

North Korean Famine, Refugees, and International Aid

Peter Alford

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By Peter Alford

Introduction by John Feffer

*What are the causes and consequences of North Korea's extended famine of recent years? Though it is not blessed with plentiful arable land or a consistently temperate climate, North Korea has long tried to feed itself and avoid dependence on the outside world. Food security represents, for the government in Pyongyang, a very concrete expression of *juche*, or self-reliance. Though such a policy has meant that one-third of the population remains rural—a very high percentage for a modern, industrialized country—North Korea continues to push hard to guarantee sufficiency in basic grains.*

This push for agricultural self-reliance, however, has had a fatal flaw. It has depended on rather large inputs of cheap energy. North Korea's farming sector has been one the most mechanized in Asia, and its application of chemical fertilizer, a petroleum product, has ranked among the highest in the world. When energy became considerably more expensive, as a result of the Soviet Union and China switching to hard-currency trade, North Korea's agricultural sector became dangerously unsustainable. Declining yields because of heavy fertilizer use, deforestation because of cultivating unsuitable land, and then several natural disasters all sent North Korea spinning into a major food crisis in the mid-1990s.

Although humanitarian aid and a few reasonable harvests brought North Korea back from the brink, the country has still not addressed the fundamental structural problems of its agricultural sector. The expansion of retail markets has helped the farmers and those with money. But the sectors of the population that can't afford food at the private markets remain vulnerable.

At the same time, the government has decided that the presence of outsiders with access throughout the country have had a malign influence on the society, and so Pyongyang cut back on the activities of humanitarian agencies. The reduction of food from the outside (as a result of sanctions, reaction to North Korea's nuclear ambitions, and general donor fatigue) and from within as well (as a result of a reduced harvest from this summer's natural disasters) are putting pressure on the most vulnerable members of the North Korean population, including children and the elderly. At a time when the United States and Japan, among others, are pressing for regime change, it has become more important to find ways of delivering humanitarian relief to those in North Korea who are the neediest.

North Korea looks to be facing its worst winter since the mass famines of the mid-1990s and China must stand ready to accept a flood of refugees into its northeast, international agencies are warning.

Pyongyang's restrictions on foreign relief work, foreign food-aid cutbacks, destructive summer floods and the indirect effects of international sanctions in response to its October 9 nuclear

test are combining to threaten the North with widespread starvation, possibly within three months.

The International Crisis Group, in a report released on October 26, warns that conditions that have developed since late last year "could be the perfect storm presaging return to famine and a new exodus to China".

The report follows a warning from the World Food Program, the UN agency that manages most food relief not originating from China and South Korea, that severe winter shortages are likely by January.

The UN's human rights investigator for North Korea, Viti Muntarbhorn, said this week that the program was feeding only about 13,000 people compared with six million a year ago, mostly because of heavy restrictions the Pyongyang regime imposed on its work late last year.

At the same time, the North curtailed market reforms and reimposed a public food distribution system - though recent refugees interviewed for the ICG report confirmed the system's inability to provide most of the population with any rations.

The refugees also told the ICG that, after a succession of relatively good years, last northern winter was the worst since the mid-1990s, when somewhere between one million and two million people perished. The North Korean population is now estimated at 23.1 million.

For security and presentational reasons, the regime tries to keep residents of Pyongyang comparatively well-fed. But accounts from refugees indicate that by March food shortages had begun affecting the capital.

At the best of times, North Korea falls about a million tonnes short of the estimated one

million tonnes of grain needed to feed its people. An estimated 40 per cent of children under six years are chronically malnourished.

But this northern winter's looming shortages have been worsened by July floods estimated by the World Food Program to have ruined 90,000 tonnes of cereals, damaged large areas of farmland and made homeless some 50,000 people.

Sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council after October 9 exclude food and other material aid to the North's population, but Mr Viti confirmed this week that the outside world was increasingly reluctant to fund relief programs. "The (July 5) missile tests had a negative impact on the food situation since they caused various contributors of humanitarian aid to discontinue, while the nuclear test caused further insecurity in the region and beyond," he said.

The ICG report notes that South Korea has discontinued regular aid shipments. Chinese aid is down 60 per cent this year.

"With food shortages threatening to return to famine levels, migrating to different cities or to China will be one of the coping strategies used by hungry North Koreans with the means to undertake such journeys," the report says. "The international community, especially South Korea, the US and the EU, should quietly engage with China now, to help it protect those who make it across the border."

The ICG, headed by former Australian foreign minister Gareth Evans, calls for China to stop forcing North Korean refugees and other "border-crossers" back into the hands of Kim Jong-il's regime, where they face execution, torture or imprisonment.

It also urges the US, Japan and European Union countries to broaden and streamline their own asylum processes and to pressure

China and Southeast Asian nations that unwillingly receive Korean refugees to stop sending them back.

Thai police yesterday disclosed they had arrested 91 North Korean illegal entrants, following the detention of 175 people in Bangkok in August. This trend is worrying to refugee organisations because until now Thailand has been the safest Asian haven outside South Korea for people fleeing the North.

Chinese authorities are now deporting between

150 and 300 North Koreans a week.

For a related article see Sheila Jager, Time to End the Korean War: The Korean Nuclear Crisis in the Era of Unification

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