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**Berlin sets up cultural centre in N Korea**

Marc Young in Berlin

Germany has become the first western nation to open a cultural centre in North Korea, enabling citizens of the isolated country to learn about Bauhaus architecture and the poetry of Goethe.

Officially opening this week, the information centre in the North Korean capital, Pyongyang, will eventually contain thousands of books on science and technology, as well as German literature and society. It will be open to the public.

'We have set conditions that there has to be free access to the centre and that it will be operated without censorship. If that cannot be guaranteed it will be closed,' said Dr Uwe Schmelter, director of the Goethe Institute in Seoul, South Korea, and initiator of the efforts to increase the cultural exchange between Germany and the totalitarian regime in the North.

The Goethe Institute, responsible for promoting German language and culture abroad, received permission to set up the reading room after three years of negotiations.

Dr Schmelter said a surprising number of North Koreans spoke German due to the country's ties with formerly communist East Germany. He said they appeared to be sympathetic towards Germany because it shared a common fate of once being divided like Korea.

'I never imagined when we started talks that we'd end up with a centre in Pyongyang, but as time went by it became clear they were seriously interested in opening up this way,' Dr Schmelter said, noting North Korean officials had told him they hoped other European countries would follow suit.

Korean security expert Sebastian Harnisch from the University of Trier said there was no way of knowing the ultimate intentions of the secretive regime, but raised the possibility it was hoping to weaken the western diplomatic front against Pyongyang.

Professor Harnisch also said using culture as a tool to build bridges with autocratic governments was not new to Germany.

'It's a very German thing. The thinking goes that you have to start with culture and economics before the political aspects can follow,' he said.