

Unification Minister Chung Told DIPLOMACY:

If the North Agrees, Then We Could Consider Holding the Summit Without Insisting on the Venue and Timing

Question: Mr. Chung Dongyoung, Minister of Unification and the chairman of the Standing Committee of the National Security Council, what are the differences and similarities between the participatory government's policy toward North Korea and that of the previous governments?

Answer: The participatory government's Policy for Peace and Prosperity aims to extend its policy perspectives to Northeast Asia and seek a balanced cooperation with North Korea between economy and security area, while maintaining principles of the "Sunshine Policy" initiated by the Kim Dae-jung Administration.

In terms of inter-Korean relations, we made some tangible progress not just in the economic field but also in the military field by holding inter-Korean general-level military talks last year. In pursuit of its North Korea policy, the government is also encouraging the active participation of the people. Thus, national consensus has been built on inter-Korean relations and perception on North Korea.

In particular, as shown in our prompt and active assistance to the North in the wake of the train explosion in Yongcheon last year, the view that the South is too generous with its economic assistance for North Korea has lost its place among South Koreans, letting the so-called South-South disputes over North Korea policy be bygones.

Q: Would you briefly explain about the top policy goals and directions of the Unification Ministry in the year 2005?

A: This year marks the 60th anniversary of liberation from the Japanese colonial rule, as well as the fifth year since the June 15 Joint Declaration. In retrospect, it seems that we have never been masters of our own destiny during the past century. Now, major powers are still exercising their invisible influence in Korea due to the North Korean nuclear issue, and North Korea, while talking about national solidarity between the South and North, is insisting on direct negotiation with the United States over the nuke issue.

It is important to note that we, as the directly concerned party to inter-Korean issues, will play a crucial role in settling the North Korean nuclear issue. The South Korean government (hereafter our government) will reiterate to the North the necessity of our cooperation and support in order to gain assurances of security of their regime and improve economic

difficulties. At the same time, we will convince the Americans that resolution of the nuke issue through dialogue and improvement of relations with the North are in their national interest.

Consistently pursuing inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation, we seek to prevent another national war from happening on the Korean Peninsula and forge an environment for peaceful co-existence of the two Koreas. This is top policy goal and wish of our government in this historically meaningful year.

Since both domestic and international understanding is crucial to maintaining the principle of our policy toward the North, I would like to take this occasion to ask readers of "Diplomacy" for their full support and interest in our efforts.

Q: What are the achievements of the North Korea policy pursued by the "Participatory Government" for the past two years?

A: The Participatory Government was launched at a time when the security environment surrounding the Korean Peninsula was rapidly changing with the North Korean nuclear issue, the Iraqi situation and redeployment of U.S. forces stationed in South Korea. Despite this volatile situation, we have successfully maintained inter-Korean relations in a stable manner through the consistent promotion of reconciliation and cooperation with the North.

It is notable that despite the recent statement dated February 10 of the North Korean Foreign Ministry, our stock market remained relatively stable and neighboring countries including the U.S. are adhering to the principle of peaceful and diplomatic resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue.

I would like to note such achievements as the establishment of the principle of peaceful settlement of the North Korean nuclear issue; promotion of substantial and cooperative relations with the North; success in keeping the risk of destabilizing our security and economy at a minimum level; and a new ROK-U.S. relations in line with the changing environment.

We held a total of 119 rounds of inter-Korean talks since the inter-Korean summit in 2000, and 56 of them or 47% took place since the inauguration of the current administration. The number of South and North Koreans visiting each other country reached 20,000 last year, and the amount of inter-Korean trade surpassed US\$700 million in 2003.

The three major economic cooperation projects began to produce tangible results after the launch of the administration; full-scale development of the Gaeseong Industrial Complex was embarked, roads linking the two Koreas were opened and tourism to Mt. Geumgang by an overland route now entered a stable stage.

Inter-Korean relations have gone through stop-and-go, as happened in recent times, but the South Korean government has maintained consistency in its policy toward North Korea by seeking inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation and peaceful diplomatic resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue. In fact, we need to look at inter-Korean relations by videos

rather than snapshots. We cannot miss the point that inter-Korean relations are sustaining its momentum even in the unfavorable situations like today.

Q: North Korea, on February 10, announced the possession of nuclear weapons and indefinite postponement of the Six-Party Talks. How do you evaluate the prospect of the South-North relations?

A: Our government endeavors to prevent inter-Korean relations from further deteriorating while noting the seriousness of North Korea's recent statement. We have been constantly engaged in major inter-Korean economic cooperation projects including the development of the Gaeseong Industrial Complex, maintaining the big trend for inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation.

We need to observe future developments of the nuke issue, but it appears that a recent flurry of diplomatic activities among concerned nations have contributed to relieving initial shocks caused by the North's statement on February 10. If the nuclear situation does not further worsen and becomes more stable with the resumption of the Six-Party Talks, I believe that the inter-Korean relations will also be able to move ahead in the existing framework of reconciliation and cooperation.

Q: How do you foresee the U.S. policy toward North Korea under the second Bush administration?

A: I think the second Bush administration will view the North Korean nuclear program as a vital issue and try hard to settle it through diplomatic means. To this end, it will strengthen its cooperation and coordination with ROK and Japan, as well as China and Russia so that they all share the common view in the process of resolving the nuke issue. In parallel with that effort, the United States might, if necessary, take issue with the North Korea human rights problem to put pressure on the North.

Q : What is the current status of the Gaeseong Industrial Complex Project? Are there any prospects for this project?

A: Despite the North Korean Foreign Ministry's statement on February 10, the development of the industrial complex is proceeding without a hitch. The North Korean workers are working as usual at South Korean factories, while South Korean workers and vehicles are continuing to move across the border. At present, a total of 2,300 workers (400 of them are South Koreans and the rest are North Koreans) are working side by side.

Factories and infrastructural facilities are currently under construction with the target of completing the development of the model complex within the first half of this year. Two companies including Living Art, a kitchen utensil producer, are currently manufacturing

products. Out of 15 businesses that were

approved to move into the complex, two of them finished constructing factories and nine are currently in the process of building factories.

Site-grading for 1 million pyeong (1 pyeong=3.3m²) of land allocated for the first-stage development is currently 52% complete. Plans for building infrastructural facilities for water, waste water, waste disposal, etc. are currently under-way so that construction work can begin within the first half of this year.

The model complex is scheduled to be in full operation within the first half of this year. Regarding the first stage development of the main complex, various situations will be considered, including the progress of construction work on the infrastructural facilities before leasing land.

The Gaeseong Industrial Complex Project is not only an economic cooperation project which helps create a win-win situation for coexistence of the two Koreas, but it is also a peace-building project, overcoming the Cold War on the Korean Peninsula through economic cooperation. The industrial complex will not only serve as a means for survival for small and mid-sized businesses but it will also contribute to North Korea's change and opening up, as well as to improving inter-Korean relations and easing tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

Q: What is the current status of our government's assistance to North Korea?

A: Since 1995, our government, out of humanitarian concern, has been providing assistance to the North to help the North Korean people who are suffering from economic difficulties and food shortages. In the course of 10 years (from 1995 until the end of last year), our government provided assistance in the form of food, fertilizer, etc. amounting to a total of over US\$1.16 billion.

In particular, after the explosion in Yongcheon in North Korea last year, South Korea played an important role for the early rehabilitation of the disaster-stricken area. For example, not only did our government and the Korean National Red Cross provided relief goods and materials amounting to more than US\$30 million, but private citizens were also involved in active relief efforts.

On the future assistance to the North, the South government's basic position is that it will continue providing assistance to the North, focusing on providing emergency relief, helping young children and babies who are suffering from malnutrition, and for rehabilitating and developing North Korea's agriculture.

Regarding North Korea's request for fertilizers in the amount of 500,000 tons early this year, we will review it seriously, taking into consideration the national sentiment, public opinion and the need for consultations between the South and North Korean governments.

Q: What do you think are the prospects for the South-North Summit Meeting?

A: Our government's position is that South-North Summit Meeting should be held as agreed upon in 2002 between the two Koreas. The agreement for Chairman Kim Jong-Il to pay a visit to Seoul remains in effect. However, if the North agrees to a summit, then we could consider holding the meeting without insisting on the venue and timing.

Given that there is our counterpart for the South-North Summit and that situations are somewhat fluid on the Korean Peninsula, it is difficult for me to talk about the prospects for the summit at this moment.

Q: What kind of measure does the South Korean government have for settling the separated family issue in a fundamental manner?

A: For the resolution of the separated family issue, reunions have to take place on a regular basis and become institutionalized. The reunion of separated families who have been separated for 60 years is an urgent issue that needs to be settled, considering the aging members of the first generation of separated families. It is very tragic that about 3,000~4,000 separated family members pass away every year. Out of 120,000 people who filed applications for family reunion, 70% are over the age of 70.

Since the June 15 Joint Declaration, we have witnessed steady progress in holding family reunions, such as holding 10 rounds of family reunions and reaching an agreement to build a family reunion center in Mt. Geumgang. It is regrettable that family reunions and the construction of the family reunion center are being delayed since the 10th round of family reunion held in July last year. Since June 15, 9,977 family members participated in the reunion, and the fates and whereabouts of 23,946 people were confirmed, and 679 letters were exchanged.

To supplement the existing method of family reunion, our government is reviewing various ways to exchange family members such as holding a reunion through video screens. This year, considering the aging members of the first generation of separated families and in preparation of active exchanges of separated families, our government is pursuing a project of exchanging letters on TV screens.