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ASIA/SOUTH KOREA - The crisis is a disadvantage for everyone: the Church welcomes the new North-South negotiations

Seoul (Agenzia Fides) - The willingness to re-open the joint industrial zone in Kaesong is a step forward that will kick off a process of thaw and rapprochement between North and South Korea. This is what the Korean Church hopes with regards to the news that North and South Korea have officially decided to resume formal negotiations to restart productive activities in the industrial park in Kaesong, on the border between the two Koreas, closed last April.

The months of tensions between North and South Korea have in fact had a negative impact at an economic level in both countries. In a note sent to Fides by the Australian office of the Foundation of pontifical right "Aid to the Church in Need," the Korean priest Fr. Lee Eun-Hyung, Secretary General of the "Commission for the Reconciliation of the Korean people," within the Episcopal Conference of Korea, said: "In this tense situation famine among the population of North Korea is likely to get worse, and also South Korea's economy is experiencing disadvantages. The right way out is dialogue and agreements, collaboration and exchange."

The Commission has been carrying out since 1999 a constant effort of communion and collaboration with the North. In the three journeys carried out beyond the "bamboo curtain" (the last in 2011) Fr. Lee spoke with representatives of the "Catholic Association Joseon", the only association of the faithful Catholics officially recognized by the North Korean authorities.

Thanks to this association, he says "we were able to provide humanitarian aid to North Korea, such as food and coal for heating."

The faithful Christians in North Korea remain in a situation of great suffering: no one knows how many there are, or whether there are priests. The only recognized church is situated in Pyongyang and probably many other church buildings were destroyed or re-used for different purposes. According to the North Korean authorities there are 3,000 Catholics in the country, but it is known that in 1945 there were about 50 thousand. "We suspect that, after the long period of persecution, there are still about 10,000 people who profess the Catholic faith in their hearts, and practice it in secret," said Fr. Lee. "Some of the refugees who fled from the north talk about elderly women, seated in a circle, count the beans while muttering something in a low voice. Maybe they are praying the rosary," he concludes. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 06/06/2013)

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