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## The Rangoon bombing: A historical footnote

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*The brief visit to Myanmar by the President of the Republic of Korea (ROK), Lee Myung-bak, in May 2012 prompted numerous references in the news media and elsewhere to the North Korean bomb attack against ROK president Chun Doo-hwan during his state visit to Myanmar in 1983. Not all these historical references were accurate.*

President Lee Myung-bak's historic visit to Burma this week has inevitably sparked references in the news media to the bomb attack by North Korea against the last South Korean president to make this trip, 29 years ago.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, these stories have breathed new life into some myths about that incident that deserve to be finally put to rest.

In 1983, president Chun Doo-hwan made a state visit to Burma, accompanied by a large delegation of South Korean officials. The morning after his arrival in Rangoon, he was due to lay a wreath at the Martyrs' Mausoleum, a shrine dedicated to nationalist leader Aung San and six other Burmese figures who were assassinated in 1947, just before the country regained its independence.

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1 'South Korean President Lee Myung-bak in Burma Visit', *BBC News*, 14 May 2012, [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-18055319](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-18055319).

Three North Korean agents secretly entered Burma just before the visit. They planted three remotely controlled bombs in the mausoleum's roof. However, these devices were detonated prematurely, before Chun arrived at the venue. Seventeen South Koreans were killed, including four cabinet ministers. Four Burmese citizens were killed and 32 were injured.<sup>2</sup>

The three North Korean agents were soon hunted down. One was killed and the other two were captured. One was hanged in 1985, but the other (who cooperated with the authorities) survived in a Burmese jail until 2008. Because of the attack, Burma severed its diplomatic ties with North Korea. Contacts were resumed in the late 1990s, but formal bilateral relations between the two pariah states were only restored in 2007.

According to most accounts, Chun was already on his way to the Martyrs' Mausoleum when the bombs exploded, but was late because his motorcade was stuck in traffic.<sup>3</sup> Some recent reports repeat the story that he was late, but say he arrived at the mausoleum 'a few minutes' after the bombs had exploded.<sup>4</sup>

Both these accounts are inaccurate. When interviewed about the incident, both Burmese and Korean officials who were in Burma at the time and directly involved in the state visit told a different story.

The night before the wreath-laying ceremony, just after Chun's arrival in Rangoon, it was realised that the president's departure from the State Guest House the following morning clashed with the arrival of a group of Burmese women who were scheduled to have tea with the Korean First Lady. For reasons of both protocol and efficiency, Korean officials were anxious to separate the two events.

Korean and Burmese protocol officers discussed the problem late into the night. Their solution was for president Chun to deliberately delay his departure for a few minutes, until after all his wife's guests had arrived and been officially welcomed. However, the South Korean Ambassador to Burma would leave the State Guest House at the original time and advise all those waiting at the mausoleum of the altered timings.

2 'North Korea Where the Dictator Loves Terrorism', *YouTube*, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=khPAWCNnIck](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=khPAWCNnIck).

3 'Rangoon Bombing', *Wikipedia*, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rangoon\\_bombing](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rangoon_bombing).

4 'Lee Makes First S. Korean Trip to Myanmar Since Attack', *The Jakarta Post*, 14 May 2012, [www.thejakartapost.com/news/2012/05/14/lee-makes-first-s-korean-trip-myanmar-attack.html](http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2012/05/14/lee-makes-first-s-korean-trip-myanmar-attack.html) [page discontinued].

When the ambassador's official car arrived at the mausoleum, with its South Korean flag flying, the watching North Korean agents apparently believed it was Chun Doo-hwan. Some reports state that they heard the Burmese military band at the venue begin playing, as it, too, was under the impression that the president had just arrived (on time). The agents triggered the bombs.

Chun Doo-hwan's motorcade was en route to the mausoleum—through streets cleared of traffic by the local police—when the attack occurred. Informed of the incident by radio, the presidential party immediately returned to the State Guest House. It is true that Chun Doo-hwan was late for the ceremony, but this was by design, not by accident. He was not held up by traffic. Nor did he ever reach the mausoleum. Only in that sense can it be said that the president 'narrowly escape death or injury'.<sup>5</sup>

While this version of the story lacks some of the drama of the news reports, it nevertheless underlines the fact that sometimes even minor events—in this case, a scheduling error that posed protocol problems for status-conscious Korean officials—can have far-reaching historical significance. As it was, war nearly broke out on the Korean Peninsula in 1983, as South Korea seriously contemplated retaliation against the North.

It is unlikely that Lee Myung-bak will need to remind anyone of this incident during his visit this week. Burma's relations with North Korea grew rapidly between 2000 and 2010, but the Burmese have never forgotten what happened nearly 30 years ago. Besides, even if President Thein Sein had not undertaken to sever Burma's military links with North Korea, closer political and economic relations with Seoul promise the reformist government in Naypyidaw much more than ties with Pyongyang ever will.<sup>6</sup>

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5 Wai Moe, 'A Friend in Need', *The Irrawaddy*, August 2009, [www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art\\_id=16425](http://www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=16425).

6 'US Welcomes Burma's Decision to Cut Military Ties with North Korea', *Mizzima News*, [Yangon], 2 December 2011, [www.mizzima.com/news/inside-burma/6247-us-welcomes-burmas-decision-to-cut-military-ties-with-north-korea.html](http://www.mizzima.com/news/inside-burma/6247-us-welcomes-burmas-decision-to-cut-military-ties-with-north-korea.html) [page discontinued].

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