

**DPRK TRIP REPORT BY  
CARITAS-HONG KONG DIRECTOR\***

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\*Kathi Zellweger, Director of International Cooperation of Caritas-Hong Kong (see [www.caritas.org](http://www.caritas.org)) -- an international NGO involved in humanitarian aid and development-oriented projects in North Korea -- recently made a trip to the DPRK in July to visit project sites, and meet with government officials and UN and other NGO personnel in Pyongyang, among other objectives. Below is an abridged version of her trip report.

**51st DPRK TRIP REPORT: 18 TO 29 JULY 2006**

**Itinerary**

Caritas' previous partner, the Flood Damage Rehabilitation Committee (FDRC), ceased to function in December 2005, and so far no partner agency for non-resident international NGOs has been established. Thus the host for this trip was again the National Commission of the DPRK for Unesco, the body that had invited Caritas-Hong Kong initially in spring 1995.

Upon arrival, program discussions took place with a focus on a 3-day trip to Hamhung to visit 6 cooperative farms and 3 hospitals, all recipients of Caritas aid. In Ryongchon and Sukchon existing projects were again visited. During the 5-day field trip over 1,300 kilometers were traveled by jeep, mostly on potholed roads.

In addition to meetings with the UN and NGO community, international consultants, foreign ambassadors to the DPRK, the National Unesco Commission, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Agriculture were also all met with.

Together with a Swiss colleague the Sunday service at the Changchun Catholic Church was attended and thanks to a visit from South Korea a mass with communion took place because a priest was one of the visiting delegation. (There is no resident Catholic priest in North Korea.)

The visit was Caritas-Hong Kong's final mission to the DPRK and several dinners for colleagues from international aid agencies, DPRK partners and friends were hosted.

## **Summary**

In July and early August heavy rainstorms hit parts of the DPRK. At the time of the visit, it was not clear how many lives had been lost, how many people were made homeless and how serious the damage to infrastructure and crop was. The government was still assessing the situation. The IFRC had, however, through their national counterpart, started to distribute family emergency kits and WFP had offered food aid.

With the involvement of resident NGO reduced and the WFP program scaled down, doubts remain as to how the community away from Pyongyang will cope in future. The struggle for survival will continue and bad weather is affecting the already fragile situation.

The working environment for aid agencies remains difficult, particularly with the new focus on development aid, which requires a different modus operandi, with increased policy dialogue, transparency, data and information, and a partnership approach.

The few remaining European resident NGOs are now working under the umbrella of the EU, a model still in a test phase. Within the DPRK government a new body under the European Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has recently been established, the Korean Europe Cooperation Coordinating Agency (KECCA) dealing with the EU, the Swiss as well as Italian Development Cooperation.

Although it had already been explained in March, some DPRK partners had a hard time accepting the fact that as of 1 January 2007 Caritas-Hong Kong was no longer going to be involved in assistance programs for the North Korean people.

The general situation seemed tense and people were somewhat withdrawn and reluctant to talk and share information. There is a risk that North Korea is slipping back into isolation.

## **General Observations**

Travelling from Beijing to Pyongyang by Air Koryo on Tuesday, 18 July, it was apparent that a number of DPRK diplomats posted in various countries were heading back home for consultation. Had the DPRK underestimated the reaction of the international community with regard to their missile testing?

In areas visited, no major flood damage was observed, but local officials knew that some places had been badly affected. The government, however, was at the time of the visit not considering appealing for international support, although donations would not be rejected.

The Ministry of Agriculture estimated a loss of approximately 100,000 tons of grain with some 30,000 hectares of arable land flooded.

People were busy with various community services (embankment repairs, building and renovation jobs or working in the fields) and the opening hours of the markets in Pyongyang, possibly also elsewhere in the country, had been reduced to 1:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

The market visited was very busy and the availability of goods -- for those with money -- has again increased. Grain is officially still no longer sold in the market and food rations from the Public Distribution System were reported to be irregular.

Since the introduction of the first economic reform steps 4 years ago it is obvious that the 'taste of money' has penetrated North Korean society, resulting in increased pressure and control, but also in a greater awareness of prices and costs of goods and services.

At the market, the exchange rate for US dollars and Euros had remained similar to March this year, my previous visit, at Won 2,900.

In the fields hardly any tractors were operating, women and children were busy weeding and for heavier work, oxen are used. In many fields the maize looked stunted and farmers mentioned that the agricultural season had started late and in July the temperatures were too low. A decrease in the maize harvest is very likely.

Cutting trees for firewood and for construction material, but apparently also for export to China, continues and this will have a long-lasting negative impact on the environment.

### **The Situation in Pyongyang**

In Pyongyang the preparations for another Arirang Festival were ongoing and thousands of youngsters busy rehearsing. Later on, however, the cancellation or postponement of the festival to spring 2007 was announced due to the impact of the floods.

With fewer foreign residents in Pyongyang, shops and restaurants are feeling the impact, and discounts, free dishes or coupons for future visits are often provided. An entrepreneurial spirit has reached North Korea and earning money is part of daily life. Name cards, also of restaurants, are now more common.

Many streets in Pyongyang were undergoing renovation and hundreds of workers were busy seven days a week, often encouraged to work hard, with music playing from loudspeakers or even live bands.

Traffic in Pyongyang has increased and new numberplates have been issued to some car operators. In the countryside men and women mainly use bicycles to move around and quite a number of motorcycles have also found their way to the DPRK. Bus services between cities (in the east coast) were also running.

Colleagues reported that the energy supply was better than before and power cuts in Pyongyang were fewer.

Shopping in Pyongyang is now less dull: there are many more shops (state shops, supermarkets, hotel shops and small stalls). A similar selection of goods available in the public all-purpose markets proved however to be much cheaper. Foreigners can shop anywhere by now and the bargaining process is great fun.

The Sunday service at Changchun Catholic Church was much livelier. A group of 5 South Koreans, including one priest, was visiting and not only was the Church full to the brim, but after the service, singing old songs had people from both the north and south joining hands.

### **Visit to Hamhung in South Hamgyong**

Despite difficult road conditions, the delegation traveled the 380 kilometers from Pyongyang to Hamhung in 4 1/2 hours. There was little traffic: some trucks, a few cars, many bicycles and a couple of scooters. In a few places some rain damage was seen; i.e. a flooded maize field near a river, a destroyed bridge and a couple of trucks or tractors that had gone off the road.

In addition to meetings with Hamhung officials, 6 cooperative farms and 3 hospitals were visited.

All 6 farms are located near Hamhung City. The idea was that if farms near the city were to produce better harvests, urban people would also benefit. This is important because residents in towns and cities tend to have an even harder time during difficult harvest times as they usually have no access to land and have to fend for themselves. Grain rations provided by the government were reported to be sporadic only. All 6 farms had meanwhile received the Caritas input package and farm managers painted a generally optimistic picture, although it was not clear if the presence of an official from the Ministry of Agriculture prompted this process. The availability of tractors with trailers as well as trucks, was highly appreciated as transporting inputs to the farms or goods (the harvest) to collection points and/or markets poses major problems; the Caritas grant will help to ease the situation. All items donated were considered to be very useful and the good quality of the hand tools (spades, forks and hoes) was praised.

Two of the farms were quite poor, 3 rated somewhere in the middle and one was more like a model farm. In comparison to previous visits, it was more difficult to obtain information from the farm management. Running a farm with a business concept is still quite an alien concept; the agricultural sector is not yet market-driven.

The 3 hospitals visited in Hamhung were all beneficiaries of a Caritas building material input package for the renovation of operation theatres. The goods had reached Hamhung in June and one of the 3 hospitals had not only completed the requested renovation, but had also done an excellent job. Work in the other 2 hospitals was still on-going, for example, wall and floor tiling, putting in new windows and false ceilings, adding appropriate wiring for lamps and other medical equipment, as well as providing a proper water supply. All 3 hospitals reported an urgent need to update their equipment; and medical supplies and drugs were also scarce commodities. The Caritas donation was once again highly appreciated and one hospital director said that they were doing their very best to do the renovation work well. It had to last for a long time and moreover the equipment and medical supplies to be provided by Caritas was another incentive, now eagerly awaited (anticipated to arrive in September). In addition all hospital managers reported an increase in traffic accident cases. Due to the fact that no ambulances were available, vital time was often lost due to difficulties in the transporting of patients.

Over the years Caritas had tested various different approaches in support of the health sector. By now the collaboration with district and/or county hospitals has showed quite positive results. Working in a partnership spirit and not just providing handouts, proved to be successful and hopefully this kind of collaboration can, and will, continue in future.

## **Visit to Ryongchon in North Pyongan**

Ryongchon county has a population of some 123,000 people; 27,000 live in the county town. In April 2004, two train wagons exploded at the railway station in Ryongchon. Over 150 people died, mostly children, and of the approximately 1,300 injured, many had to be hospitalized. A number of public buildings and many homes were destroyed or damaged with over 8,000 people in need of new accommodation.

By now, life in Ryongchon seemed to be back to normal, with residential, community and government buildings all rebuilt. But despite tremendous support from South Korea and the international community many of the new buildings are already showing signs of decay and a lack of maintenance.

Caritas had appealed for donations in support of the victims of the Ryongchon train explosion and an amount of US\$237,470 was received. While other organizations were responsible for the rebuilding of the Ryongchon County Hospital, Caritas' aid was to be utilized for equipment, furnishings, medical supplies and drugs for the hospital: items for which foreign currency was needed.

During the past two and a half years, Caritas had paid four visits to the Ryongchon hospital. Progress has been very slow and construction work is still ongoing. Due to the fact that plastering had been done during the cold season, walls had not dried out properly and now many of the rooms and corridors had to be redone. The water tank and solar energy system had been installed and officials reported that these were functioning well. At the x-ray department experts from WHO are needed to help set up the equipment and to provide training. In May, equipment, furnishings, medical supplies and drugs from Caritas had been moved from storage to the new facilities. A report about some missing items was made, but due to the fact that at delivery the local partners had confirmed arrival of all goods in good order, it was now too late to take action. Support services (kitchen, laundry, production of medicine) were ready for operation, while units for in- and out-patients still needed completion.

The opening of the Ryongchon Hospital is now planned for 9 September 2006. Future issues will be related to maintenance problems, as these costs will be high, with several buildings to be taken care of.

## **Visit to Sukchon in South Pyongyan**

Caritas, in collaboration with Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) and in the early stages also German Agroaction, established a joint project with the Dongsong Technical Trading Corporation who already had an underutilized training center in the town of Sukchon. An agreement was signed in July 2003 for short-term training programs for farm mechanics and tractor drivers. After some teething problems and a scaling-down of the project size, the Sukchon partner is now providing training courses during the off-farming season and so far over 150 people from nearby cooperative farms have participated. For practical training sessions in the workshops, further machinery and equipment is needed and SDC will be purchasing these with funds provided by Caritas. Teaching material is also still in short supply and it was agreed to finance the reprinting of some 2,300 books for teaching staff and trainees.

What is positive is the fact that the Sukchon partner is now actively seeking sources of income in order to achieve sustainability. Providing repair work services for vehicles has started and thus some income can be raised. The project, which is also not easy to implement, is nevertheless gradually showing positive results.

## **Collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Trade**

The training program in collaboration with Central European University (CEU) in Budapest, has been ongoing since January 1998, but with long gaps between training sessions. In total 81 people have so far been trained.

With donations from various sources, Caritas-Hong Kong supported four groups (totally 35 participants) to study in Budapest. The 1<sup>st</sup> group of 8 students spent 6 months abroad, the 2<sup>nd</sup> group of again 8 students some 3 months and the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> group (in total 19 participants) studied for one full academic year at CEU. Caritas supported logistical arrangements, travel and insurance costs, as well as visa fees and CEU provided full scholarships once the students were based in Budapest.

In addition two short-term training programs had also taken place in Pyongyang, one in summer 1998 with 22 participants, and in spring 2006, a second one with 24 participants.

The 4<sup>th</sup> group of students returned from Budapest this July. Although it had been agreed that in fall 2006, another 10 students were to go for studies, the DPRK informed the partners that this program had to be cancelled. No reasons were given.

## **Relationships with Counterparts**

While meetings in Pyongyang seemed somewhat more cumbersome, the project partners in the field showed more eagerness to collaborate with Caritas. The shift from humanitarian aid to development cooperation is, however, not easy to execute as many vital elements for successful collaborations as still not in place. Overall, the room for NGO work is diminishing and NGOs can no longer establish an in-country presence.

Even for some non-resident NGOs regular fieldtrips have been curtailed and some business people or foreign investors have also faced visa problems.

At the time of the visit, it was not clear if the present flood situation would bring some changes, and if so, it was not clear which direction these might take.

## **The Situation of the Aid Community**

Former resident NGOs are now health units under the EU and all have had to give up their identity (no letterheads, no name cards, no cars with logos etc.) and in most cases also have had to reduce the number of international staff in order to remain an in-country presence.

The Interagency Meeting, taking place regularly every Friday at WFP offices, was well attended, with some non-resident organizations visiting (AmeriCares) and sharing information. Coordination remains an issue.

WFP meanwhile reduced its staff establishment to 10 internationals. A number of food-for-work programs are planned and some of the blended food factories have been restarted. Access for WFP staff to the more remote areas was still under negotiation.

Generally all participants were concerned about the floods. There was willingness to support the victims, provided the DPRK government wanted such assistance.

The mood at the meeting was subdued and the future direction of aid programs is not clear.



## **Future Needs**

After more than 10 years of humanitarian assistance, the wish of the DPRK government to shift to development aid is understandable. Five priority areas for collaboration have been identified by the DPRK government:

- a) to ensure food security
- b) to improve energy supply
- c) to strengthen environmental management
- d) to rationalize trade, industry, transport sectors
- e) to assist with basic social services

It will, however, remain important for the aid community to stay alert and continuously assess the situation. **Humanitarian needs remain high during the transition phase to development cooperation, even more so if the country has to cope with natural disasters.**

## **Other Remarks, Comments and Observations**

Transparency, accountability, data and information, policy dialogue, working in partnership and access to ordinary people remain issues. Despite these, it is important to stay engaged in order to: improve the general living conditions of ordinary people; support the gradual reform process; and integrate North Korea into the world community.

After over a decade of working for the Caritas DPRK program, this is my final trip report and at the end of September I will be leaving Caritas-Hong Kong. My new appointment as Country Director for the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, a Swiss Government organization of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, takes me directly to Pyongyang. In this new capacity I am looking forward to continue making a hopefully even bigger contribution to the well-being of the North Korean people and also to peace, reconciliation and cooperation on the Korean peninsula.

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