

06/03/2003

Still a long way to go for Korean women

Zatashah Idris

THE just-concluded 13th Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit in Kuala Lumpur focused much of its deliberations on terrorism.

However, women's rights activists were pleased that a section was devoted in the final declaration to the advancement of women as well as the possibility of Malaysia hosting a NAM ministerial meeting on the advancement of women in 2004.

According to Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, who spearheaded The First Ladies' Dialogue at the summit: "Women have the power to sow the seeds of peace which will eventually grow into a lasting culture and bear fruit in building enduring world peace."

In the case of South Korea, the advancement of women is steadily progressing but there is still a long way to go.

March 8 is International Women's Day and editor-in-chief of The Korea Herald Lee Kyong-hee believes that this is the perfect opportunity for women around the world to join voices and fight for what they believe in, including their opposition to the imminent war on Iraq and the US stance against North Korea.

"People are starving in North Korea," said Lee, 55, "and I am not sure if it's correct for me to say this, but I feel that North Korea is the last twilight zone of the Cold War. The North Koreans do not have the resources to start a war against the US or South Korea."

South and North Korea have been divided since the 1950-53 Korean War and are still technically at war.

The Bush administration has labelled North Korea as one of the countries in the "axis of evil". Although South Korea has an ally in the US, Seoul has become one of the Bush administration's biggest foreign policy problems.

According to the International Herald Tribune, "years of resentment over a variety of issues are boiling over in the form of anti-American demonstrations in Seoul and pronouncements by the outgoing and incoming presidents challenging American policies in dealing with North Korea's nuclear ambitions".

Lee felt it was important that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, as chairman of the NAM Summit, voiced his opposition to war.

"It couldn't be more important since I am from South Korea, and many of us are concerned with the US foreign policy on North Korea." (The US favours a policy of no bargaining and no economic incentives until North Korea abandons its nuclear programme.)

Although South Korea does not agree with the North's nuclear programme, the majority of South Koreans oppose economic sanctions, preferring a conciliatory approach, she added.

Despite political tension, Lee is pleased with improvements in women's status in South Korea introduced by the new President.

"In terms of women's representation, we have more than 10 women in Parliament and President Roh Moo Hyun has brought in four women to the Cabinet, which is a record number for us. We also have the first South Korean woman justice minister, which I think is a breakthrough."

The issues that South Korean women have to face include the growing number of prostitutes, especially among minors, as well as the law which states only men are recognised as the head of the family.

"Women's organisations are lobbying to change this law but in vain," she

explained.

* The writer can be contacted at zatashah@nstp.com.my