

Policy Forum 07-074: Environmental Security: Agenda Item for the Inter-Korean Summit



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By Ke Chung Kim

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I. Introduction

Ke Chung Kim, Chair of the DMZ Forum (<http://www.dmzforum.org/>) and Director of the Center for BioDiversity Research at Pennsylvania State University, writes, "The 2nd Inter-Korean Summit in Pyongyang offers an timely opportunity for the leaders of two Koreas, Dear Leader Kim Jong-Il of the DPRK and President Roh Moo-Hyun of the ROK to forge an ultimate agenda, building environmental security on the Korean peninsula for which the formation of an inter-Korean commission for environmental security should be considered a positive contribution towards peace, prosperity and healthy environment for the Korean people."

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II. Article by Ke Chung Kim

- "Environmental Security: Agenda Item for the Inter-Korean Summit"

By Ke Chung Kim

The dire state of Korea's environment demands immediate resolutions for environmental security on the Korean peninsula. Many ideas and proposals have been floated in the media for the 2nd Inter-Korean Summit since it was announced (e.g., Mansourov 2007, Sigal 2007, Bulychec 2007, Lim Eul-Chul 2007, Ballbach 2007, Snyder 2007), of which none addressed serious environmental problems on the Korean peninsula. In reality, environmental security comes far ahead of any other contemporary issues the two Koreas need to consider during the next Summit, October 2-4, 2007, because the environmental security issues encompass all other suggested priorities for the Summit which require both short- and long-term resolutions.

Environmental security (EC) refers to the " *environmental viability for life support, with three sub-elements: preventing or repairing military damage to the environment, preventing or responding to environmentally caused conflicts, and protecting the environment due to its inherent moral value.* "(Glenn and Gordon 2007). To establish environmental security the two Koreas must organize themselves into a workable bilateral vehicle to repair damage done to the environment for Korea's life support, sustainable economic development, and for the intrinsic value of the environment - biodiversity and ecosystems - itself and also prevent damage made to the environment from natural and man-made attacks (Millennium Project 2007). It may be poignant for those who insist on blinded development without serious environmental safeguards that threats to environmental security include military and economic security issues and also transboundary and /or global impacts such as DMZ issues, nature conservation, and carbon emission issues/global warming.

Korea's environment is in a formidable state of concern, as it has been badly damaged for the last five decades and continues to deteriorate, as unbridled approach to economic development continues. Aggressive economic development and urbanization in the South (Digital Chosunilbo 1998, 1999a, b) and military buildup and operation along with a declining economy in the North have systematically compromised the integrity of Korea's environment. South Korea's phenomenal success in economic development, now considered 11th economic power in the world, was made with tremendous environmental costs and some irreversible consequences (Korea Herald 1998, Jung 1999, Kim Hongso 2000). Along the way, human population grew rapidly as well and urbanization ensued to accommodate the growing population--South Korea became one of the most populated countries in the world with 48 million people and 425 persons per km², the 3rd highest in the world (average world population density 48/km²) in 2005 (Korea Times 2005). Large parts of South Korea's natural ecosystems have been converted to industrial sites and urban centers and this trend

continues to this day (Digital Chosunilbo 1998, 1999b) - only a few places in South Korea escaped the massive land exploitation or severe pollution. Today's South Korea became the land of industrial and urban complexes, saddled with critical environmental degradation, polluted waters, and uncontrolled urban and commercial sprawls (Digital Chosunilbo 1999a, Esty et al. 2005).

North Korea, the DPR Korea, is a socialist nation of 23 million people, completely isolated from the outside world and highly disciplined with perpetual poverty. North Korea's environment has been badly damaged and DPR Korea faces serious deforestation, shortage and degradation of water quality, deteriorating air quality in urban and industrial areas. Severe degradation of land that is closely related to natural disasters like landslide, flooding and drought and biodiversity loss all together affect food production, national productivity, public health, local economy and economic development (United Nations Environment Programme 2003). All these environmental problems will retard economic development and would worsen the impacts of global warming to the environment, loss of biodiversity and habitats, and hence national capacity and resources for renewal and advancement of North Korean society.

Today's Korean environment is considered one of the worst environments in the world. The Yale-Columbia Environmental Sustainability Index (ESI) 2005 Project ranked South Korea 122nd and North Korea the last of 146 countries. The ESI benchmarks the ability of nations to protect environment over the next several decades based on five categories: a) environmental system, b) reducing environmental stresses, c) reducing human vulnerability to environmental stress, d) societal and institutional capacity to respond to environmental challenges, and e) global stewardship (Esty et al. 2005). The state of Korea's environment is much worse than many of underdeveloped countries in the world. At this juncture, there is a unique environmental heritage, the richest biodiversity corridor of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), which is the pivotal natural resource for building environmental security on the Korean peninsula. The DMZ ecosystems bustling with native species, large parts of which have already been extirpated or become extinct from the rest of Korea, are a monument of nature for renewal and rehabilitation of Korea's environment for environmental security. Limited human intrusions allowed cultivated farmlands and damaged forest and grasslands in the DMZ corridor to develop into a natural sanctuary.

To sustain continued economic development Korea must maintain a healthy environment for biodiversity and ecosystems, because biodiversity that refers to the totality of all living organisms: plants, animals, fungi, and microorganisms is the foundation of life and natural resources and capital for ecosystem services which drive our life-support system.. North Korea needs sustainable economic development with focus on rapid industrial and energy development at the national level and building local economy, heavily based on food production and local natural resources. South Korea also needs sustainable economic development that requires new market and equitable labor force along with cultural, educational and scientific and technological advancement. That is the ultimate agenda for the 2007 Summit.

Massive destruction of habitats and severe environmental deterioration resulted in a continued loss of biodiversity and many species of plants and animals are now extirpated or endangered outside of the DMZ and its buffer zones. Most habitats for animals and plants are drastically fragmented, modified or completely destroyed, and agricultural lands are highly polluted with chemical pesticides, fertilizers, industrial and municipal wastes, all of which contributed to the massive loss of biodiversity (Lee et al. 1994, Kim 1995, 1999, Eder 1996, United Nations Environment Program 2003, Esty et al. 2005). The 1994 *Biodiversity Korea 2000* Report provided a conservative estimate of South Korea's biodiversity -- over 20% of South Korea's terrestrial vertebrates, for example, are already extirpated or endangered, including 14% of birds, 23% of freshwater fishes, 39% mammals, 48% reptiles and 60% of amphibians. Compounding the massive loss of biodiversity is a knowledge

deficit: for example, barely one-third of the insect fauna and less than 2% of invertebrates are currently documented (Lee et al. 1994, Sungchun-Munhwa-Jaedan 1996).

Today, the two sovereign states are exploring possibilities for the destiny of their nations that represent extreme contrast in demography and most of socio-economic parameters but are connected by lineage and culture. Korea's environmental security is basic to economic development and human well-being, without which our world cannot be sustained. The essence of environmental security involves repairing damage to the environment for our life support and for preventing damage to our environment from natural or man-made attacks. Korea already faces environmental dangers caused by massive human activities and effects of global warming that would further destroy the land that has already been environmentally compromised. The Inter-Korean Summit is an important, necessary process for building mutual trust and personal respect between the two leaders which should be conducted on an equal footing for the common good. Neither side should trade economic goods for political favors and nor should negotiations be conducted naively in the name of Korean nationalism. Korea's dire state of environment demands close attention by the two leaders because a healthy environment and people are fundamental to building sustainable economy and peaceful Korea. The 2nd Inter-Korean Summit in Pyongyang offers an timely opportunity for the leaders of two Koreas, Dear Leader Kim Jong-Il of the DPRK and President Roh Moo-Hyun of the ROK to forge an ultimate agenda, building environmental security on the Korean peninsula for which the formation of an inter-Korean commission for environmental security should be considered a positive contribution towards peace, prosperity and healthy environment for the Korean people.

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