

# Korean boy bands, soccer stars march to different beats

By John Duerden  
The Associated Press

**S**EOUL, South Korea — Boy band BTS hit the top of the charts not long after Son Heung-min and his South Korean soccer team stepped atop the Asian Games podium in Indonesia.

The performers and athletes brought plenty of acclaim to the country, but it has sparked a national debate on military service.

Son Heung-min, who plays for Tottenham in the English Premier League and is the country's most recognizable sports star, helped his team win a gold medal at the Asian Games. All players on the squad were rewarded for it by receiving exemptions from 21 months of military service that South Korean men must start by the time they are 28.

A total of 42 athletes won military exemption by winning gold medals in various sports in Indonesia. The government offers the same incentive for any athlete who wins a medal at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

The rules that came into effect in 1973, giving military exemptions to successful athletes or classical musicians or ballet dancers who win certain local and international events, but there is nothing for pop stars who gain international fame.

BTS fans have launched a number of online petitions to support their group, but in South Korea as a whole, opinion on the wider issue, always sensitive in a country that is still technically at war with North Korea, is mixed. A July poll on increasing exemptions for athletes found 48 percent of 500 respondents in favor with 44 percent seeing it as excessive.



Regardless, the existing guidelines proved to be such a valuable lure that Son gambled on taking a short break from his Premier League duties in order to fly to Jakarta for the continental event. Now the 26-year-old forward can return to Europe and continue the lucrative five-year contract without the prospect of a long break for military service hanging over him.

Goalkeeper Cho Hyun-woo had already registered to start his service with army team Sangju Sangmu in December, but the reprieve means the 26-year-old can follow his dream and play overseas.

"I know that fans expect me to go play in Europe and I will try my best to show that I am good enough," Cho said.

Being on top of your game in the international arena doesn't give pop stars a break from the military service. Just

three days after the soccer team won at the Asian Games, BTS became just one of a select few artists to achieve a second No. 1 on the Billboard Artist 100 chart in the same year.

South Korea president Moon Jae-in congratulated the band on social media by posting: "Huge congratulations to BTS on topping the billboard 200 for the second time!"

Despite the accolades, the seven members of the group will all have to report for duty in the coming years, just as other performers from other popular bands such as Big Bang have in the past.

In July, opposition lawmaker Ha Tae-kyung questioned how the exemptions were granted.

"The general public, including young people, wonder what makes topping the

**SERVICE FOR SOME.** South Korea's Son Heung-min celebrates on the medal podium after defeating Japan in the men's soccer gold medal match at the 18th Asian Games in Bogor, Indonesia. All players on the soccer squad were rewarded for the gold medal by receiving exemptions from 21 months of military service that South Korean men must start by the time they are 28. (AP Photo/Bernat Armangue)

Billboard chart different from winning in other international competitions?" Ha asked.

"Winning the former is likely to create bigger added value. But there is no mention of popular culture on the list," Ha added, also mentioning the global success of PSY and his hit song "Gangnam Style" that broke records in 2012 for views on YouTube.

Other options have been mooted. Sookmyung Women's University professor Hong Sung-soo suggested that postponement of military service may be fairer than exemption.

"Offering a long deferment until the age of 35 or 40 and having (the athletes) complete their service after that could be a way of allowing them to serve society with the thing they are truly good at," Hong wrote in a national newspaper.

Korean Olympic Committee president Lee Kee-heung said at the end of the Asian Games that a points system, with credit accrued over time, may be preferable to the existing rule, which rewards medallists from the Olympics and champions from the Asian Games.

"I have thought about a system benefiting athletes who acquire a lot of 'mileage' with performances in the Olympics, Asian Games, and world championships," Lee said.

Continued on page 16

## Undersea eruption detected at Japan's Iwo Jima

TOKYO (AP) — Signs of undersea volcanic eruptions have been detected at Iwo Jima, the site of one of the bloodiest battles in World War II, meteorological and defense officials said.

Aerial photos taken by navy aircraft showed seawater shooting as high as 33 feet above the surface just off the island's southern coast, the Japan Meteorological Agency said.

The island, which has been renamed Ioto, has shown increased volcanic activity, the agency said, warning of more eruptions. The island is 780 miles south of Tokyo. Ioto last had an undersea explosion off its northern coast in 2013, and small overland explosions at a few places in 2015, the agency said.

Defense officials said troops stationed on the island are safe and there are no evacuation plans. The island is closed to civilians, except for those with permits to search for the remains of more than 10,000 soldiers still unaccounted for or to attend memorial services and other special events.

Virtually all of the Japanese soldiers defending the tiny island died in the battle in early 1945, which claimed 21,570 Japanese and 6,821 American lives.

Japan has about 100 active volcanoes and is frequently jolted by earthquakes. Earlier this month, a magnitude 6.7 quake on the northern island of Hokkaido killed more than 40 and injured hundreds.

## Japan's foreign minister says country to open to foreigners

HANOI, Vietnam (AP) — Japan is gearing up to accept more foreign workers as its own population is on the brink of a steep decline, foreign minister Taro Kono said.

Kono told a World Economic Forum meeting in Hanoi that Japan gains "value added" by accepting foreigners, especially since its aging population and low birth rate mean the country is shrinking by a half-million people per year.

"We cannot sustain our society like that," he said in response to a question during a panel discussion. "We are opening up our country. We are opening up our labor market to foreign countries. We are now trying to come up with a new work permit policy so I think everyone shall be welcome in Japan if they are willing to assimilate into Japanese society."

Japan has traditionally resisted accepting migrant

Continued on page 16

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