



ASIA/SOUTH KOREA - A Bishop on a mission to North Korea: "We want to reopen the door to dialogue and peace"

Seoul (Agenzia Fides) – His Exc. Mgr. Iginus Kim Hee-jong, Archbishop of Kwanju, is visiting North Korea next September 21, and will be the head of a delegation of seven religious leaders, members of the "Korean Conference of Religions for Peace"(KCRP), of which the Archbishop is President. The visit, explains Mgr. Kim Hee-jong in an interview with Fides, intends "to reopen the doors to dialogue and peace, a relationship we all hope for, from North to South", in a very difficult phase in the bilateral relation agreements between the two countries, in which "all channels are closed".

The relations, in fact, have been at historic lows for almost a year after the accident of the South Korean Cheonan corvette (sunk by a north korean torpedo in April 2010), an episode that generated the political and military crisis and the subsequent bombing of the north Korean island of Yeonpyeong (November 2010).

The Archbishop, who is also President of the Commission for Interreligious Dialogue within the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Korea, says he is "hopeful for the upcoming trip", which sees a Bishop set foot on North Korean soil "after more than 5 years" .

"As religious leaders in Korea - notes the Archbishop - we believe we have to play a role in trying to build dialogue and peace with our brothers in the North. We will try to renew relationship with the North: the main aim of this visit will be to provide human support and our closeness to North Koreans".

Mgr. Iginus continues: "It is a very positive sign: the political authorities in the North have invited us and the government in the South has given its approval. We will meet political leaders and civil authorities. We hope that this visit will help to re-open an official dialogue between the two countries".

"Last month a group of aid workers – he notes- visited North Korea, bringing humanitarian aid, medicines and foodstuffs. There are signs of openness. Even North Korea needs a relation. We know that we risk exploitation, but the important thing now is to help reopen a channel".

According to Fides sources, Pyongyang, while strongly penalizing religious freedom in the nation, intends to use the channel of dialogue with religious leaders to get new financial help. Tomorrow, September 3, a Buddhist delegation of 37 people, including religious and civilians, will begin a five-day visit to the North, participating in a Buddhist celebration. The trip was approved by the Ministry of Unification in Seoul.

In recent months the government in Seoul authorized the release of humanitarian aid prepared by South Korean charity organizations that despite the political crisis between the two countries can reach the malnourished population of the North. A coalition of 54 non-governmental organizations ask to keep a "permanent humanitarian corridor" open. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 02/09/2011)