

‘LA wildfires proved Korean community’s strength, moving beyond memories of the riots’

‘Clean and Safe Koreatown’ project launched ahead of 2026 World Cup and 2028 LA Olympics

“Just five days into my term, I faced a historic wildfire. But the crisis became an opportunity. The Korean community’s status shifted from being victims during the LA riots to becoming helpers this time.”

At just 50 years old, Robert Ahn is the president leading the Korean Association of Los Angeles (LA), home to the largest Korean diaspora worldwide. He shared these insights in an interview with Yonhap News at the Grand Walkerhill Hotel in Seoul, where the Overseas Koreans Agency (Commissioner Kim Kyung-hyup) is hosting the 2025 World Korean Association Conference.

Ahn, who faced an unexpected major disaster shortly after taking office, candidly discussed the wildfire damage sites, the Korean community’s response, and his vision and concerns as a second-generation Korean leader.

“While this wildfire caused record damage, it was concentrated mainly in predominantly white residential areas, so fortunately, damage to Koreans was limited,” he said. “This was different from the situation during the 1992 LA riots, when Koreatown was left defenseless and suffered significant damage.”

‘Large-scale relief and material support; now it’s our turn to help’

As a lawyer, he spoke about his experience providing legal aid during the wildfires.

“When I heard about the wildfires, memories of the LA riots

overlapped, and the shock to the Korean community was immense,” he said.

While about 40 households have registered damage with the Korean Association, the actual scale of damage is estimated to be larger.

Ahn explained: “For completely destroyed homes, the recovery process is extremely complex, involving soil remediation, safety inspections and permitting procedures. The victims face immense hardship, compounded by insurance issues, declining property values and even attempts by investors to purchase their properties.”

Given the relatively minor impact on Koreans, the LA Korean Association actively stepped up to support the broader American community.

“Thanks to the full cooperation of our Korean community, we secured 200,000 masks in just three days and swiftly distributed them to the wildfire-affected areas,” he said. “Within two months, we raised \$230,000 in donations. The Korean community’s united effort to help the local community actually became an opportunity to gain recognition from mainstream society.”

Through direct connections with state government and city of LA, Korean Association made its presence felt

“During past riots, Koreatown was abandoned amid political powerlessness, but now political accessibility has changed to the



Robert Ahn (5th from R, back row), presenting relief funds to Korean Americans affected by wildfires, takes a commemorative photo.



Robert Ahn (2nd from R) holds a press conference regarding wildfire relief efforts with sponsor representatives present, reporting on fundraising progress, damage cases and support policies at the LA Korean Association on April 3.



Robert Ahn, president of the Los Angeles (LA) Korean Association

point where we can call the mayor directly. The Korean community has gained the strength to cooperate with mainstream society on equal footing,” Ahn said.

Public safety is currently the most pressing issue in LA’s Koreatown.

“Public safety is severely compromised due to problems like homelessness, mental health issues and the policy of not prosecuting criminals. The Korean Association is taking the lead in conducting safety campaigns,” Ahn said.

“Korean seniors are most at risk. They rely heavily on buses and walking, exposing them significantly to crime. We cannot just wait for government budgets, so we are preparing self-help measures led by the Korean Association,” he said.

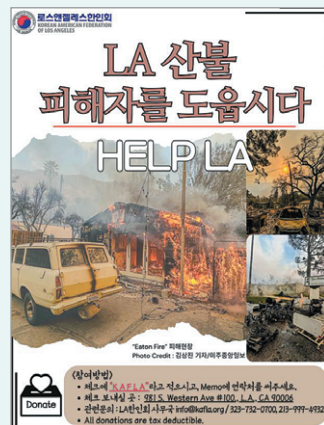
“With the World Cup next year and the 2028 LA Olympics approaching, if things remain as they are now, we could become a laughingstock to the world. Our urgent priority is to create an environment where foreign tourists visiting Koreatown due to the Korean Wave craze can stay safely,” he said.

Upon taking office as president, Ahn adopted the slogan “Connection.”

“‘Connection’ signifies not merely generational succession, but the first and second generations walking together to inherit the legacy. This concept is a philosophy unique to the Korean community, difficult to translate into English,” he said.

“One reason I ran for Korean Association president was a sense of crisis that the legacy built by the first generation could be lost without preparation. Without active participation from the second and third generations, there is no future for the Korean community.”

An LA wildfire relief campaign poster for Korean victims



‘Perceptions of Koreans have changed dramatically thanks to K-pop and Samsung’

“Perceptions of Koreans have changed dramatically thanks to the success of K-pop, Samsung and BTS,” he said. “In the past, Koreans were confined to roles like deliverymen in mainstream films, but now it’s completely different. Korea’s success is the strength of our diaspora community. We must grow like the Jewish community.

“We should model ourselves after communities like the Jewish diaspora -- small in number but possessing formidable political power. The Korean government must also step up to support the diaspora, systematically connecting the global network of Koreans,” he proposed.

“The success of politicians like Sen. Andy Kim is possible not only through individual ability but also with the backing of the Korean community. To become a more powerful Korea in the next 10 or 20 years, we must prepare starting now.”

Born in the United States, Ahn conducted the interview fluently in Korean.

“My mother couldn’t speak English, and I naturally learned Korean while living with my grandparents. The Korean language is a gift from my parents. Korean is the power that preserves my identity,” he said.

“I was in third grade during the 1984 LA Olympics. Even though I was born in the U.S., I cheered for Korea. I don’t know why, but my identity has always been Korean,” Ahn remarked, revealing the deep-rooted consciousness of a second-generation leader.

“While Koreans have achieved success, they remain passive about service and donations. Yet, these are essential for the community’s sustainability,” he said.

“During my two-year term, I won’t just manage the Korean Association; I’ll build a system that looks ahead five, ten years. I will practice connection so future generations can inherit responsibility and pride.” 장