

APEC 2005 - An ugly feast and a huge protest

Saturday 3 December 2005, by [LEE Yu Kyung](#) (Date first published: 30 November 2005).

The cost of accommodation for each leader attending the APEC summit was US\$4000 per day. US President George Bush occupied the whole of Western Chosun Hotel. Some 1000 official participants swallowed \$1.5 million at the luxurious dinner following the summit talks on November 18. Another \$1.5 million was spent on 50 minutes of fireworks to celebrate APEC.

Pusan,

Since March, the government in the southern port city of Pusan has cracked down on street stalls. The same happened during the 1988 Olympics and the 2002 soccer World Cup in Seoul. As a result, the vendors around Haewoondae, which is the most frequented tourist beach, and near BEXCO (the Busan Exhibition and Convention Centre), the venue of the APEC summit, were forced to abandon their source of income. The poor quarters near BEXCO were walled by the city's government, which argued that "these things shouldn't be shown to the world leaders". In response, one woman burst out in anger, "So what? Are we snakes or something?"

On November 19 - the last day of the summit - three subway stations in the vicinity of BEXCO were set up as non-stops under the cloak of protection from terrorism or protest activities. Residents in this area could hardly move without transportation. The nature of APEC, the world's largest economic entity, was revealed in the gulf between rich and poor in Pusan.

On November 18, the demonstrators from PAAAB (People's Action Against APEC and Bush) marched towards BEXCO. As some 20,000 protesters advanced towards the APEC venue, they were blocked by shipping containers and 35,000 police. Police helicopters circled over the scene and police fired water cannons. In response, protesters tried to pull down the huge containers with ropes and some threw rocks and wielded long sticks. Around 150 protesters and seven police were wounded.

Farmers made up the frontline of the protest and seemed to be the most enraged, as the APEC summit focused on opening the agricultural market. In South Korea, a rice bill is about to be ratified by the national assembly and during the past two weeks, two farmers killed themselves in a protest against this bill.

Green Left Weekly spoke to Kim Keun Hae from Pusan's farmers' union: "We're not a farmhand of WTO or APEC. Look, the government worries about the low birth rate, but how can we have a baby in an era where poverty is handed down from the parents to their children?" An Ji Jung, another activist, added: "I'm very anxious about the current situation being similar to 1991, when we saw successive suicides by student activists."

Tejo Pramono, an Indonesian who had been kept at the airport by the immigration authorities for four hours, described the condition of the Indonesian peasants: "More than 60% of the population are peasants. But only 0.2% have at least some land, while most is owned by companies that are licensed from the government."

John Beacham from ANSWER (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism) in the US firmly told GLW that

it's not only Asians, but many people in the US too that suffer from neoliberalism. "The Bush administration has drastically cut off the welfare budget in order to finance the invasion on Iraq. Now the majority oppose Bush's war."

Various anti-APEC actions were organised during the summit. The Korean Teachers and Education Workers Union conducted a seminar titled "Be aware of the APEC", which provoked many discussions among students. A controversial educational video clip on the union's website that satirised the APEC leaders was aggressively condemned by conservative forces.

Human rights organisations, along with some cultural groups, co-organised a "brigade to watch violations against freedom of expression and assembly". They stood in the frontline of the demonstrations and warned the police not to violate any democratic rights.

A medical unit for emergencies was also present among the protesters, consisting of medical and pharmaceutical students and specialist NGOs that gave first aid to those wounded.

Following the APEC banquet and anti-APEC actions, the establishment media plastered their front pages with slogans like "APEC, promoting the country to a higher position". Demonstrations continued on November 20-21, and people vowed to flock to Hong Kong to protest the World Trade Organisation meeting in December.

P.S.

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