

# Former student soldier played leading role in development of homeland

## Park Byung-heon, former head of Korean Residents Union in Japan (Mindan)

**Raised 52.5 billion won in donations from Korean Japanese toward successful hosting of 1988 Seoul Olympics**

The Overseas Koreans Agency has selected Park Byung-heon (1928-2011), former head of the Korean Residents Union in Japan (Mindan), as its June Overseas Korean of the Month for his leadership in the Korean community and contributions to his homeland.

A native of Hamyang, South Gyeongsang Province, Park moved to Japan in 1939 at the age of 12 and, starting with the youth movement after liberation, led Mindan and dedicated himself to the advancement of Korean rights in Japan and the development of his homeland.

Under the oppression of the Japanese occupation, living in another country was not just about adapting to a different language and lifestyle. Protecting his identity and not forgetting his people was a struggle in itself. After graduating from a small school in Tokyo, he worked in a factory and struggled through vocational school. Immediately after liberation, he became involved in the nationalist movement, starting with the Youth Alliance for the Promotion of Korean National Reconstruction, a youth organization for Koreans in Japan. This choice soon became a watershed moment that led him to a position of leadership in the Korean Japanese community.

### Formation of Japanese Student Volunteer Army during Korean War

When the Korean War broke out in 1950, he was a 22-year-old university student. As a student at Meiji University, he became a member of the committee that promoted the creation of a volunteer army to join the Korean War effort in his homeland, and he willingly volunteered to serve as one of the first 78 members of the "Korean Japanese Student Volunteer Force."



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His first combat assignment was the Incheon landing. He was assigned to the 10th Army Group, which included the U.S. 1st Marine Division and the 7th Infantry Division. When the student volunteers insisted on being deployed to the front lines, the U.S. military created the March 1st Independent Infantry Unit, which was not originally in the unit formations, but it was disbanded in November 1950, when China's People's Liberation Army entered the war and the Allies shifted to a rear-guard action.

The disbandment of the unit meant that it would soon be withdrawn, but Park refused and was invited by the ROK Army Headquarters, which was short of senior officers at the time, to take the cadet selection test, which he passed and was commissioned as an army major. He served

as a platoon commander during the Battle of Yongmunsan, which helped stabilize the front line and halt the Chinese offensive.

After returning to Japan following the armistice, he erected a monument to the Japanese Student Volunteer Army in Subong Park in Incheon in 1979 to recognize the efforts of the Japanese compatriots to defend their homeland, and after becoming the head of the Mindan, he and his comrades erected a monument in front of the Mindan Central Headquarters in Tokyo.

### Led establishment of Korean Japanese Investment Association and Shinhan Bank

He served as a leader of the Korean Japanese community, rising from general secretary to vice president and then president of Mindan, where he conducted various support activities for national unity and the development of his homeland.

At the 1970 Osaka Expo in Japan, he served as the secretary-

general of the Japan-Korea Expo Sponsorship Committee, which was organized to build a Korean pavilion, and collected \$700,000 in donations that exceeded the total budget for the pavilion.

In addition to the fundraising campaign, he organized the Inviting Families from the Homeland to Japan program to provide comfort for his people back in Korea, inviting a total of 9,710 people to visit Japan six times during the expo. If you count the family members who traveled separately from the homeland, the total number of people who visited Japan was more than 12,000.

He additionally organized the Home Country Family Invitation to Japan program to comfort the people of his home country, which brought 12,000 people to the expo.

As a result of his efforts, the Korean pavilion attracted 6.25 million visitors, attracting the second-best attendance among foreign pavilions after the United States.

Elected as the 38th president of Mindan in 1985, he served as honorary chairman of the sponsorship committee, which was formed to support the successful hosting of the 1988 Seoul Olympics, raising 52.5 billion won (US\$39 million) for his home country. The money was used to build Olympic venues, including gymnastics, swimming and tennis venues, as well as the Olympic Park Hotel, which helped make the Games a success.

In 1987, with the Seoul Olympics around the corner, he proposed the Overseas Korean Representatives' Conference to help overseas Koreans around the world work together and gathered 303 Korean leaders from around the world in Tokyo. The meeting became the basis for the World Korean Association Conference, which is now hosted annually by the OKA.

Based off his success in Japan, Park was also active in the economic and regional development of Korea.

### **Led Overseas Korean Representatives Conference, also supported scholarship programs**

In 1973, with his brothers, he founded Daesung Electric, an electronics company in the Guro Industrial Complex, and contributed to Korea's industrialization by bringing in advanced technology and capital from Japan, and led the establishment of the Korean Japanese Investment Association and Shinhan Bank, contributing to the investment and financial development of Korean businesspeople in their home country.

In addition, 12,000 cherry trees donated to his hometown of Hamyang-gun in 1987 were planted at the foot of Baekun Mountain (a 16-kilometer stretch) and led to the establishment of the Baekunsan Cherry Blossom Festival, which attracts many tourists every year and has contributed to the development of the local community.

He also established the Unam Scholarship Foundation, which provided scholarships to 395 youths from his hometown, and provided financial support for the development of his hometown and



Park Byung-heon (C), former head of the Mindan, was a leading organizer of the 'Overseas Korean Representatives' Conference, the predecessor to World Korean Association Conference.



Park Byung-heon is seen here reunited with his mother in his hometown in 1951 while serving in the Korean War as a student soldier.

the training of future generations, such as providing learning equipment for elementary schools and funding for school trips.

In honor of his contributions, the government awarded him the Samiljang Medal in 1975, the Order of Civil Merit Peony Medal in 1979, the Cheongryong Medal of the Order of Sport Merit in 1989 and the Order of Civil Merit Mugunghwa Medal in 1994.

"As the spiritual pillar of Mindan, Park Byung-heon was a true national leader who dedicated his life to contributing to his homeland while protecting the identity and rights of overseas Koreans," OKA Commissioner Lee Sang-duk said. "In honor of June's National Veterans Month and the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Korea and Japan, we have selected him as this month's Overseas Korean of the Month for his active participation in the Korean War, investment in and support of his homeland, and more."

The OKA recognizes and announces the Overseas Korean of the Month every month by identifying compatriots who have contributed to the development of Korea or raised the profile of Koreans in their countries of residence. In March, Kim Pyeong-jin (1926-2007), former president of the Korea Development Association, was honored; in April, Hong Myung-ki (1934-2021), former chairman of the M&L Hong Foundation; and in May, Lim Chun-taek (1903-1985), a patriot of the independence movement. 