PROK E-NEWS
November 2005

PROK in Focus

Korean-Chinese migrant workers from China are living day and night in the halls outside the PROK General Assembly office in a prayer protest demanding justice from the Korean government. The protest began on August 23rd of this year outside the offices of the Christian Council of Korea (CCK, not NCCK), moving to the location of the PROK General Assembly office on November 7th. The workers, under the leadership and ministry of Rev. Kim Hae-Sung, Director of several PROK migrant worker centres, and other staff and volunteers, are demanding fair and equal application of the Law on Overseas Koreans. While this law applies equally, in writing, to the 6 million Koreans residing permanently outside Korea, half of these in China and the former Soviet Union, in fact it is applied discriminatively. Koreans from the so-called advanced countries such as the US, UK, Australia, are recognized as fellow Koreans and may easily receive a two-year visa, twice renewable, allowing them to live in Korea for up to six years at a time. Ethnic Koreans living in some 20 specifically-listed countries such as China and the former Soviet Union, must, on the other hand, go through the same procedures as non-Korean foreigners, to visit Korea. The Korean government regards Koreans from these 20 countries with a prejudiced eye, as in the past so many have overstayed their visas, remaining and working illegally in Korea, and is concerned that removal of restrictions will result in an incoming flood of workers from these countries, unsettling the labour market. The Korean-Chinese workers are demanding the right to unconditionally enter and leave Korea. Their request is simple: that all overseas Koreans be treated the same, without judgment based on their country of residence; give all overseas Koreans the same status, different from that of non-Korean foreigners, equally applied to all ethnic Koreans.

2. PROK Peace Community Movement
While the PROK has long and actively worked for peace and reunification, the 89th General Assembly in 2004 took the added step of approving a national staff position and headquarters for an intentional Peace Community Movement; preparations over the past year culminated in the appointment of the staff person who began his work in the General Assembly Office in early November 2005. With a focus on reunification and peace-building, the purpose of the Movement is to implement the peace movement at the local church level; raise peace consciousness and enable people to implement their peace awareness in their daily life; build a peace network domestically and internationally; remove all obstacles to peace, revising relevant laws and systems.
The Movement headquarters is working closely with the ‘Pan-National Committee Opposing the US Military Base Extension in Pyeongtaek’. The Movement headquarters and South-Kyungkee Presbytery, in which Pyeongtaek is located, are member groups of this National Committee, together with other NGOs consisting of farmers and other residents of Pyeongtaek area, and other concerned citizens. Under an agreement between the US and Korean governments, US military troops are being moved from front-line areas to Pyeongtaek, hugely expanding the present US military base there, at the cost of 2,328 acres (2,850,000 Korean pyung) of land presently owned by Korean farmers. The farmers claim they cannot survive without the land they must give up to the US military and are demanding their right to live. They and their supporters claim the US and Korean governments made the agreement without consulting, and without the consent of, the area residents. They insist that while the US claims the transfer of troops is for the protection of Korea, it is in fact part of the US military strategy for the whole region of North-East Asia, and only for its own vested interest.

3. PROK opposes opening of the rice-market
On November 15th the Church and Society Committee of the PROK General Assembly sent a statement to the Ministry of Agriculture and the National Assembly, as well as local churches of the PROK, declaring PROK opposition to further opening Korea’s rice market. Under WTO pressure, protective tariffs have been reduced over the past several years, endangering the livelihood of Korea’s rice farmers. Last year Korea agreed to increase its import quota from the current 4% to 7.96% by 2014 and to permit up to 30% of imported rice to be sold directly to consumers by 2010. Huge demonstrations by farmers and their supporters are being held to block ratification of the rice import deal signed with nine rice-exporting countries; the National Assembly is expected to vote on the bill on November 23rd.

In its statement the PROK urged that without an alternative solution for the farmers, the bill presently before the National Assembly must be blocked; the government must first establish clear measures for sustainable development of the local agricultural industry. Claiming that a lack of transparency in the negotiations between Korea and the nine rice-exporting countries means Korea’s farmers do not know the contents of the agreement or the extent of damage they will suffer, the PROK urged that the government must open its negotiations with the WTO to the public, and declared that the PROK will cooperate closely with farmers and with rural churches in making the above demands. To give visible expression to this position, ministers of rural churches and other concerned members of the PROK, PCK (Presbyterian Church of Korea) and Korean Methodist Church, will jointly hold a two-day-all-night prayer meeting in front of the National Assembly on November 22-23.

4. PROK partner church visitors learn first-hand of PROK ministries
PROK recently received visiting groups from partner churches in Switzerland and the United States, as well as individual visitors from several other countries. From October 11-28 a team of 14 women and men from the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches visited Korea as part of a regular exchange program with the PROK and the PCK (Presbyterian Church of Korea). Through the program arranged both jointly and separately by the PROK and PCK, they gained first-hand exposure
to varied mission programs. Among their final comments, some repeated by several, were: 1) surprised that social service is so central to the Korean church: “If there is a social need, the church responds,” however overwhelming the challenge: “I take the courage now to not think small.” 2) impressed by the church’s prophetic role in society; 3) wanted to learn more about the status and role of women in the church, and impressed by their active engagement; 4) impressed that their Christian faith is so centrally a part of Koreans’ daily life, and by their readiness to openly confess their faith.

From November 7-14, a team of 13 women from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) (CCDC) in the US, visited the PROK after also spending time in China, in the CCDC “Woman to Woman Worldwide” visiting program. With them were also the Area Secretary for East Asia and the Pacific, Global Ministries (UCC/CCDC), and a Korean-American minister who filled the valued role of translator. In one short week they gained first-hand knowledge of various PROK ministries, focusing on peace and justice issues, including the role and status of women in church and society. They visited Pyeongtaek and heard the pain of the farmers and their supporters in the face of the expanding US military base there; they learned of PROK ministry among and for women caught in the sex-trade catering to American military servicemen. An acknowledged highpoint of their visit was Sunday morning worship with Korean-Chinese migrant workers; the young CCDC minister’s sermon, in which she stressed our oneness in Christ around the world, reaching beyond language and nationality, was met repeatedly with emphatic “Amen!”s of heartfelt affirmation.

Both the Swiss and American visiting teams heard the PROK position on reunification and on other peace and justice issues. To balance this, both teams also visited their respective Embassies to hear the views of their respective governments, and both also visited the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone) through the offices of their respective countries.

The American women will share their learnings through developing the upcoming Korea mission-study curriculum for the CCDC. We thank our Swiss and American and other sisters and brothers for these opportunities to learn together and share encouragement and inspiration.

Ecumenical Movement in Focus

Consultation on women’s participation in the church

On October 27th an ecumenical women’s consultation was held in Seoul under the theme “How may we achieve women’s full participation in the church?”., organized jointly by Korea Church Women United (KCWU) and the Women’s Committee of the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK). Representatives of the Korean Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church of Korea (PCK), and Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) reported on the present reality of women’s participation in the decision-making bodies of their respective churches. In her opening presentation reflecting the recent church women’s ecumenical movement, Rev. Lee Moon-Sook, KCWU General Secretary, challenged the women with several
crucial tasks: 1) Create a new church model reinterpreting the spirit of church reformation from the perspective of women and life; 2) At the local church level, raise and widen awareness of the problematic issue of women’s participation, and seek new models of practical methods to secure their full participation; seek in-depth and wide analysis and cultural transformation; 3) Develop clear communication and the spirit of consensus in the women’s ecumenical movement; 4) Transform the core of the women’s ecumenical movement; 5) Share responsibility for the urgent short-term work; cooperate together in the long-term continuing tasks, to reduce the waste of human and material resources and avoid competition and rivalry in our work.

PROK E-News is a publication of The Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK).
Editor: Rev. Yoon Kil-Soo, General Secretary