

March 5, 2007

Dear Representative/Senator:

We write to you as faith-based organizations to express our profound concern in regards to the ongoing negotiation of a Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (Kor-US FTA). While the exact contents of the proposed agreement have not been made public, the pattern established by the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) has been made abundantly clear through recent trade agreements, including those with Central America, Peru and Colombia. We feel that this cookie-cutter approach to trade negotiation is inappropriate and leaves too many people out in the cold by not taking into account the cultural, historical and social contexts of each prospective trade partner, and by emphasizing corporate profits over the common good.

To highlight a few areas of particular concern with the proposed Kor-US FTA:

Farmers & Food Sovereignty: Food is not the same as other commodities. It is deeply tied to cultural beliefs and practices, national sovereignty and the economic survival of some of the poorest people in the world. Family farmers are the backbone of national food security and environmental stewardship. Rice in Korea is a particularly sensitive issue – the powerful witness of South Korean rice farmers at recent trade negotiations demonstrate how deeply felt the challenge to their culture and livelihoods is. South Korea should be allowed to protect the well-being of its family farmers in order to prevent the collapse of rural communities, internal displacement and instability, cultural uprooting and environmental degradation.

Migrant workers: In May 2006, the National Labor Committee documented widespread and grievous abuse of migrant workers under the auspices of the US-Jordan Free Trade Agreement. Amnesty International has documented similar patterns of serious rights violations in South Korea, including verbal and physical abuse, the withholding of wages and the repression of attempts at organizing. While we applaud the South Korean government's recent recognition of a migrant workers union, this is only a first step. Given migrant workers' significant contributions to the economies of both South Korea and the US, as trade increases between our two nations, the rights of all migrant workers must be respected, and they should share in the benefits of rising national prosperity.

Healthcare & Public Services: As the debate in the US grows around rising healthcare costs and the growing numbers of people lacking health insurance, South Korea has demonstrated that alternatives are possible by providing universal, low-cost healthcare. Unfortunately statements made by USTR suggest that the proposed agreement would challenge and undermine this system, assuredly resulting in higher prices and limited access. Furthermore, currently in South Korea, water, electricity, education and healthcare are all publicly-provided services. If investment clauses hold true from other recent FTA's, public provision of these vital services will be open to challenge by private corporations. We believe strongly that trade agreements should not undermine government's legitimate role to ensure the wellbeing of and care for its people.

Flawed & rushed process: We lament the lack of transparency and dearth of input from civil society that has characterized US trade policy, and which continues to hold true in the current negotiations. Furthermore, the pending expiration of Presidential Trade Promotion Authority, or ‘Fast Track,’ has put negotiators under unseemly pressure to conclude negotiations before the end of March deadline, subsuming product to process in a rush to the finish line. The disturbing trend of ever more expansive trade agreements that threaten national sovereignty, the democratic process, and human rights are directly encouraged by this flawed legislation. We look forward to its expiration, and the creation of a more humane, accountable and transparent process for future trade negotiation.

We also note with concern the violent repression faced by protesters of the trade agreement in South Korea, a relatively young democracy. We should be engaged in processes that encourage the deepening of that democracy, rather than undermining it through lack of transparency and our complicity of silence in the repression of dissent.

Our deep concern is rooted in the experiences and lives of our members and of the people they serve – from those on the ground in South Korea to those who have witnessed first-hand the devastating impacts of similar trade agreements in Mexico, Central America and elsewhere. As well, we are guided by our parishes, members and communities here in the US who have also felt the repercussions of a misguided trade policy at home.

From this broadly informed perspective, and in deep solidarity with our South Korean brothers and sisters, we hold that the CAFTA model of trade is fundamentally flawed. In the case of the proposed Korea-US Free Trade Agreement, we ask that both the process of negotiation and the end product of those negotiations adhere to principles of solidarity and justice, including transparency and democracy in the negotiations process, respect for human rights and livelihoods, and care for creation.

We fear that this agreement will far fall short of these principles, and so hope that you will engage with the USTR to ensure the best possible outcome of the negotiations: a trade agreement that will deepen the ties of solidarity between Americans and South Koreans while raising up the welfare of the people of both nations, that will protect the most vulnerable members of our societies and promote sustainability, and that will be in tandem with our cultural and spiritual values of justice and fairness.

Sincerely,
Center of Concern
Columban Justice, Peace & Integrity of Creation Office (USA)
Common Global Ministries, United Church of Christ & Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
NETWORK: A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby
Quixote Center/Quest for Peace
United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries

cc: Ambassador Susan C. Schwab, U.S. Trade Representative