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### **SCHOLARS ANALYZE PLAN BY KOREA TO RE-VISIT MILITARY GAY BAN Contrast with U.S. Cited**

SANTA BARBARA, CA, May 30, 2006 - In the wake of the recent announcement by South Korea that it plans to ease or end its ban on gay soldiers, researchers of gender, sexuality and military culture say the developments are surprising for a nation that is not known for tolerance of open homosexuality. According to the Associated Press, the statement by the Defense Ministry followed a recommendation by a government human rights group that the military take steps to ensure the rights of its gay troops. Before that, gays were discharged for "mental illness" and were sometimes the target of harassment.

In April, Defense Minister, Yoon Kwang-ung told a parliamentary committee that his office would review the recommendation of the National Human Rights Commission "in a positive manner," saying that the decision was, in part, a reaction to an increase in "public calls on the issue." Roughly three dozen civic groups had convened a press conference to call for greater government action to protect the rights of gays in the military, according to Korea times. The first phase of new regulations went into effect on April 1. They restrict the use of personal information about gay soldiers on military documents, end the forced medical examinations of gay troops and punish perpetrators of sexuality-based physical or verbal abuse.

Analysts said the announcement was a promising step in the evolution of rights for gays in Asia. "This is a culture that does not have much of a tradition of discussing sexual orientation openly," said Dr. Aaron Belkin, Director of the Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military, a think tank at the University of California, Santa Barbara. "But right now on this issue, what we're seeing there is a more open political process than we enjoy here in the United States." Belkin explained that despite overwhelming evidence showing that gays can serve openly in a military setting without undermining the mission, the political process in the U.S. has stalled, as opponents of gay rights work to thwart open discussion of what the research shows. "The willingness of political leaders and military brass in South Korea to be responsive and open to the evidence seems quite a contrast with the process in the U.S.," he said.

Dr. Seungsook Moon, Associate Professor of Sociology at Vassar College and author of *Militarized Modernity and Gendered Citizenship in South Korea*, said that attitudes toward homosexuality in much



of Asia are closer to those of 19th-century Europe than 21st-century America. "Overall, it's a pretty conservative society when it comes to gender norms and sexuality issues," she said. "Most people still consider that heterosexuality is the norm because it produces life. Homosexuality is considered abnormal, a perversion or mental illness." Recently, Moon said, widespread but hidden anti-gay violence was exposed in the military, bringing public attention to the issue and an outcry from gay and gay-friendly groups. The government response was partly a reaction to this media attention and public pressure.

South Korea transitioned from a military regime to a procedural democracy in 1988 and some groups took the opportunity to work toward creating a new political openness. The National Human Rights Commission, which made the recommendation to revise the policy on gay troops, was one of a new brand of liberal government organizations that emerged out of this transformation. Moon said that these developments had created space for sexual minorities in Korea to mobilize and call for greater rights, but that sometimes government leaders paid lip service to these rights without ultimately delivering them. She called the announcement by the Defense Minister "a positive sign" because it was the first time the military was taking up the issue publicly, but she cautioned that it was not yet clear whether it would translate into significant change. "We'll have to wait and see," she said.

The Center for the Study of Sexual Minorities in the Military is an official research unit of the University of California, Santa Barbara. The Center is governed by a distinguished board of advisors including the Honorable Lawrence J. Korb of the Center for American Progress, Honorable Coit Blacker of Stanford University and Professor Janet Halley of Harvard Law School. Its mission is to promote the study of gays, lesbians, and other sexual minorities in the armed forces.