

Eight Men Exonerated 32 Years After Execution For Treason — Relatives Awarded \$67.4 Million

By JD Staff

Eight South Koreans were tried in December 1974 for committing treason by organizing the subversive People's Revolutionary Party. The government alleged that the men sought to overthrow the South Korean government and build a communist nation in cooperation with North Korea. Confessions by the men were introduced as evidence supporting the charges. The men asserted in their defense that they had been tortured into making the confessions. They also claimed that while they were critics of the government, they had not done anything except advocate democratic changes and they did not belong to any revolutionary organization.

All eight men were convicted and sentenced to death. They were executed in a mass hanging on April 9, 1975, less than eight hours after South Korea's Supreme Court upheld their convictions and sentences. The eight men were Woo Hong-seon, Song Sang-jin, Seo Do-won, Ha Jae-wan, Lee Su-byeong, Kim Yong-won, Doh Ye-jong and Yeo Jeong-nam. Su-byeong wrote in his last message before being hanged, "I have not done anything but object to the Yushin establishment. Why should I die on a false charge when I have fought only for national and democratization? My undue sacrifice will asserted by justice."

Twenty-seven years after the men were executed, it was publicly disclosed in September 2002 that the the revolutionary group the men had been convicted of organizing never existed. To galvanize public support for its harsh anti-democratic domestic policies, the South Korean government conjured a fake domestic threat by fabricating the People's Revolutionary Party out of thin air. It was also disclosed that the Korean Central Intel-



The eight defendants stand before the South Korean Supreme Court on April 8, 1975. They were executed less than eight hours later.

ligence Agency had tortured confessions from the eight men, just as the men had claimed at their trial. The men's cases were re-opened based on the new exculpatory evidence. On January 23, 2007 all eight men were posthumously acquitted after a retrial.

Following the exonerations, the families of the men sought compensation by filing a lawsuit against the South Korean government. On August 20, 2007, the Seoul Central District Court awarded 46 relatives of the eight men \$28 million, plus 5% interest on the award for the 32 years from 1975 to 2007. With interest the award totaled \$67.4 million. (Note: The base award was for 24.5 billion won (South Korean money), which converts to US\$28 million, and with interest the 63.7 billion won converts to US\$67.4 million.) In making its ruling, the court stated: "Although the state is obliged to protect the basic rights of the people and guarantee the dignity and value of each one of them, it took the precious lives of these eight men by using its power to label them as an impure force in society and drive them out. Their family members have suffered from society's cold treatment, social disadvantages and consequential financial difficulties for the past three decades."

In awarding compensation, the court rejected the government's argument that the statute of limitations for filing a claim had expired, because it began to run when the wrongful executions were carried out in 1975. The court recognized that the families couldn't have filed a successful claim until the men were cleared of their wrongful convictions and executions. Consequently, "We cannot allow the government to be exempt from its responsibility by claiming that the statute of limitations has passed." The court also stated, "It is humiliating for the nation to use the statute of limitations in order to escape its responsibility. The government's claim cannot be accepted."

The compensation award was the largest in South Korean legal history related to wrongful convictions. Dozens of other critics of South Korea's government were convicted in the 1970s of trumped-up charges related to their alleged activities with the non-existent People's Revolutionary Party. Those people were given sentences ranging from 15 years to life in prison, so there could be additional exonerations and compensation awards.

Sources: Reflections on the court's decision to retry 'the people revolutionary party reconstruction commission case', *Korea Democracy Foundation Newsletter*, February 2007. Families of eight wrongfully executed political prisoners awarded compensation, *The Hankyoreh* (Seoul), August 22, 2007.

Sheila Rose Steele In Memoriam



Sheila Rose Steele speaking at a 2004 March For Justice in Saskatoon.

Sheila Rose Steele and Richard Klassen founded the injusticebusters.com website in June 1998 to publicize outrageous miscarriage of justice cases. Steele was a longtime social activist who assisted Klassen when he, his wife, and 10 other adults were falsely arrested in 1991 for allegedly abusing three foster children the Klassen's cared for in their Saskatoon, Saskatchewan home. In 1993 the charges were dropped against the Klassens. A year later they filed a \$10 million malicious prosecution lawsuit against the therapist who claimed the children had been abused, the Saskatoon police officer who investigated the case, and two prosecutors. In December 2003 three of the four defendants were found liable for malicious prosecution, and in November 2004 details were disclosed of the lawsuit's settlement for \$1.5 million.

Based in Saskatoon, injusticebusters.com grew to be the most prominent Canadian based website of wrongful prosecutions and other injustices. Profiling both Canadian and U.S. cases, the website featured details about hundreds of cases. A trademark feature was a distinctive poster of a wronged person with brief details about their case.



Injusticebuster.com poster for Kirstin Blaise Lobato, whose case was featured in JD Issues 26 and 34.

Steele and Klassen also engaged in direct action by organizing protests of an injustice.

Steele died on November 11, 2006. She was 63. Her son, Kevin Steele, took over administering the website, and Klassen vowed to continue the organization's activities as long as he could. In November 2007 Klassen announced that they could no longer investigate or report on new cases, but that the website will be maintained online indefinitely. The injusticebuster.com website has had many millions of visits since 1998, and it remains a valuable source of information about the cases it reported on, so the memory and vision of Sheila Rose Steele continues to live on.

Source: Remembering Sheila Rose Steele, *Saskatoon StarPhoenix*, November 14, 2006. Settlement details released for Sask. couple accused of child abuse, *CBC News*, November 19, 2004.