



ASIA/SOUTH KOREA - Humanitarian aid for North Korea and new paths for dialogue and reconciliation: the President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea launches a call

Seoul (Agenzia Fides) – “The Catholic Church in Korea supports and encourages commitment on the part of the country's religious leaders for peace and solidarity. It is urgent to find new paths for dialogue and reconciliation. Humanitarian aid to the North is both beneficial and positive: it can help reduce the present tension between North and South”. These words were part of an interview with Bishop Peter Kang, Bishop of Cheju and President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea CBCK, on the eve of a special Day for Prayer and Reconciliation promoted by the CBCK on Sunday 20 June. Speaking with Fides News Agency, on Friday June 19, Bishop Kang voiced concern “for an imminent humanitarian catastrophe in the North” and “the risk of war, which would be a terrible tragedy”, and he urged the universal Church to unite with Korean believers in fervent prayer for peace and reconciliation.

Bishop Kang, has the local Catholic Church made any official request to the government of South Korea to resume humanitarian aid to the North?

Yes, a request has been formulated by the Church together with different religious communities in the country. The Catholic authorities support and encourage commitment by the country's different religious leaders to promote peace and solidarity. At this time of extreme tension, ways must be found to give new impulse to promoting dialogue and reconciliation. Humanitarian aid to the North is beneficial and very positive, and to resume it would be a gesture of goodwill towards our brothers and sisters in North Korea suffering because of poverty and hunger: a gesture that would certainly have a positive effect on the government of North Korea.

What is Caritas Korea doing at present?

At present Caritas Korea is doing nothing, its activity of providing aid to the North has been stopped. This is the first such deadlock in decades. Our concern is to save innocent civilians in North Korea especially the most vulnerable categories, the children, who suffer dramatic consequences when humanitarian aid is stopped. Local NGOs warn of an imminent humanitarian tragedy in the North: in this regard we have no direct information but the danger exists and must be avoided.

How would you assess the present policies of the government in Seoul towards North Korea?

The government of President Lee as early as 2008 stopped various different activities of North-South cooperation initiated by the previous government which allocated economic aid at various levels. The approach to the North Korean issue of the present executive is different. The crisis in March (when a S. Korean warship, the Cheonan, was sunk by a reportedly N. Korean torpedo. Writers note) – clearly worsened the situation and produced a total closing of the border. So, 'goodbye' humanitarian aid. This latest crisis is breeding sentiments of mistrust and hostility and fear that violence could escalate.

What steps are now urgently necessary?

It is urgent to stop this self-feeding spiral and identify new ways and means of reactivating dialogue. Direct dialogue with the North is extremely difficult for various reasons: due to tension at the level of both government

and society; then the North is an interlocutor of its own kind, it ignores conventional norms. So indirect dialogue through other countries, such as China a government which could have determinant influence on Pyongyang, becomes fundamental. I would also underline the necessity of greater involvement of international institutions such as the United Nations Organisation.

In this context how does the local Catholic Church intend to act?

In this extremely delicate situation Korea's religious leaders continue to pronounce just one word: reconciliation. We as Christians can only keep reminding all Koreans and indeed the whole world that the supreme good is reconciliation. We will continue building awareness among the people, today divided between those who realise the importance of reducing tension and making room for dialogue and those who continue to harbour feelings of hostility and refuse to “hold out a hand to the aggressor ” as they see it.

Is this the purpose of the special Day of Prayer on June 20?

Yes this is why we, the Catholic Church in Korea, through the Bishops' Conference, promoted this Day for Prayer and Reconciliation and Unity of the Korean People, which we will hold tomorrow 20 June, in every diocese. The theme chosen is “Blessed are the peace-makers, for they will be called children of God ” (Mt 5,1). It will be a day of prayer and fasting. We ask the Churches of the world to join in this universal prayer for a future of peace in Korea. War would be a terrible tragedy, and we want to prevent it, using the most powerful of weapons: prayer. (PA) (19/06/2010)