



World Council of Churches

Commission of the Churches on
International Affairs

International Ecumenical Conference on a Peace Treaty for the Korean Peninsula

*Hong Kong SAR
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Opening Statement by Peter Prove, Director of the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs

At the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Busan in October-November 2013, the member churches of the WCC committed themselves to moving together in a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. While we recognize numerous places of conflict and tension around the world as 'stations' on this pilgrimage, there can hardly be a context more emblematic of this intention that the ecumenical accompaniment of the churches and people of the Korean peninsula in their search for peace and reunification after what is now more than 70 years of division.

Building on three decades of engagement since the Tozanso consultation in 1984 – initiating the WCC-supported and internationally-accompanied process of engagement between the Korean Christians Federation of North Korea and the churches of South Korea (represented through the NCKK) – the Busan Assembly reaffirmed and renewed this commitment. In its statement on peace and reunification of the Korean peninsula, the Assembly recognized new challenges to reconciliation and healing, rearticulated our faith commitment to peace with justice, expressed faith and hope in action, and sought to discern and describe the way towards healing, reconciliation and peace.

Since Busan, a series of events and encounters have taken a few steps along that way. In June 2014, the international consultation convened in Bossey – which brought together 54 participants representing 34 churches and related organizations from 15 countries – both marked the 30th anniversary of the Tozanso consultation and laid out specific recommendations for continued and increased ecumenical action for peace and reunification (the 'Bossey process').

In October 2015 – in the 70th anniversary year of Korean liberation from Japanese occupation but also of the division of the peninsula into north and south – a delegation primarily comprising members of the Ecumenical Forum for Peace, Reunification and Development Cooperation on the Korean Peninsula – convened by the WCC – visited the DPRK. During this visit, on 28 October, the EFK Steering Group held a meeting in Pyongyang. This was not just another in a long series of meetings. It was the first time an ecumenical gathering involving both North and South Korean (as well as international participants) had been able to be convened anywhere on the peninsula. To that extent, it represented the fulfilment of a dream dreamt for at least 30 years, if not indeed longer.

The EFK Steering Group met again in June this year, in Shenyang, China, as an urgent response to escalating tensions on the Korean peninsula, and in the face of new obstacles to encounter and dialogue between South and North Koreans imposed by the South Korean government. The meeting considered ways in which to sustain, expand and enhance the Forum and its work.

In September this year a high-level delegation from the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) visited the KCF in Pyongyang and the NCCK in Seoul, in a further expression of the ecumenical commitment to encounter, fellowship and solidarity with Korean Christians – in both North and South – in the pursuit of peace and reunification of the Korean people. In turn the KCF received from the delegation an invitation to send representatives to the WCRC General Council in Leipzig in June 2017.

Today we convene in Hong Kong to discuss perspectives for a peace treaty for the Korean peninsula. In Busan in 2013, the WCC 10th Assembly declared that: “We are convinced that it is the right time to begin a new process towards a comprehensive peace treaty that will replace the 1953 Armistice Agreement and secure just and peaceful relations among nations in the region while normalizing relations between North and South, and facilitating Korean reunification.” At the Assembly, WCC member churches specifically committed themselves to embarking upon “a universal campaign for a Peace Treaty to replace the Armistice Agreement”. And in the meantime, NCCK has articulated a vision and proposal for a peace treaty and has engaged in national and international campaigning for this purpose.

The Armistice Agreement of 27 July 1953 suspended, but did not end, the state of conflict on the peninsula. That state of conflict, albeit suspended, continues to colour and frame all discourse concerning the situation in the region, and to impede efforts to engage pragmatically with current realities. As the Busan Assembly put it, “shared human security and human rights must become a greater priority than divisive, competitive and militarized national security.” In this perspective, a peace treaty to formally conclude the conflict suspended since 1953 is a long overdue pre-requisite for reducing and addressing current tensions and disputes, not the ultimate outcome of their resolution.

This is not to minimize our concern regarding the threat posed by nuclear weapons in the context of the Korean peninsula; on the contrary. The WCC and the whole ecumenical movement has a longstanding frequently reiterated conviction that nuclear weapons and the threat of their use are an offense against God. And we believe that a world without nuclear weapons is both necessary and possible. However, once again quoting the Busan Assembly statement, “Our shared hope for a nuclear-free world would not only be for the people of the Korean peninsula but for all people in the world”.

In the most recent weeks and days, there have been a number of significant unexpected and ‘interesting’ developments in the global context for our discussions and subsequent actions.

On 27 October, the UN General Assembly’s First Committee (dealing with disarmament issues) voted on a resolution emanating from the report of UN Working Group on nuclear disarmament. The establishment of this Working Group followed three major intergovernmental conferences in 2013 and 2014 examining the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons.

The resolution proposed launching negotiations in 2017 for an international treaty banning nuclear weapons. Most of the nuclear-armed states and almost all their allies voted against the resolution. Three nuclear-armed states – China, India and Pakistan – abstained. But one – and only one – of the nuclear-armed states voted in support of a multilateral negotiation for a treaty to outlaw such weapons: North Korea. This is an important sign of hope that has been hardly reported at all.

The political situation in South Korea, which has been so inimical to dialogue and engagement with North Korea, is shifting radically during these very days. And the outcome of the US presidential election, though presenting enormous new obstacles to justice and peace in many different contexts, may yet prove also to offer some new opportunities at least for the pursuit of peace and reunification of the Korean peninsula.

Our meeting during these two days is more timely that could have been foreseen. It gives us an opportunity to reflect together on the new and still emerging context for the Korean people's long search for peace and reunification, and on what the ecumenical movement can do in support of this search in these shifting landscapes.

I hope that together – with God's help and guidance – we will be able to do more than simply reiterate our call for a peace treaty. I hope and pray that we will be able to discern new opportunities and commit to concrete practical steps whereby we as the ecumenical movement in Korea and around the world can actually lead towards that objective, and advance the pilgrimage of justice and peace on the Korean peninsula.