Are There South Korean Mercenaries in Ukraine?

The fact that mercenaries from various countries are fighting on the side of the Ukrainian regime is relatively well-known, and so the rumor that “South Korean mercenaries from among former special forces have arrived in Ukraine” spread quite quickly. However, although the ROK is on the list of unfriendly countries because of its actions, the news is more likely to be fake.

So here we have 38-year-old Rhee Keun: former naval special operations officer (main specialization is a submarine miner) and owner of a YouTube channel with the pathetic name ROKSEAL and over 780,000 followers (and of course Instagram account, too). Born in the United States, Rhee graduated from the Virginia Military College in 2006 and was commissioned from 2007 to serve in the ROK Marine Special Forces (UDT), where he rose to captain in 2014. In 2020, he appeared as an instructor on “secret special forces techniques” on a YouTube show and gained immense popularity through his participation in various entertainment shows on major television networks such as MBC and SBS.

On March 6, Rhee wrote on Instagram and on his YouTube channel that he had gone to Ukraine to take part in the war against Russia as a volunteer. Rhee said he initially tried to go to Ukraine officially, but abandoned that plan after receiving a government response that travel to Ukraine was banned and that violating the ban could lead to criminal prosecution. Since mid-February 2022, for security reasons, Seoul has banned its citizens from visiting all regions of Ukraine and has evacuated all citizens who wish to do so. The ban also applies to the areas bordering it: the Rostov, Belgorod, Voronezh, Kursk and Bryansk regions of Russia and the Brest and Gomel regions of Belarus.
Those who enter the country without a permit could face up to a year in prison or a fine of up to 10 million won (US$8,150). In addition, the ROK Criminal Code prohibits participation in hostilities without government permission.

But what is a ban for an internet celebrity? Rhee said he had not shared the plan with anyone but a few close aides because his team had to leave South Korea and arrive safely in Ukraine by an unofficial route.

On March 7, Rhee wrote on Instagram that “our team (Rhee and three of his fans, beautifully filmed in heroic poses and decked out in guns) safely arrived in Ukraine. We’ll fight on the frontlines.” In response, the foreign ministry warned that the group’s passports would be revoked if it was confirmed that they had entered the war-torn country. Ministry spokesperson Choi Yong Sam told reporters that the Foreign Ministry is consulting with relevant agencies, including the Ministry of Justice, to take administrative measures. Rhee, on the other hand, replied that the ministry had better think about how to provide support, rather than wasting time revoking passports.

On March 11, the ROK Foreign Ministry called on the country’s law enforcement agencies to investigate the case of Rhee Keun, and on March 13 the Russian Armed Forces launched a missile strike on Ukrainian Armed Forces centers in the village of Starichi and the Yavorivsky military training ground, killing up to 180 foreign mercenaries. In a video circulating on the web, a Brazilian representative who decided to leave Ukraine described seeing “special forces from all over the world” in Ukraine, including from South Korea: “And then very simply, all I know is that they are all dead. They have all been destroyed.” After that, some began to think Rhee Keun was dead.

On the same day, Choi Yong Sam told a briefing: “It has not yet been officially confirmed whether a group of our citizens who recently entered Ukraine without government permission have returned to Poland.”

After this, Rhee Keun immediately wrote on his Instagram account that he was alive, his group members had completely left Ukraine, he was alone and had a lot of “work” to do. He called for an end to the spread of fake news, which there was plenty of, and demanded that journalists stop trying to contact him as he was in combat and busy every day: “There will be no news from me until I complete my mission.”

However, minutes after it was uploaded, the message was deleted, along with the photos he had posted just before and after his departure for the country.

Later, Rhee additionally released a recorded message from an official at the Seoul Metropolitan Police Department, in which the policeman wrote to him that if Rhee reported his current whereabouts to the authorities, he would be protected as a Korean citizen abroad. In response, the social media star said he could not return to Korea, although he thanked the South Korean government and people for worrying about him.

In this or the following message, the “seal” called the Chosun Ilbo journalist a fraud, saying that he had not sought entry to Poland and was not in the border zone, but in the epicenter of hostilities. However, Rhee has since deleted all Ukraine-related posts from Instagram.

On March 17, it was reported in the ROK media that Rhee Keun’s two comrades, who went with him to fight in Ukraine just over a week ago, had returned to Korea and after undergoing a 7-day quarantine would be summoned for questioning on charges of violating passport laws. Whether the mercenary charge will apply to them has not yet been decided. The author points out, however, that in the “tacticool photos” Rhee’s entourage consisted of three people. Apparently, one is either dead or is with the brave spec ops officer as photographer or make-up artist.

On March 17, Media Real Research Korea conducted a public opinion survey on the attitude towards Rhee Keun’s actions. According to the results, 56.7% of respondents expressed support for the Korean “soldier of fortune.” 33.63% negatively assessed Rhee’s departure for Ukraine, noting that “this is a PR stunt to gain following on social media.” 57.63% consider it necessary to prosecute him.

Anyone else? On March 18, a foreign ministry spokesman said that nine ROK nationals, including Rhee Keun, remain in Ukraine and many of them are believed to have “entered the country to join the foreign military,” adding that the
Yonhap news agency also claimed that a number of South Koreans had expressed interest in participating in the war as volunteers and made requests to the embassy in Seoul after its president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, asked for volunteers from abroad to help his country. Some media in ROK say that besides Rhee, several other people have left, but without much experience.

This author will write more about how the South Korean youtuber’s adventures in Ukraine will end, but it can already be stated with confidence that the speculation about “special forces mercenaries” is untrue. Not mercenaries, but ONE mercenary with a support group. And even then, not a real hired gun, but a youtuber in search of fame and credibility, who tried to escape as soon as it became clear that the war was going on in earnest. Meanwhile, the ROK authorities do not indulge him, but intend to persecute him, constantly warning of possible prison sentences for Korean citizens who wish to join the Ukrainian armed forces without the proper approval of the government.

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