

Moon calls for truth finding of massacre during Gwangju movement

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President Moon Jae-in speaks at Cheong Wa Dae, Tuesday, during an interview with local broadcaster MBC to mark the 40th anniversary of the May 18 Gwangju pro-democracy movement. Courtesy of Cheong Wa Dae

By Jung Da-min

President Moon Jae-in has called for a fact-finding investigation into the use of military force against residents of Gwangju during the city's pro-democracy movement in 1980.

"It has yet to be revealed who ordered the shooting and who is liable for it," Moon said during an interview with local broadcaster MBC aired Sunday, a day before the 40th anniversary of the Gwangju May 18 Democratic Uprising. The interview was conducted at Cheong Wa Dae, May 12.

"We should identify all the victims of the massacre, and find out how the military fired machine-guns from helicopters and how the distortion and cover-up maneuvering were carried out," he said. "The purpose of the investigation is not to punish the responsible people, but to seek reconciliation and unity based on truth."

Since taking office in May 2017, Moon has reiterated that the truth of the pro-democracy movement should be revealed.

In September 2017, the Ministry of National Defense launched a special investigative body to look

into whether machine-guns were fired from the helicopters. After a five-month investigation, the panel concluded they were.

Another truth-finding commission was launched May 12 this year following a special law set up in 2018 on the issue. Moon's remarks in the interview are expected to give momentum to its activities.

"I have high expectations of the truth commission, and the government will be actively supporting it," Moon said.

The pro-democracy movement has been an issue of political and ideological conflict, with some conservative politicians and activists still disparaging the movement. Moon said finding the truth would help prevent such remarks.

He also said the historic value and spirit of the movement should be inscribed in the Constitution through a constitutional revision.

In May 1980, a military junta led by then-Army general Chun Do-hwan declared martial law and cracked down on pro-democracy protesters. In Gwangju, many residents were killed, beaten and tortured. Official figures show around 200 were killed, but the number is presumed to be much higher.

Chun is believed to have been the overall person in charge of the mass shooting, but has denied the allegations. The former president, from 1980-87, who stepped down after the June 10 pro-democracy movement that year, also denied that machine-guns were fired from military helicopters.

He is currently on trial for defaming a deceased priest who testified that he had seen machine-guns being fired from a helicopter in Gwangju, May 21, 1980.