**, second from right, and gang leader "**Liz**", center, are interviewed by the media after their close door meeting.

they will explore the possibility of offering gang members four jobs in Koreatown.

At the Wilshire Plaza Hotel May 25, gang leaders also proposed:

- A Korean-run bank in their neighborhood;
- Cultural exchanges between the communities;

- T-shirts that would promote racial harmony between the two ethnic groups;

- Protection of businesses in Koreatown and South Central Los Angeles by patrolling the streets in the "Guardian Angel" style.

"We just listened to their proposal. That's all," said David H. Kim, president of the Korean American Grocers

Association of Southern California. "We did not make any commitment, any promises. We told them we will take their proposals back to the Korean American community, tell the community about it and get back to them."

He said he was upset by the way the

• See KAGRO, Page 8

## KAGRO

continued from page 1

Los Angeles Times' May 26 front-page article on the meeting misled the readers into believing that some sort of a contract had been reached between the two parties.

As a result of that story and other similar reports from the Korean-language press, David Kim said he received many angry calls from KA businessmen who raised concerns about what the Los Angeles Times had reported.

The KA community—which had 1,867 of their stores burned and looted during the Los Angeles riots—are greeting the meeting with hope and skepticism.

"I think the intentions are good," said Eui Young Yu, professor of sociology at Cal State Los Angeles. "The merchants realize that the work they did in the past with established leadership didn't work, so they are exploring alternative avenues. Potentially, there is both danger and hope."

But Steve J. Lee, whose two family-owned businesses in South Central Los Angeles were destroyed during the riots, said gang members can't be trusted.

"I'd say 'no way' to the proposal," said Lee, who was elected earlier this year by black residents to sit on the 77th Street Area Community-Based Policing Council. "It sounds like extortion to me. It's not going to work. KAGRO wants protection from gangs. If they want protection, they should talk to black residents and block club members who are genuine at heart, not gang members."

The closed-door meeting was initiated by the Rev. James Stern, a minister who counsels gang members in South Central Los Angeles.

According to the Los Angeles Times, Stern served two years in state prison after pleading guilty in 1988 to charges that he conspired to send phony student loans applications through vocational schools to swindle the state and banks of about \$125,000.

"I was 19 then and I made a mistake," said Stern.

The minister and four gang leaders—two Bloods and two Crips selected by more than 85 gangs to represent them—attended the meeting, along with the two Kims and Chung.

According to David Kim, the gang members indicated that they wanted four jobs—two for Crips and two for Bloods—in Koreatown, where they could interact with Koreans on a daily basis.

"They said they wanted to better their lives," he said. "They don't want box-boy jobs at mom-and-pop stores. They want meaningful jobs that would provide training, a future. They want to work with Korean people and learn how Koreans are successful at their jobs."

The two sides "talked honestly" about numerous issues—ranging from the Latasha Harlins shooting and misperceptions about KA merchants to the burning of Korean stores and the gangs' disillusionment with black leaders, according to Chung.

When the Kims told the gang members about the numerous efforts on the part of KA merchants to give back to the black community, the gang members said they knew nothing about them.

In turn, the gang members and Stern told the KAGRO leaders that their efforts to promote racial harmony wouldn't reach the grassroots level if they only deal with mainstream black leaders.

Chung said he told the gang members that Korean Americans are not responsible for the deteriorating conditions in the inner cities, nor could they solve them alone.

"But if all the gang members are asking is for Korean Americans to do their small part, we should try to make an effort," he said. "It is in that light and spirit that we proceeded the meeting."

Stern, 27, said he called for the meeting with Korean leaders because "my intention is to build peace before there are more outbreaks of trouble. We talked about areas where blacks and Koreans could work together in peace and harmony."

Calling the talks a success, Stern said both sides were cooperative and sensitive. "I felt we communicated. After we got talking, everyone agreed that something has to be done, but the question was how do we do it," he said.

Stern said he has also approached white-owned corporations to offer jobs to gang members and other youths in the black community. He said he has received positive responses from the corporate sector and details will be released later this week.

David Kim vehemently denied that he and Yang Il Kim were vulnerable and desperate merchants when they agreed to meet with the gang members.

Furthermore, he said he and the other Kim felt "no pressure" during the meeting, and the gangs' proposal was not an attempt to extort KA businesses.

"We told them that eventually they would need to work with join well-known organizations like the Urban League, the NAACP because we don't know their group," David Kim said.

Gang members need to be included in future dialogues between Korean Americans and blacks, said Marcia Choo, executive director of the Asian Pacific American Dispute Resolution Center.

"They are part of the community. They offer a perspective. But we shouldn't single them out and negotiate one-on-one," said Choo.

She urged the KA community to continue working with

mainstream black leaders and politicians, rather than shunning them out of disillusionment.

Gangs in South Central Los Angeles are "a reality that can't be ignored," said Yu. While not opposed to KA-gang dialogues, he expressed concern about "the forces" behind the gangs.

"These forces—who influence and manage the gangs—when their interests are threatened, they can strike back. That is where the real danger lies."

Yu also reminded KAs that their interests are intertwined with the African American community's.

"The Korean merchants cannot rise by themselves," he said. "They cannot rebuild their shops without rebuilding the black community. When the merchants rebuild by themselves, there is more danger. You have to rise together."

He also urged Korean Americans to give KAGRO leaders time to work things out. "They know it is risky and dangerous," said Yu. "Their intentions are pure. The community is more prone to criticize than give constructive support."

But Steve J. Lee, who managed his parents' beauty supplies store before it was destroyed by looters, said it is ironic that gang members who may have destroyed Korean businesses are now turning to Korean merchants for help.

"I don't know what the motives of the gang members are," he said. "If the dialogues don't produce something, it's going to affect the merchants more than ever. It is going to leave gangs high and dry and more violent."

Saying that he doesn't trust gang members, Lee recalled encountering a lot of problems with them at his store.

"They'd come in and shoplift, harass us, call us names, try to aggravate us. My father and I would run after them. We knew it was dangerous, but we wanted to send a message that we were not going to take it from anybody. After a while, they left us alone."

Asked if gang members could be trusted, David H. Kim replied, "You can't trust anybody. Can you trust the politicians? What's the difference? We trusted them, gave them millions in donations and what did we get? They didn't help us after the riots."

Lee also wondered why KAGRO leaders didn't consult with other merchants' associations before facing gang leaders. "KAGRO is not the only Korean merchants association in South Central Los Angeles," he said.

Yu said there is nothing wrong with KAGRO leaders deciding on their own to meet with gang members. "In times of emergency, some creative people will have to act," he said. "It is impossible to get a consensus from the community."

Attorney Angela Oh expressed mixed feelings about the Korean-gang dialogue. In many ways, it is "smart" for Korean merchants to sit down and talk with gang members, she said.

"But KAGRO needs to be extremely careful about whom they choose to negotiate any final agreements with," she warned. "They have to be careful not to be put in a position where they are the only ones giving monetarily into projects that are developed."

She also added that this might be a ripe opportunity for the Korean community and gangs to approach Peter Ueberroth, chairman of Rebuild Los Angeles, for financial and moral support.

But the idea to have gangs patrol South Central L.A. and Koreatown streets "makes no sense whatsoever," Oh said.

"That's not viable because gang members are targets of law enforcement," she said. "The reality is we have a new police chief who comes to this city with a strong, positive reputation. We need to give Willie Williams a chance."

Won H. Chung, president and chief financial officer of Sachan Bank, said it is also not economically feasible during a recession for any bank to open a branch in South Central Los Angeles.

"At this moment, there is not much hope for that idea," he said. "To have a new bank, you have to be subjected to many preparations and government perusal."

"Gang members have been glorified in the media," said the Rev. Young Woo of Young Nak Presbyterian Church. "It is hard for me to digest them having this kind of coverage and one-to-one negotiation status. I don't think Korean grocers know what they are getting into."

The Rev. Joseph Young-Sik Ahn of Oriental Mission Church echoed a similar sentiment. "Gangs represent violence and crime. Koreans should hire black people, but not gang members. It is not the right attitude from a religious perspective."

But Jerry Yu, executive director of the Korean American Coalition, took a more sympathetic view toward gangs.

"They are intelligent people who because of their environment didn't have many alternatives to work on constructive things," he said.

"Up until now, Korean Americans have been working with mainstream black leaders, but there's been no progress," said Yu. "I see this as a sign that Korean grocers are searching for others to work with."

KAGRO leaders said they plan to meet with KA community leaders to see if they support the gangs' proposal or not.

"If the community doesn't want to get involved with gangs, we have to go back and tell them," David Kim said.

What will happen if the Korean community turns down the gang leaders' job proposal?

"What can I do?" Stern said. "That is their decision. I cannot predict."