



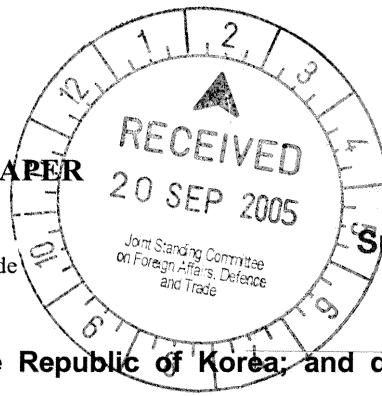
Submission No 36

Inquiry into Australia's Relations with the Republic of Korea; and Developments on the Korean Peninsula

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Inquiry into Australia's Relations with the Republic of Korea; and developments on the Korean Peninsula.

Background

The DPRK first appealed for international humanitarian assistance in 1995 following devastating floods destroying harvests and food stocks, weakening an already frail economy. In the decade since, the Caritas International network and supporters, has provided assistance of over US\$30million to the DPRK. By the end of 2006, Caritas Australia will have contributed over AUD1million to the DPRK program. DPRK remains one of the most significant humanitarian crises globally and Caritas Australia is committed for the long term. In 2005 the Caritas International program budget for DPRK is US\$2.5 million. Caritas is uniquely placed to implement programs across a range of sectors, humanitarian through to development.

The Humanitarian Imperative

The DPRK was one of three countries in Asia which suffered a decline in living standards in the 1990s, with GNP dropping from US\$991 to US\$457, life expectancy being reduced from 73.2 years to 66.8, and infant mortality increasing from 14 to 22.5 per 1000 live births. Whilst the situation has modestly improved, a nutritional assessment of 2004 showed proportions of stunted children at 37% and underweight at 23%, 'high' according to WHO criteria. Almost one in three mothers of young children were malnourished and anaemic. Initiatives of economic reform introduced in 2002 have created spiraling inflation and reductions in purchasing power and serious power shortages. Food insecurity and social services provided by Government are deteriorating. Access to water and basic health services are limited. Many hospitals are functioning without power, with extremely outdated equipment and only traditional medicines.

Conclusion

Emergency assistance remains vital in safeguarding and promoting the wellbeing of millions of North Korean people. However tackling the underlying issues requires the commitment of the DPRK Government and assistance of the international community. It requires:

- a less hostile international community, in which mutual interests and responsibilities are shared;
- recognition of the genuine need for humanitarian and development assistance not tied to political agendas.

In September 04 the government indicated that it would welcome more technical assistance as well as development oriented support focused on building local capacity. Priority sectors for long term engagement with DPRK are: agricultural and food security, energy and infrastructure, social welfare, health and education, business development and trade, and institutional support and capacity building.

Recommendations to the Australian Government

- Humanitarian support to the DPRK should not be linked to the resolution of political issues. The Australian Government should maintain, if not increase current aid levels.
- Capacity building, human and institutional development are crucial to the long term transition of the DPRK to a more open, stable political system and its economic recovery. We recommend that the Australian Government continues to build relations with the DPRK through bi-lateral programs, whilst at the same time pursuing a solution to the nuclear crisis.
- As the DPRK is signatory to the Millennium Development Goals, it is opportune for all stakeholders to work towards a national development strategy for DPRK, including aid coordination mechanisms.