S.Korea charges Roh, Chun over Kwangju massacre

By Kim Myong-hwan

SEOUL, Jan 23 (Reuters) -- South Korean prosecutors on Tuesday formally charged ex-presidents Roh Tae-woo and Chun Doo Hwan with sedition over events surrounding the 1980 army massacre of pro-democracy activists in Kwangju, prosecutors said.

It was the latest in a string of charges against the two former heads of state.

Chun and Roh already face mutiny charges over the 1979 coup that propelled them to power. They have also been indicted on corruption charges for amassing slush funds of hundreds of millions of dollars during their rule.

The brutal quelling of the popular uprising against military rule in the southwestern city is one of the most traumatic chapters in South Korean history. Secrecy has for many years surrounded the event.

"Chun, as the mastermind, and Roh...As a key player in various violence, mutiny and seditious activies committed a crime of trampling on the constitution," a prosecutor statement said.

It said Chun and his military associates "believed protests in Kwangju could pose barriers to their bid to seize control, restricted media reports on Kwangju demonstrations on fear of worsening protests and intended to crush them."

Along with Chun and Roh, six former senior military officers were indicted on sedition charges. They include former army chief of staff Hwang Yung-si and generals-turned-politicians Lee Hak-bong and Yoo Hak-seong, who have already been arrested.

The others, who have not been held, are former defence minister Choo Young-bock, then martial law commander Lee Hui-sung and former military academy president Cha Kyu-hun.

"The Kwangju incident took place as the new military leadership tried to follow programmes aimed at seizing political power," a prosecutor said.

The programmes included the closure of parliament, arrests of politicians, purging of journalists, a crackdown on democracy campaigners and a revision of the constitution.

About 200 people were killed by official count when members of crack special forces trained for combat with North Korea stormed the city to end the revolt. But residents say as many as 1,000 may have died.

The Kwangju rebellion erupted a day after the Chun-led military ordered the imposition of martial law across South Korea in May 1980 following a military coup in 1979.

Many Kwangju residents were also angry at the arrest of opposition leader Kim Dae-jung, a local political hero whom the
military accused of fanning protests.<ep>
A statement by the main opposition National Congress for New
Politics, headed by Kim Dae-jung, said the prosecution failed to
shed light on the fabrication of charges against Kim and accused
the government of trying to end investigations quickly.<ep>
Prosecutors said the final authority for the order to send
troops to Kwangju came from Chun.<ep>
The two former presidents could face execution if convicted
although it is widely believed they will escape with jail terms.<ep>
Chun and Roh challenged the constitutional validity of a
special law enacted to punish them and their former aides.<ep>
Last month parliament passed a law ordered by President Kim
Young-sam to punish his two predecessors for leading the
crashdown in the city.<ep>
The law made possible the prosecution of Chun and Roh, which
President Kim described as "unfortunate but necessary steps to
put history to rights."

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