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Building Peace in Korea:
The Trickle-Up Approach

By John Feffer and Karin Lee

The recent meeting in June of the two Korean leaders, Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong Il, may well herald a new era for the Korean peninsula. The summit paved the way for a crisis hot line, a rail link between the two countries, reunions of families divided by the Korean War, a reciprocal visit to the South by Kim Jong Il, and more economic assistance flowing northward. The U.S. government has reacted cautiously to these developments and is still refusing to rethink its East Asian military policy. For peace activists, however, the summit will encourage more initiatives such as the ones described below.

In a policy shift, the North Korean government has decided to approach its erstwhile adversaries for help. In several agreements with the United States, North Korea has made military concessions concerning its nuclear and long-range missile programs in exchange for concrete economic benefits including immediate fuel supplies and a nuclear reactor to be built on North Korean soil for civilian use. The United States is also providing a considerable amount of food aid; North Korea, in turn, has been more responsive in helping search for the remains of GIs from the Korean War. North Korea has also turned to its long-time enemy, Japan, in the hopes of negotiating a compensation deal for crimes committed during the colonial period that could bring in as much as $10 billion. And North Korea is even working with South Korean companies such as Hyundai and Samsung on deals involving tourism, software production, and cultural exchanges.

So far, however, these concrete signs of engagement with North Korea have not resulted in changes in the military architecture of Northeast Asia. The United States continues to maintain 100,000 troops in the region (37,000

North Korea is on the verge of coming in from the cold, diplomatically speaking. In recent months, the isolated country in Northeast Asia has established diplomatic relations with its first G7 country (Italy), has made headway in negotiations with Australia and Japan, and is edging closer to a rapprochement with the United States. At stake is not just an exchange of diplomatic missions. Official ties with the world's largest countries will likely translate into considerable aid and trade for the economically disadvantaged North Korea. But will official recognition also lead to an end to the Cold War in Asia and a new era of regional peace and security?

For many years, North Korea was proud of its independence. During the Cold War, it maintained relations with both China and the Soviet Union, but also kept a certain wary distance. North Korea courted the members of the Non-Aligned Movement in a bid to become a leader of the developing world. At the same time, it has pursued a policy of "juche" or self-reliance, which values economic self-sufficiency and avoids entangling alliances.

Since the mid-1980s, however, the once strong North Korean economy that successfully lifted the country from the rubble of the Korean War has suffered a series of setbacks. The collapse of the communist trading bloc and the loss of subsidized energy supplies from the Soviet Union devastated North Korean industry as well as its heavily mechanized agriculture. Several natural disasters in the mid-1990s — floods, drought — prompted the North Korean government to make an unprecedented approach to the world community for food aid. The full-scale food crisis in North Korea has resulted in, at a minimum, several hundred thousand deaths.

stationed in South Korea), and has made no promises to close any of the military bases located in Okinawa or throughout South Korea. Japan is pushing ahead with a redefinition of its Self-Defense Forces that would permit them to act more aggressively in the region. The United States and Japan together are researching a Theater Missile Defense program to deter missile attacks (ostensibly from North Korea and China), a violation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972 that is eliciting outrage from Moscow, Beijing and Pyongyang among others.

At an official level, then, North Korea is simultaneously being engaged and contained. It is being encouraged to join the world economic community. Yet as high-level foreign delegations fly in and out of Pyongyang, North Korea remains encircled militarily, which does nothing to allay its fears of being invaded or bombed à la Baghdad or Belgrade. The Cold War in Asia, symbolized most starkly by the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) dividing North and South Korea, seems to be as entrenched as ever before.

How do NGOs and peace organizations negotiate these contradictory forces that are simultaneously coaxing North Korea into greater participation in world diplomacy and threatening it with ever more sophisticated weaponry should it take a false step?

FOOD AID

Since the mid-1990s, non-governmental organizations have been visiting North Korea and even setting up offices in Pyongyang. These NGOs are distributing and monitoring food aid, much of it raised through U.N. appeals to member states. This is, first of all, a humanitarian response. But the contacts between aid workers and monitors and North Korean people are also building bridges. For the first time in 50 years, North Koreans and Westerners are meeting in large numbers for a reason other than war. Alongside diplomat-to-diplomat Track One diplomacy and Track Two diplomacy which involves NGOs, Track Three or people-to-people diplomacy plays a key role. Such relationships have a "trickle up" effect, creating more opportunities for reconciliation at all levels of society. As more contacts are made between the peoples of two countries in conflict, this bottom-up reconciliation can lead to or strengthen peaceful relations between the governments.

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), an international Quaker-based organization, is pursuing the bottom-up approach through two very concrete projects in North Korea, one agricultural, the other medical. In 1995, AFSC's North Korean partners asked for assistance in coping with the effects of severe flooding. At that time, AFSC contributed funds to buy rice. Then, in 1997, a new phase began, involving direct work with farmers on food production. AFSC now works with three cooperative farms, providing inputs to increase their ability to produce food. Through discussions with farming cooperative staff, AFSC determines the most useful agricultural supplies such as fertilizer, plastic sheeting for seedbeds, and seeds to improve yields and soil fertility.

The AFSC also works with the North Korean Academy of Agricultural Science (AAS) to explore new seed varieties and fertilizing techniques. The AFSC brings AAS delegations on study tours to different countries. For example, last fall the AFSC brought three scientists to the United States for two weeks to study corn, rice, and soybean production. Exchanges such as these provide DPRK scientists with information on current research and production methods, so that they may determine what might be applicable to the DPRK system. This past spring, AFSC brought a delegation of DPRK scientists to China to research True Potato Seed, in response to the DPRK decision to focus on potato production. With the support of agencies such as Mennonite Central Committee, the humanitarian program has supplied over U.S. $1.2 million, with the majority of funds going toward direct inputs to improve farming.

MEDICAL ASSISTANCE

According to a 1987 WHO assessment, North Korea ranked high in the delivery of primary care services. However, recent hardships have seriously reduced the capacity of the medical system. During a visit to the North Korean Ministry of Public Health in the

fall of 1998, AFSC discussed the possibility of medical exchanges on a range of topics, including epidemiology, public health, pediatric medicine and cardiac care. The Ministry was most interested in cardiac care.

In July 1999 AFSC brought the first delegation of doctors from North Korea to the United States. The five doctors, two surgeons and three cardiologists, visited hospitals and medical organizations in four U.S. cities. Through it all, the Korean doctors were resourceful, energetic, and gracious. They kept their focus throughout the tour, despite its overwhelming pace.

The tour gave the North Korean doctors an overview of the health care system in the United States. They learned about the technology available, the patient care process, and the continuing education of certified doctors. Many U.S. doctors showed a high level of interest in follow-up work with North Korean doctors. In addition, many Korean-Americans — doctors and laypeople — were grateful for the opportunity to meet the delegation and to assist in the work.

PEACE IN THE REGION

Peace in Northeast Asia is not simply dependent on an improvement in relations between North Korea and its adversaries. The trickle-up approach focuses not just on peace between states but also peace between peoples. After all, decades-old resentments are still simmering in the region. Japan's conduct during World War II, ranging from the Nanking massacre to the hundreds of thousands of women drafted into sexual slavery, remains a divisive issue. U.S. atrocities committed during the Korean War, such as the one at No Gun Ri, are currently under investigation. Combined with current tensions around North Korean refugees in China and the negative impact of economic globalization, these resentments only strengthen prejudices and cultural barriers. Without lasting peace among the peoples of the region, diplomatic pronouncements are fragile indeed.

One AFSC initiative in the region that addresses this concern is conflict resolution work in South Korea. Last fall in Seoul AFSC and three Korean civic groups co-sponsored a workshop on conflict resolution skills for 23 young Korean activists. It was an experiment in both style and content. Led by Jan Sunoo, a professional mediator from the United States, the group spent two days learning about and practicing various conflict resolution skills, such as active listening, interest-based problem-solving, and mediation. The relevance of conflict resolution to the Korean context was explored at the interpersonal, group, and international levels. The workshop resulted in some very interesting conclusions. For example, some participants pointed out that because they were fighting against an authoritarian system, many Korean activists are very good at confrontational politics, such as protests and strikes. They are not, however, as well-versed in negotiating skills. This workshop was a first step toward practicing these skills.

OTHER NGOS AS WELL

From food aid to medical exchanges to conflict resolution workshops, the AFSC is addressing peace work in Northeast Asia from several different angles. Given the scale of the problems — the troubled North Korean economy, the billions of dollars spent on military hardware in the region — these efforts are modest. But AFSC's trickle-up approach is mirrored in the work of many other organizations, from the United Nations to NGOs such as Caritas, the Nautilus Institute, and World Vision.

While it is a positive sign that diplomats from North Korea and other countries are shaking hands and negotiating, for the Cold War to come to an end in Asia and for a durable peace to take its place, the initiatives have to come from the bottom up as well. □

The authors are AFSC workers living in Japan and participating in the Korean work.

THE AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE

The American Friends Service Committee is an American organization founded by Quakers in 1917 to aid civilian victims of World War I. Believing that there is 'that of God' in each human being, Quakers embrace non-violence and refuse to participate in war. Today only a small percentage of AFSC staff are Quaker, but all of them find common cause in AFSC concerns. At the end of the Korean war AFSC sought to provide humanitarian assistance to both North and South Korea. Ways were not found to help people in the north until the 1970s. The first AFSC delegation visited North Korea in 1980, followed by five more delegations over the next ten years, creating dialogue at the height of Cold War tensions. After each trip, AFSC staff shared what they had learned about the North Korean perspective. Lack of contact between ordinary people in the United States and ordinary people in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea allowed for the demonization of North Koreans in the United States, and vice versa. A series of AFSC conferences in the 1980s on reunification of Korea led to publication of the book *Two Koreas - One Future?* It was AFSC's conviction that the goal of reunification "is not visionary; it is an attainable goal."

In 1993 the AFSC then began a new International Affairs Program, based in Japan. The program currently seeks to increase communication between Korea and the United States and to support peace and reconciliation efforts in the region, with a particular emphasis on South Korea.