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## Participants in the World Food Program

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### ABSTRACT

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) or North Korea has been experiencing an ongoing food crisis for more than a decade. A famine in the late 1990s resulted in the deaths of perhaps 600,000 to 1 million people out of a pre-famine population of roughly 22 million. <sup>1</sup> Since then, a combination of humanitarian food aid and development assistance has ameliorated the situation somewhat, but according to the World Food Programme (WFP) and other observers, as of this writing the country is once again on the precipice of another famine. By standard statistical measures, North Korea is the world's most militarized society, and domestic propaganda incessantly proclaims the virtues of "military-first" politics.<sup>2</sup> If comparable statistical measures were available for politicization, North Korea might rank first on this criterion too. Internally, all aspects of society are suffused with politics, and externally, politics thoroughly permeates not only the country's diplomatic relationships but also its economic relations. Given the regime's extreme preference for guns over butter, the North Korean economy does not produce enough output to sustain the population biologically, and population maintenance is increasingly aid-dependent. Yet the October 2002 revelation of a nuclear weapons program based on highly enriched uranium (in addition to a plutonium-based program acknowledged a decade earlier), undertaken in contravention of several international agreements, and North Korea's subsequent withdrawal from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty have put continued international assistance in doubt. The situation is further complicated by internal economic policy changes initiated in mid- 2002. These reforms included marketization of the economy, a large increase in the overall price level, the promotion of special economic zones, and a diplomatic opening to Japan intended to secure the provision of billions of dollars in postcolonial claims. These initiatives could be expected to impact the availability of food on both the supply and demand sides.

**Keywords:** Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK); World Food Program

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Food crises trigger obligations not only on the part of the country experiencing them, but for the international community as well. The bulk of total aid provided to North Korea has come through the WFP, with the United States, the European Union, and Japan all playing significant roles at various times. A crucial first question is whether the international community should provide aid to North Korea at all. A variety of critics—not only in the United States but in Europe and South Korea as well—have argued that aid to North Korea only serves to prop up the current regime. Food insecurity is likely to remain a problem as long as this regime holds power. Some, therefore, conclude that the ultimate aim of the external community should be regime change in North Korea.

Moreover, it has been suggested that the goal of policy reform would be advanced by coordinated action to cut North Korea off from the international economy and even from external supplies of food. A reformist government would be desirable. But there are a number of flaws in jumping from this conclusion to prescriptions for how humanitarian assistance should be managed.



**Photo 1.** Feeding children has become harder for impoverished families, some of whom can no longer afford to provide a decent meal for them “We can no longer manage to offer our five children even a single decent meal. Prices are too high, I was recently laid off from my factory and now do only odd jobs, earning around Rs. 6,000 [US\$70] a month. Almost the entire amount goes on buying food,”

Fareed Ahmed, a textile factory worker, told IRIN.

First, the North Korean government has repeatedly shown its ability to impose extreme deprivation on its people. If the current regime was capable of surviving a devastating famine, it is highly dubious to assume that coordinated, wholesale reductions in food aid will necessarily lead to improved conditions or policy reform. In any case, there is little evidence that such coordination is possible given the competing political interests of the donor countries.

Moreover, this argument rests on a questionable utilitarian logic: that it is morally acceptable to sacrifice the innocent today in the uncertain prospect that lives will be saved or improved at some future point. This type of argument flies directly in the face of the fundamental rights that the international community is trying to uphold. While it is courageous for some to choose to make such a sacrifice for themselves, it is unacceptable for the outside community to choose it for the North Koreans. It is important to point out that those NGOs who did pull out of North Korea did so in the context of the WFP, bilateral donors, and other NGOs continuing to provide food and services.

The calculus is very different when considering whether total food aid should be reduced or cut altogether. It is also important to underscore that the humanitarian effort, however impeded, has almost certainly had positive effects on meeting the needs of vulnerable groups. Moreover, in the presence of functioning markets and diversion to undeserving groups or the market, food aid can still have beneficial effects for vulnerable populations by increasing overall supply and moderating prices. And markets are indeed developing: most local food production now finds its way onto the market, and the PDS exists largely as a mechanism for distributing foreign aid. The sheer volume of aid that has been poured into the country and the apparent improvement in conditions since the peak famine years seem to suggest that aid has indeed had some beneficial effects through one or both of these channels. Yet the North Korean government has imposed severe restrictions on attempts to conduct rigorous analyses of nutritional status.

Nutritional status remains at levels found only in the very poorest of countries. This does not mean that delivered aid is ineffective; it only demonstrates the uphill battle the humanitarian community must fight in a context where other features of the system make it difficult to be as effective as it otherwise could be. Just as the closed nature of the North Korean system inhibits effective program design, implementation, and monitoring, it prevents effective evaluation as well. There is much that remains hidden.

The arguments in favor of assistance seem clear, but one must simultaneously be clear-headed about the nature of the bargains that have been struck. It is likely that aid is not proffered in a non-discriminatory manner. Given the political stratification of North Korea and the inability of the WFP to achieve minimum standards of transparency and monitoring in its operations, deserving households—including politically disfavored households—are not getting the food intended for them or are being denied relief altogether. Recent refugee interviews confirm this point (Chang, forthcoming).

Furthermore, diversion is almost certainly occurring, and its scale is not small. If the off-the-record estimates of humanitarian assistance workers are to be believed, perhaps enough food to feed 3 to 10 percent of the North Korean populace is diverted. Some of this aid is almost surely consumed by the less deserving. The diversion that does go to the market is contributing to the creation of a privileged class of state-sector entrepreneurs and their allies. North Korea is becoming an increasingly stratified society, with a sharp division between those with access to foreign exchange and food and those without.



**Photo 2.** Kurram Agency is one of the seven tribal agencies on the Pakistan-Afghan border. The ongoing violence has resulted in hundreds of deaths and large-scale displacements from Kurram.

In the end, however, regardless of technical improvements of the aid program, the international community must make a concerted and coordinated effort to wean North Korea from humanitarian assistance. This would involve outlining and negotiating a path of reduced humanitarian assistance over time, subject to reversal in the face of natural disasters. One of the most disturbing findings is the evidence that North Korea seems unwilling to purchase grain. This practice cannot continue.

The burden of financing North Korea's food deficit should be shifted from the international humanitarian community—which is facing pressing needs elsewhere—onto the North Koreans themselves. Resources are not limitless, and there are other competing needs around the world. In the absence of significant changes in North Korean government policy, scarce resources may be better deployed elsewhere.

**Bilateral Donors Outside of the WFP: China and South Korea** Two countries, China and South Korea, provide concessional sales or grants of food to North Korea outside of the WFP. It is not evident that China has conditioned aid either on overall policy reform or more particular principles of programmatic design, implementation, or monitoring.

In the case of South Korea, concessional food assistance has been provided without any attempt to assess conditions or target vulnerable groups, and with only perfunctory attempts to monitor its distribution. In this regard the practices of the South Korean government have been most disappointing. Large, relatively open-ended aid commitments—amounting to nearly 90 percent of total WFP appeals—are having the unintended consequence of undermining the WFP’s attempts to uphold the norms embodied in international agreements to which South Korea is a party. Special circumstances bind the South and North Korean people together.

However, if China and South Korea assume the role of suppliers of last resort, North Korea will be able to avoid greater accountability. ■ China and South Korea should channel future concessional food assistance through the WFP. Their experience and voice would be of invaluable assistance to WFP operations—both generally and in North Korea—and would facilitate the coordinated approach needed to reduce North Korea’s dependence on humanitarian assistance.



**Photo 3.** Students get a hot lunch at a school in Beri, India. Photo: Ben Arnoldy/Christian Science Monitor.

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Moreover, it has been suggested that the goal of policy reform would be advanced by coordinated action to cut North Korea off from the international economy and even from external supplies of food. A reformist government would be desirable. But there are a number of flaws in jumping from this conclusion to prescriptions for how humanitarian assistance should be managed.

First, the North Korean government has repeatedly shown its ability to impose extreme deprivation on its people. If the current regime was capable of surviving a devastating famine, it is highly dubious to assume that coordinated, wholesale reductions in food aid will necessarily lead to improved conditions or policy reform. In any case, there is little evidence that such coordination is possible given the competing political interests of the donor countries.



**Photo 4.** Farmers plant onions in Jalgaon, India. The lack of basic farm equipment and infrastructure has held back production, even as the demand for food has risen greatly. Photo: Kuni Takahashi/New York Times

Moreover, this argument rests on a questionable utilitarian logic: that it is morally acceptable to sacrifice the innocent today in the uncertain prospect that lives will be saved or improved at some future point. This type of argument flies directly in the face of the fundamental rights that the international community is trying to uphold. While it is courageous for some to choose to make such a sacrifice for themselves, it is unacceptable for the outside community to choose it for the North Koreans. It is important to point out that those NGOs who did pull out of North Korea did so in the context of the WFP, bilateral donors, and other NGOs continuing to provide food and services.

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**Photo 5.** Garbage floating on stagnant water, a situation that promotes disease. A new government study indicates that the water was unsafe to drink in 82 percent of water sources tested in districts across all four of Pakistan's provinces.

The sheer volume of aid that has been poured into the country and the apparent improvement in conditions since the peak famine years seem to suggest that aid has indeed had some beneficial effects through one or both of these channels. Yet the North Korean government has imposed severe restrictions on attempts to conduct rigorous analyses of nutritional status. Nutritional status remains at levels found only in the very poorest of countries.

This does not mean that delivered aid is ineffective; it only demonstrates the uphill battle the humanitarian community must fight in a context where other features of the system make it difficult to be as effective as it otherwise could be. Just as the closed nature of the North Korean system inhibits effective program design, implementation, and monitoring, it prevents effective evaluation as well. There is much that remains hidden. The arguments in favor of assistance seem clear, but one must simultaneously be clear-headed about the nature of the bargains that have been struck. It is likely that aid is not proffered in a non-discriminatory manner. Given the political stratification of North Korea and the inability of the WFP to achieve minimum standards of transparency and monitoring in its operations, deserving households—including politically disfavored households—are not getting the food intended for them or are being denied relief altogether.

Recent refugee interviews confirm this point (Chang, forthcoming). Furthermore, diversion is almost certainly occurring, and its scale is not small. If the off-the-record estimates of humanitarian assistance workers are to be believed, perhaps enough food to feed 3 to 10 percent of the North Korean populace is diverted. Some of this aid is almost surely consumed by the less deserving. The diversion that does go to the market is contributing to the creation of a privileged class of state-sector entrepreneurs and their allies. North Korea is becoming an increasingly stratified society, with a sharp division between those with access to foreign exchange and food and those without. The administrators of the international aid program have worked in extremely difficult circumstances, even heroically, to assist the people of North Korea. Yet it is critical that within these constraints, the WFP continue to be not only the humanitarian face of the international community but a voice of conscience for those deprived of the most fundamental right to food.

The WFP and its associated donors must:

- Continue to highlight government practices that impede the delivery of food to vulnerable groups;
- Continue to uphold the humanitarian principles outlined above;
- Continue to abide by the principle that aid will not be extended to counties where access is denied;
- Explore technical solutions to improve the quality of monitoring, such as the introduction of modern inventory-management systems that can reduce the scope for diversion and assure donors that their contributions were used as intended.

In the end, however, regardless of technical improvements of the aid program, the international community must make a concerted and coordinated effort to wean North Korea from humanitarian assistance. This would involve outlining and negotiating a path of reduced humanitarian assistance over time, subject to reversal in the face of natural disasters.

One of the most disturbing findings is the evidence that North Korea seems unwilling to purchase grain. This practice cannot continue. The burden of financing North Korea's food

deficit should be shifted from the international humanitarian community—which is facing pressing needs elsewhere—onto the North Koreans themselves. Resources are not limitless, and there are other competing needs around the world. In the absence of significant changes in North Korean government policy, scarce resources may be better deployed elsewhere.

## **2. PERCENTAGE OF THE POPULATION IN A CONDITION OF UNDERNOURISHMENT**

**1990-1992** - 27.7% of Africa, 15.3% of Latin American and the Caribbean, 23.7% of Asia, 15.7% of Oceania

**2000-2002** - 25.2% of Africa, 11.5% of Latin American and the Caribbean, 17.6% of Asia, 16.5% of Oceania

**2005-2007** - 22.6% of Africa, 8.7% of Latin American and the Caribbean, 17.4% of Asia, 15.4% of Oceania

**2008-2010** - 20.9% of Africa, 7.0% of Latin American and the Caribbean, 14.1% of Asia, 13.5% of Oceania

**2012-2014 projections** - 20.5% of Africa, 6.1% of Latin American and the Caribbean, 12.7% of Asia, 14.0% of Oceania

### **Timeline of Significant Famines (1900-present):**

**1921-1922** - Famine in the Soviet Union, results in nine million deaths.

**1927** - In China (northwest), three to six million perish.

**1929** - Famine in China (Hunan Province), results in two million deaths.

**1932-1933** - In the Soviet Union (Ukraine), seven to eight million people die.

**1943** - Famine in China (Henan), results in three to five million deaths.

**1943** - In India (Bengal), 2.1-3 million perish.

**1946-1947** - In the Soviet Union, two million people die.

**1959-1961** - Famine in China results in 15-30 million deaths.

**1974** - In Bangladesh, 1.5 million perish.

**1975-1979** - Famine in Cambodia results in 1.5-2 million deaths.

**1984-1985** - Ethiopian famine, affects more than eight million people and results in approximately one million deaths.

**1991-1993** - Somalia famine, after the government's fall and civil war, affects more than three million people.

**1995-1999** - North Korean famine results in an estimated 2.5 million deaths.

**1998-2011** - Sudan/Darfur/South Sudan famine brought on by an ongoing civil war, drought and disease. More than two million people are affected.

**2008** - The United Nations officially declares famine for the first time. In two areas of southern Somalia, famine caused by drought, theft of food shipments by rebels, civil war, and an influx of refugees in other war torn nations is declared; 3.7 million people are affected.

**July 20, 2011** - The United Nations declares a famine in parts of southern Somalia.

**September 5, 2011** - The United Nations announces that famine has spread to the sixth area in Somalia and about 750,000 people are in danger of imminent starvation.

**May 2, 2013** - The United Nations announces that 260,000 people in Somalia died from the famine between October 2010 *and* April 2012. A top U.N. humanitarian official says the international community did not take action fast enough.

### **3. CONCLUSIONS**

For four decades after the end of the Korean War in 1953, U.S. strategy toward the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, commonly referred to as North Korea) was relatively simple: deter an attack on South Korea. This included a freeze on virtually all forms of economic contact between the United States and North Korea in an attempt to weaken and delegitimize the North Korean government. In the 1990s, two developments led the United States to rethink its relationship with the DPRK: North Korea's progress in its nuclear weapons and missile programs and the onset of massive, chronic food shortages there. In response, the United States in 1995 began providing the DPRK with foreign assistance, which to date has totaled over \$1.2 billion. This aid has consisted of energy assistance, food aid, and a small amount of medical supplies. The United States has provided virtually no assistance since early 2009, though episodically there have been discussions about resuming large-scale food aid. Additionally, the Obama Administration, like the George W. Bush Administration, has said that it would be willing to provide "significant" energy and economic assistance to North Korea if Pyongyang takes steps to irreversibly dismantle its nuclear program.<sup>1</sup> However, due to the deterioration in U.S.-North Korea relations, at the time of this writing there is little likelihood the Obama Administration will provide assistance to North Korea in the near future.

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