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## US ambassador to South Korea in stable condition after knife attack

*Knife-wielding man reportedly screamed during attack on ambassador that rival  
Koreas could be unified*

March 4, 2015



U.S. Ambassador Mark Lippert was in stable condition after a man screaming demands for a unified North and South Korea slashed him on the face and wrist with a knife, South Korean police and U.S. officials said Thursday.

Media images showed a stunned-looking Lippert examining his blood-covered left hand and holding his right hand over a cut on the right side of his face, his pink tie splattered with blood.

"We strongly condemn this act of violence," said Marie Harf, a U.S. State Department spokeswoman of the attack at a performing arts center in downtown Seoul as the ambassador was preparing for a lecture about prospects for peace on the divided Korean Peninsula.

The U.S. Embassy later said Lippert was in stable condition after surgery at a Seoul hospital. President Barack Obama called Lippert, who was one of his Senate aides, to wish him a speedy recovery, a White House official said.

In a televised briefing, Chung Nam-sik of the Severance Hospital said 80 stitches were needed to close the facial wound, which was slightly more than 4 inches long and a little deeper than 1 inch. He added the cut did not affect his nerves or salivary gland.

Chung said the knife penetrated through Lippert's left arm and damaged the nerves connected to his pinkie and tendons connected to his thumb. Lippert will need to be treated at the hospital for the next three or four days and may experience sensory problems in his left hand for several months, Chung said.

But the reported comments of the suspect, 55-year-old Kim Ki-jong, during the attack — "South and North Korea should be reunified" — touch on a deep political divide in South Korea over the still-fresh legacy of the 1950-53 Korean War, which is still technically ongoing because it ended in an armistice, not a peace treaty. Some South Koreans [blame the presence of 28,500 U.S. troops](#) stationed in the South as a deterrent to the North for the continuing split of the Korean Peninsula along the world's most heavily armed border — a view North Korea's propaganda machine regularly pushes in state media.

The attack came suddenly, witnesses said. A knife-wielding man ran screaming up to Lippert as soup was being served for the breakfast meeting and began slashing, said Kim Young-man, spokesman for the group hosting the breakfast, the Korean Council for Reconciliation and Cooperation. A separate, unidentified witness told local media that as Lippert stood up for a handshake, the suspect wrestled the ambassador to the ground and slashed him with a knife.

Kim is a member of the pro-Korean unification group that hosted the event, police said.

"The guy comes in ... He yells something, goes up to the ambassador and slashes him in the face," said witness Michael Lammbrau of the Arirang Institute, a think tank. Michael Lammbrau.

"The ambassador fought him from his seat ... There was a trail of blood behind him," Lammbrau said.

Yonhap TV showed men in suits and ties piled on top of the attacker, who was dressed in a modern version of the traditional Korean hanbok.

"I carried out an act of terror," Kim shouted as he was pinned to the floor by event attendees. The suspect also shouted anti-war slogans after he was detained, police said. They said the knife was about 10 inches long.

The suspect in the attack appeared to be known in Seoul for his willingness to use violence to highlight his grievances.

A police official, speaking on condition of anonymity because the investigation was still underway, said the suspect in 2010 threw a piece of concrete at the Japanese ambassador in Seoul. South Korean media reported that Kim Ki-jong was later sentenced to a three-year suspended prison term over the attack. Kim, who was protesting Japan's claim to small disputed islands that are occupied by South Korea, missed the ambassador with the concrete and hit his secretary instead, the reports said.

Kim also reportedly tried to set himself on fire with gasoline while protesting in front of the presidential Blue House in October 2007. He was demanding a government investigation into an alleged 1988 rape in Kim's office, according to news reports.

South Korea's Foreign Ministry released a statement condemning the attack and vowing a thorough investigation and strengthened protection of embassies.

The suspect on Thursday also reportedly mentioned the annual U.S.-South Korean military exercises that North Korea says are preparation for an invasion. Seoul and Washington say the drills, which will run until the end of April, are defensive and routine.

North Korea each year reacts with fury to the drills, which the impoverished country is forced to respond to with drills and weapons tests of its own. In 2013 it threatened nuclear strikes on Washington and Seoul, and on the first day of this year's drills, Monday, it test-fired short range missiles in a demonstration of anger.