

DIPLOMAT
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Court Says South Korea Responsible for Vietnam War Massacre

The ruling marks the first time a South Korean court has found the government responsible for mass killings of Vietnamese civilians during the war.

By **Kim Tong-hyung**

A South Korean court on Tuesday ordered the government to pay 30 million won (\$24,000) to a Vietnamese woman who survived a gunshot wound but lost several relatives when South Korean marines rampaged through her village during the Vietnam War in 1968.

In awarding the compensation to 62-year-old Nguyen Thi Thanh, the Seoul Central District Court dismissed the government's argument that it was unclear whether South Korean troops were responsible for the slaughter in the village of Phong Nhi in central Vietnam.

The court also rejected the government's argument that civilian killings were unavoidable because the South Korean troops were dealing with Viet Cong guerrillas who often blended with villagers, according to Thanh's lawyer, Lim Jae-sung. The government's lawyers were also unsuccessful in invoking a statute of limitations.

The ruling marks the first time a South Korean court has found the government responsible for mass killings of Vietnamese civilians during the war and could potentially open the way for similar lawsuits. Then ruled by anti-communist military leaders, South Korea sent more than 320,000 troops to Vietnam, the largest foreign contingent fighting alongside U.S. troops.

South Korea's Justice Ministry didn't immediately respond to a query about whether the government will appeal.

The government has never officially acknowledged responsibility for civilian massacres linked to South Korean soldiers in Vietnam, which some experts say were possibly responsible for thousands of deaths. Those atrocities haven't meaningfully impacted official relations with Vietnam, whose growing economy benefits from South Korean investment.

According to U.S. military documents and survivors, more than 70 people were killed and around 20 others injured when South Korean marines allegedly fired at unarmed civilians as they swept through Phong Nhi and the nearby village of Phong Nhut on February 12, 1968. The action came after at least one South Korean soldier got struck and injured by nearby enemy fire.

Thanh, then 7 years old, was treated for gunshot wounds in her stomach while five of her family members died, including her mother, sister, and brother.

According to U.S. military investigation records, U.S. Marines and South Vietnamese militia provided medical treatment to villagers who fled as South Korean soldiers continued to shoot inside the villages.

U.S. Marines later entered the villages and found piles of bodies in different areas, many burned or buried in ash. One U.S. soldier took photos, which were used as evidence during Thanh's trial.

Thanh filed the lawsuit against the South Korean government in 2020 and testified at the Seoul court last August. The trial also included the testimonies of other Vietnamese villagers and South Korean war veterans such as Ryu Jin-seong, a member of the marine unit linked to the attacks in Phong Nhi and Phong Nhut. He provided a first-hand account of how the South Korean soldiers shot at unarmed civilians, many of them children and women.

Thanh, who awaited the ruling in Vietnam, said she was “overjoyed” by her court victory.

“I think that the souls (of those who died in Phong Nhi) were always with me and supported me,” she said in a video message translated by her legal team. “I am overjoyed because I think that the souls can now rest easy.”

The South Korean government had argued there was no conclusive evidence that South Korean troops were responsible for the killings, even suggesting that the aggressors may have been Viet Cong fighters disguised in South Korean uniforms who were attempting psychological warfare.

The government also insisted that even if South Korean soldiers were involved, their aggressive response was defensible because they were facing constant threats from Viet Cong guerrillas who often hid among villagers and actively recruited young women.

Thanh’s lawyers pushed back at the claim, saying there was no way to justify the killings when South Korean veterans have consistently said they didn’t face any meaningful resistance or aggression from the villagers, who were rounded up and shot from close range.