

Late leader stood for peace in Korea

For the AJC, Sunday, August 30, 2009

The late Kim Dae-jung, a Nobel Peace Laureate and former president of South Korea, is often referred to as “the Nelson Mandela of Korea.” This title was given to him for his lifelong struggle in promoting democracy and human rights in South Korea during the turbulent years of military dictatorships.

In his struggle to protect democracy and the right of the common man, he was imprisoned multiple times, exiled abroad, kidnapped with the intent of political murder, subjected to a mysterious “traffic accident” that crippled him, and even sentenced to death on the charge of treason.

Despite all of these challenges, he refused to compromise his principles of the pursuit for truth and the love of peace. Until his last breath, he never rested, even for a moment, in guiding the course of politics and social engineering. In his last public appearance just weeks before his death on Aug. 18, he declared that “if conscience is not acting, it is in fact siding with evil.”

He lived to make a difference. He will be long remembered for his compassion, for his humanity, and for his love of peace.

Most of all, he will always be remembered for his unwavering commitment and devotion to the peaceful reintegration of the two Koreas. In June 2000, during the prime moment of his presidency, he set aside all political calculations and risked his political career by forcing his way to Pyongyang to meet with Kim Jong Il, for the singular purpose of paving the way for unification.

In the end, not only did he gain a summit meeting but also brought home a major framework agreed upon by the two leaders, which became the principle for inter-Korea relations for the next ten years. Kim Dae-jung’s obsessive desire for the accommodation of differences in ideology and political institutions, and the pursuit of common prosperity, became the core of the historic document, known as the 6.15 (June 15) Agreement.

Kim Dae-jung’s presidency came at a difficult time period in South Korea’s history. During this period it was not easy to maintain conciliatory relations with the North, particularly due to the steady objection from the Bush administration that not only demonized Kim Jong Il’s regime, but also applied punitive policies on Pyongyang for pursuing a nuclear program.

In light of all these obstacles, it took the courage of two strong presidents in South Korea, Kim Dae-jung and his successor Roh Moo-hyun, to sustain a policy of co-prosperity. These two leaders visited North Korea for meetings with Kim Jong Il, and laid the road map for future relations between these two estranged states. It is

unfortunate that South Korea has lost both of these enlightened leaders within the last few months.

The election of President Lee Myung-bak in 2007 marked the end of the Sunshine Policy and the beginning of the doctrine of "Denuke, Reform, 3000." This new doctrine asserts that North Korea must abandon nuclear ambitions and embrace an open and reformed political system --- and only then will South Korea help the North achieve a per capita GDP of \$3,000. The North considered this policy to be insulting and hostile toward its leadership, and since then has refused to talk to the South Korean government.

Thus, in recent memory, the last 1 1/2 years have been the lowest point in inter-Korea relations. Undeterred by all of this ideological posturing, Kim Dae-jung never neglected to encourage both governments to revive dialogue and seek a peaceful resolution to their differences.

Upon learning of Kim's death, North Korea's Kim Jong Il did not waste time in sending a message of condolence and dispatching a high-level delegation to pay tribute.

What was noteworthy of the visit by this delegation was that, surprisingly, the delegation also gave a condolence visit to the presidential house and met with President Lee Myung-bak himself. This clearly would not have happened without the unexpected opportunity presented by the passing away of Kim Dae-jung.