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COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Thirty-first session

SUMMARY RECORD (PARTIAL)* OF THE 46th MEETING

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva,

on Thursday, 20 November 2003, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. BONOAN-DANDAN

CONTENTS

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS (continued)

(a) REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES IN ACCORDANCE WITH ARTICLES 16 AND 17 OF THE COVENANT (continued)

Second periodic report of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (continued)

The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS (continued)

(a) REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES IN ACCORDANCE WITH ARTICLES 16 AND 17 OF THE COVENANT (continued)

Second periodic report of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (continued) (E/1990/6/Add.35; E/C.12/Q/DPRK/1; HR/CESCR/NONE/2003/1; HRI/CORE/1/Add.108/Rev.1)

At the invitation of the Chairperson, Mr. Chae Ryang Il, Mr. Jong Chol Won and Mr. Sim Hyong Il (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) took places at the Committee table.

Issues relating to specific provisions of the Covenant (continued)

Articles 10-12 of the Covenant (continued)

Mr. SIM Hyong Il (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) said, in reply to questions regarding the right to adequate food, that, despite considerable difficulties in past years, the food situation had begun to stabilize. But much remained to be done.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea was a mountainous country with limited arable land, which made it more difficult to find solutions to the food problem. The Government had launched a number of projects. One was a nationwide rezoning initiative, to be completed in the next year or two, to improve and modernize the agricultural sector; the existence of many small agricultural plots, a relic of feudal society, made modernization impossible. A regrouping of land would help to boost production.

Remarkable progress was being made with new, less expensive and higher-yield seeds, either produced domestically or acquired elsewhere; the aim was to have two and even three crops a year. Drawing on the experience of certain European countries, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was using mountainous regions for the potato crop and improving their yields, which had already risen from 15 tonnes to 40 and even 50 tonnes per hectare. Efforts were being made to enhance soil fertility and increase the production of organic fertilizers. To improve meat production, natural grazing areas in mountainous regions had been set aside for livestock not dependent on grain feed.

New goals had been set in terms of irrigation for agriculture. The country was rich in water resources, and the Government was

working to develop natural waterways which did not require electricity to pump the water.

Electricity generation was essential for industry and agriculture, and every effort was being made to meet the country's energy needs. Small and medium-sized power plants had been built, and others were under construction. The efficiency of power plants was being improved. Construction of a number of large-scale hydroelectric plants was under way, and existing plants were being modernized.

The country had a self-reliant economy based on decades of experience, and, despite the adverse impact of outside influences, he was convinced that difficulties would be overcome and that the situation would soon improve.

As to whether there were differences in standards of living, some people earned a better livelihood than others, and, of course, natural disasters did not affect everyone in the same way. But one thing was clear: the country had no unemployment, no beggars and no vagrants, and everyone was cared for by the State. While not everyone had exactly the same standard of living, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was a far cry from a country in which the rich got richer and the poor got poorer.

Differences in living standards depended on the quantity, quality and difficulty of the work performed and the number of family breadwinners. Some people also received assistance from relatives living abroad. Some families had a car, others did not; every household had a television set; everyone had decent clothing; basic food, such as rice, was readily available. A flat might be large or small, depending on the size of the family. But nobody lived a life of luxury.

Senior officials did not necessarily lead a better life. There was certainly no discrimination when natural disasters struck. If a high-ranking official lived in a village hit by a flood, why would his abode be spared? Generally speaking, coalminers had higher wages than high-level officials. Family savings likewise differed. Thanks to their higher wages, coalminers usually had more savings.

Mr. JONG Chol Won (Democratic People's Republic of Korea), referring to a question on the decreasing birth rate, said that it had stood at 20.0 per thousand in 1993 and 17.8 per thousand in 1999 (HRI/CORE/1/Add.108/Rev.1, table 7), a development linked to natural disasters and the economic embargo imposed by outside forces. But the birth rate was declining worldwide, and there was nothing unusual about it falling in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

A report by a non-governmental organization (NGO) alleged that the birth rate had declined because working women were under such stress and that maternity leave, at 77 days, was insufficient. In fact it was 150 days, and working hours for women with large families were reduced. The Government's policy was to promote a higher birth rate.

With regard to a question on smoking, he said that women traditionally did not smoke; children did not smoke either, but many men did. A number of measures had been taken to combat smoking. Awareness-raising campaigns had been stepped up to explain its harmful effects and warn about the risk of passive smoking. Smoking in public places was restricted to special areas. Cigarette advertising was prohibited. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea had signed the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and observed World No Tobacco Day.

Concerning the reproductive health of women, the Government's policy was to educate women about such matters, work to decrease maternal morbidity and mortality, and encourage women to have a reasonable number of children. Hospitals and clinics had been opened in every village. There was a well-established network of free maternity and paediatric clinics to which women had convenient access. There were no family planning centres as such, but the health-care clinics provided such services to all. Regular classes were held on reproductive health. The network of family doctors was another valuable aspect of efforts to promote women's reproductive health.

Articles 13-15 of the Covenant

Mr. KERDOUN asked what methods were used by the Government to promote education, and what share of the budget was allocated to education in comparison with other economic and social sectors. He wondered whether the Ministry of Education or a separate ministry was responsible for higher education. Noting that education was compulsory for 11 years, he asked how schools dealt with students who performed poorly. He wished to know whether the Government attached the same importance to technical and vocational training as it did to general instruction, particularly in higher education.

He asked whether the figures given in the second periodic report (para. 97) for the number of teachers had changed. He wished to know the names of the countries or international organizations with which the Government had established educational cooperation or exchange programmes and the specific fields involved.

Mr. MARCHÁN ROMERO commended the Government on its success in ensuring the participation of all members of the population in cultural activities. He wondered what mechanisms it used and whether it encountered any difficulties in fully ensuring the enjoyment of that right. He wished to know what share of the budget had been allocated to cultural activities in recent years and whether there had been a steady upward trend. He asked what measures had been adopted to ensure that vulnerable segments of the population, such as disabled children, elderly persons and rural inhabitants, were given equal opportunity to participate in cultural activities.

It was unclear what was meant by the term "propaganda squads" in paragraph 102 of the second periodic report; he wondered whether it meant that cultural participation was influenced by political propaganda. He wished to know how the assertion that the country had a homogeneous cultural tradition could be reconciled with the Government's encouragement of native regional cultures. To what extent did the Government respect and guarantee the identity of regional cultures? Referring to paragraph 106 of the report, he commented that it was not the role of the Government to meet the "sentimental requirements" of the masses.

Ms. BRAS GOMES asked what was meant by the orphans' schools mentioned in paragraph 48 of the report. Did orphans not attend mainstream schools? She enquired whether the education system provided extra-curricular activities for all children rather than only for gifted children.

Mr. CEAUSU said that the Committee welcomed the efforts towards reconciliation being made by the two Korean States and noted that education was a key factor in helping to make that possible. He asked what steps had been taken to teach pupils about the economic, social and cultural realities of the Republic of Korea and to promote a sense of cultural unity with its people. In order to benefit from advances made in other countries, it was important to increase the number of persons who could communicate in a foreign language. Although the cultural exchanges organized between the two Korean States were commendable, he asked whether efforts had also been made to reunite families separated by the war and to facilitate their reunification on one or other side of the border. He wondered why only one concert had been given in Seoul by the Pyongyang National Symphony Orchestra.

Ms. IYER enquired whether school attendance had been affected by the natural disasters of the 1990s, particularly if, owing to resource constraints, midday school meals had had to be suspended. She asked whether entrance exams were required of all prospective university students or whether some students were exempt.

Mr. KERDOUN asked for clarification concerning the long-term objective of making all members of society intellectuals through compulsory higher education (E/1990/6/Add.35, para. 87).

Mr. ChaeRyang Il (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) said that education was the foundation on which a modern society and economy were built. The Ministry of Education was responsible for all levels of education, from kindergarten to university. It also administered the Academy of Educational Science and the Research Centre of Higher Education, which conducted research into teaching methods and curricula used in other countries for their possible use in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. At the start of the twenty-first century, revised textbooks had been published at all levels.

There was no problem with school dropouts: schooling was compulsory for 11 years and learning support was provided, often by other students, to those experiencing difficulties. There were higher schools that offered technical and vocational training, some of which were attached to large factories, as in the case of information technology institutes. International cooperation in education took place through regular exchanges of students, teachers and researchers with a number of countries, including China, the Russian Federation, Italy and Austria. Foreign teachers taught foreign languages and some engineering courses.

In accordance with the provisions of the Covenant, all citizens were guaranteed the right to participate in cultural life. There were theatres and citizens' palaces or halls in each province, and cultural centres at the county and local levels, offering a variety of cultural activities. All of the country's factories and enterprises also had their own art circles, which workers could join free of charge.

The Government encouraged music, sport and art at all levels of education. Music education began in kindergarten, and there were special art and sports schools in each province. Regular schools throughout the country organized after-school activities, and a variety of extracurricular activities were also offered at children's palaces, halls and libraries. At the central level there were a number of specialized tertiary institutions, including the Music and Dance University, the University of Drama and Cinematics, and the University of Fine Art.

Regarding differences between the regions, apart from certain geographical variations the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was a homogenous nation, with one language and one set of customs. There were, however, a number of regional cultural variations, such as traditional songs, which were encouraged by the Government.

Orphans, like all children, were guaranteed 11 years of free education. There were more than 14,000 kindergartens, some 4,000 primary schools and almost 5,000 secondary schools throughout the country. The Government had taken specific measures with regard to orphans and children with disabilities. There were special kindergartens and primary schools for orphans, and while children with mental disabilities attended regular schools, there were separate schools for blind and deaf children.

The floods of 1995 and 1996 had resulted in considerable numbers of street children. The Government had set up a special task force to ensure their protection, and centres providing food and accommodation had been established in each province. The Ministry of Education had sent teachers to give classes in those centres so that even in the most difficult circumstances education had not been interrupted. Every effort had been made to send the children back to their homes, and where that had not been possible, the Government had encouraged families to take street children into their homes and raise them along with their own children. Many families had responded, and there were now no street children in the country.

The school attendance rate of 99 per cent had naturally been affected by the disasters in 1995 and 1996, but had never fallen below 85 per cent. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Public Health Ministry, the Ministry of Education, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and various non-governmental organizations had all cooperated in developing strategies to cope with the disasters.

The only criterion for university admission was, in all cases, the ability of the student. Each year all secondary school students had the option of sitting university entrance examinations, which were marked anonymously by a number of different graders. There were channels of complaint, and students could appeal entrance examination results to the highest organ of the State, the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly.

Regarding the Government's long-term objective of making higher education compulsory, so that every member of society would have the level of knowledge of a university graduate, it was not yet clear whether such an aim was possible in reality. There were more than 300 universities and higher education colleges in the country, 100 of which were part-time institutions. In addition to correspondence courses and evening classes, there were also factory, fishery and farm colleges, which allowed workers to obtain a degree without having to leave their jobs. Factory colleges, for example, were headed by the factory manager, and employed full-time teachers, as well as inviting factory engineers to give occasional lectures. By combining study with work, workers received both theoretical and practical experience.

Mr. SIM Hyong Il (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) said that the delegation appreciated the constructive dialogue with the Committee, but regretted that the limited time available had not allowed Committee members to gain a deeper understanding of the situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The delegation looked forward to receiving the Committee's concluding observations, and would ensure that they were widely disseminated.

The CHAIRPERSON said that she welcomed the fact that the Committee's concluding observations would be widely disseminated and hoped they would be of practical help. She hoped also that the country's third periodic report would not be subject to the same delays as the second, and that regular contact between the Committee and the State party would be maintained. Before submitting its next report, the State party should carefully study the Committee's 15 general comments, which would ensure a better understanding of the Covenant.

The meeting rose at 12.05 p.m.