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Plans in the works for Korean workers detained in raid to go home while fear lingers for residents

South Korea's foreign minister has traveled to the U.S. to address the detention of over 300 South Korean workers

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press and KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press
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POOLER, Ga. -- After more than 300 South Korean workers were taken into custody during a raid on an electric battery plant in Georgia, the country's foreign minister traveled to the U.S. this week in hopes of bringing them home.

The Koreans were among some 475 workers detained during the raid [Thursday's raid](#) at the [battery factory](#) under construction on the campus of Hyundai's sprawling auto plant west of Savannah.

South Korea's Foreign Ministry said Seoul and Washington were discussing details for the workers' return. Late Tuesday, the State Department announced that Secretary Marco Rubio will meet with Foreign Minister Cho Hyun at the White House on Wednesday morning.



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[A Korean Air Boeing 747-8i](#) departed from Seoul late Tuesday and was expected to arrive in Atlanta on Wednesday to bring the workers home.

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The workers were being held at an immigration detention center in Folkston, in southeast Georgia, near the state line with Florida. It's a 285-mile (460-kilometer) drive from there to Atlanta.

South Korean officials said they've been negotiating with the U.S. to win "voluntary" departures for the workers, rather than deportations that could make them ineligible to return to the U.S. for up to 10 years.

South Korean TV showed Cho Ki-joong, consul general at the Korean Embassy in Washington, speaking outside the detention center. He said some administrative steps remained to be completed but that things were going smoothly. The South Korean Foreign Ministry declined to comment on media reports that he and other diplomats met with detained workers.

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Charles Kuck, a lawyer representing several of the detained South Koreans, said the "vast majority" of the workers from South Korea were doing work that is authorized under the B-1 business visitor visa program.

A B-1 visitor for business visa allows foreign workers to stay for up to six months, getting reimbursed for expenses while collecting a paycheck back home. There are limits — for example, they can supervise construction projects but can't build anything themselves — but if it's spelled out in a contract, they can install equipment, Los Angeles immigration lawyer Angelo Paparelli said.



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Also, South Korea is one of 41 countries whose citizens can use the U.S. Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA), which provides a visa waiver if they can provide “a legitimate reason” for their visit, and this basically gives them B-1 visa status for up to 90 days, said immigration attorney Rita Sostrin in Los Angeles.

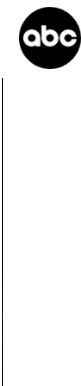
In Pooler, a suburb of Savannah, the sprawling Hyundai electric vehicle plant has triggered noticeable growth.

Signs in shopping center parking lots point to homes for sale in new subdivisions nearby. Construction crews work on multistory apartment buildings while finished apartments in the same complex display large banners proclaiming they’re ready for new residents.

Meanwhile, a growing number of Korean restaurants and Asian grocery stores have found a home among standard American fast-food franchises and chain eateries like Starbucks and Cracker Barrel.

Ruby Gould, president of the Korean American Association of Greater Savannah, said there’s no question that last week’s raid has raised anxiety among the area’s Korean immigrants.

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“People are very upset about the incident, the arrest of the workers,” Gould said. “I’m sure there are some people in fear about this visa situation after they witnessed what’s happened.”

The U.S. Census Bureau says Pooler’s population jumped to 31,171 last year, an increase of 21% since 2020. That period includes the groundbreaking and construction of Hyundai’s EV factory.

People of Asian origin made up just 6% of the suburban city’s residents in 2020. While newer demographic data isn’t available, people in the area say Korean Americans and South Korean immigrants make up a sizable share of recent newcomers.

Pastor Robin Kim and his wife closed last month on a new home in Pooler, where Kim is starting his own church. He left the Army a few months ago after serving as a chaplain to soldiers at nearby Fort Stewart. Kim said they wanted to be a part of the Savannah suburb’s growing Korean community.

Kim, 51, has sought to calm some of the anger and anxiety in the community since last week’s raid. He noticed fewer Korean people out shopping over the weekend, and reads a constant stream of messages posted in a chat group of 1,900 local Korean residents.

“The people feel like they’re being watched, like they’re being judged by the American people,” Kim said. “They are scared right now. They don’t want to be trouble.”

He said some are resentful at the U.S. government considering the billions of dollars Hyundai has invested in the Georgia plant and the thousands of U.S. jobs it’s creating. Others worry the immigration arrests will mean increased scrutiny that hinders their own efforts to extend visas or obtain green cards.

A suggestion that local Korean residents stage a protest, Kim said, was quickly stifled by others who cautioned against drawing attention.

“They’re trying to keep a low profile right now,” he said, “to not go out much and stay home.”

For his part, Kim hopes the raid doesn’t have lasting impacts.

“I hope the Korean community keeps thriving here,” he said, “and we get over this incident real soon.”

Brumback reported from Atlanta. Associated Press writers Hyung-Jin Kim in Seoul and Didi Tang and Paul Wiseman in Washington contributed.



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