Call to ease or suspend the sanctions against the DPRK that impede the response to COVID-19

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On March 25th (local time), the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo asserted that “the G7, and all nations, must remain united in calling on North Korea to return to negotiations, and stay committed to apply diplomatic and economic pressure over its illegal nuclear and ballistic missile programs.” This was a dismissal of remarks made the day before by Michelle Bachelet, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, that “In a context of a global pandemic, both for global public health reasons, and to support the rights and lives of millions of people in these countries (the DPRK), sectoral sanctions should be eased or suspended.” Following to this, Secretary Pompeo had an interview with the media on the 26th saying that “Venezuela, North Korea, Iran, in some of these countries, when humanitarian assistance is offered, they’ll often reject it.” However, maintaining the level of pressure in the DPRK policies while taking their rejection of humanitarian assistance does nothing to mitigate the current situation. If the U.S. is willing to cooperate with the DPRK in preventing the COVID-19 epidemic as President Trump wrote in his personal letter to Kim, what is needed right now is to ease or suspend the sanctions against the DPRK imposed by the U.S. and UN, which are blocking any possibly effective response to COVID-19.

Calls for easing or suspending sanctions are continued, as COVID-19 is spreading on a global scale. Michelle Bachelet said that “Broad sectoral sanctions should urgently be re-evaluated in countries facing the coronavirus pandemic” and mentioned Cuba, the DPRK, Venezuela, Zimbabwe and Iran to emphasize that sanctions may also impede medical efforts, which heightens the risk for all of us. António Guterres, UN Secretary-General, also sent a letter to G20 members and
encouraged them to waive sanctions to ensure access to food, essential health supplies, and COVID-19 medical support. Humanitarian assistance groups of the U.S. also urge that sanctions against the DPRK should not impede the assistance.

The 1718 Sanctions Committee of the UN Security Council is approving the requested humanitarian exemptions on a case-by-case basis and they recently shortened the duration of the procedure, but it is still not enough. Even the necessary medical supplies such as thermometers, RT-PCR machines, reagents, and resuscitators have to go through a complex process. In order to obtain the waiver, a wide-ranged submission of information that encompasses the purpose of the aid, the travel position of the items, the quantity and method of the shipment, travel route of the package, its value converted into dollars, the reasons for seeking an exemption, and the financial institutions that will be used, is required and there should be no changes in its operation. Besides, even if an exemption is granted, financial sanctions and the U.S. secondary boycott complicates the situation further because they make it difficult to find financial institutions to pay for the items and provide fund for resident NGOs or UN agencies in the DPRK. It is hard to deliver cash in person due to COVID-19 related restrictions, overall, assistances are met with severe adversity. Sanctions against the DPRK are blocking urgent and effective responses to a rapidly spreading epidemic.

The DPRK has reported that there is no case of COVID-19 up until now, but no one would be able to possibly predict situations to come. They have shut down flights since the beginning phase of proliferation and with other border controls, are said to be concentrating in the prevention of epidemics. Concurrently, they asked for reagent kits to Russia and medical supplies to Médecins Sans Frontières(MSF) and UNICEF, etc. Even if there is not a single case of infection, no country can be called safe unless a tight quarantine system in operation. There are no borders for a virus. Experts accentuate the importance of multilateral and international cooperation because if only one country fails to prevent and the outbreak goes out of control, it will pose the intensified level of threat to the whole world. Not just to ‘support’ the
DPRK but also to jointly respond against COVID-19 as a whole, it is very urgent that some alteration in sanctions be made.

On March 26th, G20 leaders have hosted an extraordinary summit regarding responses to COVID-19 and agreed upon that ‘global action, solidarity and international cooperation are more than ever necessary to address this pandemic.’ A number of countries have been requesting the ROK for international cooperation as South Korean government’s actions have been acclaimed for. Ironically, one country that the ROK cannot cooperate with is the DPRK, a country that resides on the same peninsula. Assistance from the ROK government and NGOs and inter-Korean cooperation on health care have been blocked by the sanctions. Effective mechanisms to prevent the outbreak of COVID-19 in the DPRK would expand supplies for prevention, quarantine, and treatment, which cannot possibly take place without an extensive easing or suspending sanctions against the DPRK and international cooperation. In addition, something that is as important as the elaborated agenda is the active participation of the DPRK to the proposals of the international society for cooperation to prevent the epidemic. Cooperation does not bear fruit by efforts that are one-sided.

Two Koreas, through the Inter-Korean Sectoral Meeting for Cooperation on Health Care that took place in November 2018, agreed upon bilateral share of information to prevent the influx and spread of infectious diseases, cooperation on diagnosis, prevention and treatment of infectious diseases including tuberculosis and malaria, promotion of extensive mid and long-term cooperation projects for epidemics, health and medical care, regular discussions and resolutions through inter-Korean Joint Liaison Office. However, in a context of a global pandemic of COVID-19, these pacts are not carried out at all. This is a clear case that shows the progress of a peace process on the Korean peninsula is directly connected with people’s safety. As António Guterres, UN Secretary-General had highlighted, “this is the time for solidarity, not exclusion.” There is no time to hesitate. The U.S. and the international society must immediately ease or suspend sanctions that impede the response to COVID-19 in the DPRK.
87 CSOs in ROK

Contact Details

People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD)

- Sooyoung Hwang, Manager of Center for Peace and Disarmament
- +82 2-723-4250 peace@pspd.org http://www.peoplepower21.org/English