

As the US maintains economic blockade

A human catastrophe unfolds in North Korea

Peter Symonds
7 April 1999

While the international media, for definite political ends, is highlighting the plight of refugees in Kosovo, little or no attention has been focussed on humanitarian disasters elsewhere in the world, particularly North Korea, where US policies, including an economic blockade, are contributing directly to the severe food shortages, widespread malnutrition and starvation for the fourth year in a row.

The UN World Food Program co-ordinator for North Korea David Morton warned last week: "We are now entering the most difficult months of the year." Government stocks of basic grains are likely to be exhausted within the next two months and will not be replenished until the next summer crop is harvested. "In May and June, people in North Korea will be having to survive on whatever coping mechanisms they have," he said.

Much of the population of about 21 million will have to depend on substitute foods--cakes or noodles made from corn stalks, cabbage stalks, or grass ground with grain--or on foraging wild roots and grasses. Some aid is being channelled through the UN World Food Program to provide food for the most needy--young children in nursery schools and kindergartens, pregnant and nursing mothers and the elderly. "We're keeping alive a generation of children. But this is only a holding action," Morton said.

Up to two million people have died since 1995 directly as a result of the ongoing famine, according to various estimates. Last year the US Bureau of the Census suggested a figure of more than one million while the South Korean intelligence agency puts the death toll higher--at 500,000 a year for the last four years. The North Korean regime has repeatedly denied that famine has caused such a large number of deaths but has provided no official statistics of its own.

Aid workers, visiting politicians and North Korean refugees fleeing across the border into China have all given harrowing accounts of the disaster. An estimated 100,000 North Koreans are living in hiding in China, many relying on the help of ethnic Koreans living in the border area. According to aid workers, some North Korean women are sold to bride traders or end up as prostitutes. Fearing that the refugees will compound China's own social crisis, Beijing has been attempting to halt the exodus by imposing substantial penalties of \$US600 for harbouring North Koreans.

An Associated Press report last week contained an account of a former soldier who had slipped into China and planned to earn money, food and medicine to take back to his family. He explained that his wife was sick following an abortion, his 11-year-old son had a festering wound on his foot, and his six-year-old son had haemorrhaged after eating buns made from ground-up tree bark. "I can't eat. Whenever I look at food, I immediately see my children crying, dying before my eyes. It's not just my kids. Everyone's children are starving to death, freezing to death," he said.

North Korea is facing shortages not only of food but supplies of basic medicines, electricity and fuel as well as spare parts and machinery for the country's aging industrial and transport infrastructure. As many as two

million children under the age of five have not been immunised due to the closure of factories producing the necessary vaccines. US Congressman Tony Hall, who toured North Korea last year and visited four hospitals, described a patient being held down by assistants, while surgeons conducted a stomach operation without electric lights or anaesthesia.

Two UN reports published last November paint a picture of a country undergoing economic and social collapse. A nutritional study of North Korea by the World Food Program (WFP), UNICEF and the European Union found an acute malnutrition rate, or wasting, of 16 percent--a figure higher than any country in East Asia including Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. The highest rate of 30 percent was found in the age range from 12 to 24 months when lack of proper nutrients can permanently impair physical and intellectual growth.

Chronic malnutrition or stunting affected about 62 percent of the children surveyed. "This is indicative of the longer term effects of lack of nutritious food. In the case of North Korea, obviously this means that these children have been suffering from inadequate food intake for several years," the WFP noted. The survey also found that impact of inadequate food was further complicated by contaminated water supplies and the spread of diseases such as diarrhea, lung infections and impaired immune systems.

The crisis could have been far worse. "In spite of the fact that malnutrition rates were found to be so high, we have reason to believe that without food aid the situation would have been catastrophic. A wide variety of observers, WFP food monitors, NGO staff resident in the country, visitors--have all remarked that the state of children in nurseries, kindergartens etc have improved over the last year," the report commented.

A second report by the WFP and FAO assessed the food supply in North Korea last year and warned of chronic food shortages this year. While the estimated cereal production in 1998 of 3.48 million tonnes was a substantial improvement over the severely reduced crop of 2.66 million tonnes in 1997, the survey indicated that North Korea would still need more than one million tonnes in food assistance in the year 1998/99. As of last November, only 360,000 tonnes of food aid had been pledged.

North Korea has been hit by a series of natural disasters--in 1995 and 1996, by widespread flooding and in 1997, by tidal waves and the most severe drought in decades. Although the weather returned to normal last year in most areas, there was localised flooding damaging a crop area of about 30,000 hectares on the East Coast.

But as the WFP/FAO report makes clear these catastrophes have been significantly worsened by the country's economic crisis. Following the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, North Korea's markets and access to supplies of machinery, spare parts and raw materials such as oil have all but dried up. According to one estimate, per capita Gross Domestic Product plummeted from \$1,000 to \$500 between 1991 and 1996.

In the past, North Korea had a comparatively high level of

industrialisation, which had augmented agricultural production through the use of irrigation, artificial fertilisers and pesticides, electrification and mechanisation. Only 30 percent of the population was engaged in agriculture. Now with the breakdown of industry, the country is reverting to primitive methods of production. According to South Korean intelligence reports, the Pyongyang regime is sending up to two million people from the cities, where many factories are idle, back to the countryside to provide manual labour.

The WFP/FAO report detailed the impact of the economic decline on agricultural production:

- "The total capacity of the three fertiliser factories that DPR Korea has is over 400,000 tonnes of nitrogen nutrient, enough for self-sufficiency. But the operation of these factories is seriously constrained by plant obsolescence, poor maintenance, shortage of spare parts and shortages of raw materials, principally petroleum... In terms of nutrient content, the availability in 1998 was only about 18 percent of the 1989 level.

Â

• "Energy is a critical factor in the country's irrigation system. Water has to be pumped into the main canals and reservoirs. But the availability of fuel has been declining. Moreover, the conditions of canals and pumping stations have been deteriorating because of natural calamities, while the pumping stations and the feeding steel pipes have suffered from a lack of spare parts and poor maintenance. The Mission found that water pumping hours, and hence, the supply of irrigation water to crop fields have seriously declined.

Â

- "The highly mechanised DPR Korea agriculture faces a serious constraint as about four-fifths of the motorised farm machinery and equipment is out of use due to obsolescence and lack of spare parts and fuel. During field visits, the Mission saw a large proportion of tractors, transplanters, trucks and other farm machinery lying unused and unusable. In fact, because of non-availability of trucks, harvested paddy [rice] has been seen left on the fields in piles for long periods--three weeks or more--resulting in large post-harvest losses."

The breakdown of machinery has meant that work animals, which are also in short supply, and human labour are being used as substitutes. Last year fuel was so scarce that 90 percent of the country's rice fields were not ploughed after the summer harvest--a common practice used to suppress weeds and pests. Artificial pesticides are also scarce.

The worsening economic disaster in North Korea has been deliberately exacerbated by the US administration as a means of undermining the Stalinist regime in Pyongyang. In ruling circles in Washington, a debate has been developing over the last decade as to the best means for exploiting the unfolding human disaster in North Korea to further US interests in what is a key strategic region, adjacent to Russia, China and Japan.

A report by former Assistant Secretary of Defence Richard Armitage tabled in the US Congress last month provides a flavour of the debate taking place. Armitage is critical of the approach of the Clinton administration, which has been to maintain economic and political pressure on North Korea to force a "soft landing"--the opening up of the country to market reforms and the dismantling of its military capabilities--while at the same time avoiding a "hard-landing"--an economic collapse and military aggression.

At the centre of the criticisms by Armitage and Congressional Republicans is the deal struck in 1994 between the US and North Korea, after a series of highly provocative US demands for the opening up the North Korea's nuclear reactors to inspections. Under the agreement, Pyongyang shut down its existing nuclear program in return for limited aid and assistance in building new replacement light water reactors, which have little potential for producing weapons-grade nuclear fuel.

While repeatedly denying that it is using economic aid as a form of

blackmail to compel the North Korean regime to make concessions over its nuclear and missile programs, the Clinton administration maintains the economic blockade against North Korea and any increases in food assistance are closely coordinated with its negotiations with Pyongyang. The latest increase in US food aid in March came only weeks after Pyongyang agreed to allow inspections of an underground North Korean construction site, which the US claimed would be used to restart a nuclear weapons program.

Clinton's critics are demanding even tougher economic and military measures against North Korea. Last year Congressional Republicans threatened to block money for even the limited fuel supplies provided by the US under the 1994 agreement. They have attempted to justify their threat by insisting that any aid, including food, would be diverted to the North Korean military. But as WFG official David Morton explained, UN monitors are able to visit all regions where aid is given to check if schools and hospitals have received their allotments. "We believe from what we see, that they are getting the food," he said.

The Armitage report derided the Clinton administration's approach, commenting: "There are also no signs that the regime is contemplating any radical market-oriented reforms. Instead, forced by necessity, it is experimenting at the margins with modest reform to alleviate food shortages at the local level and gain hard currency. With Chinese aid and a variety of hard currency schemes--missile exports, counterfeiting, narcotic trafficking, selling overflight rights--the regime has been able to keep urban areas minimally functioning. By all appearances, the regime may be able to stagger on indefinitely."

While not explicitly stated, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that the report advocates a policy aimed at further heightening the economic and political crisis of the Pyongyang regime. Armitage calls for a series of provocative military measures to strengthen the US military forces in South Korea, to deploy anti-missile batteries in the region, and to deliver an ultimatum outlining the US military response to "unacceptable behaviour" by North Korea. The report ties the continued provision of limited food and medical aid to steps by North Korea "to open its economy to market forces".

It is clear that a vast human tragedy has already taken place in North Korea and is certain to continue as the US maintains its siege of the country.

US, Japan turn up the pressure on Pyongyang regime

An explosive situation on the Korean peninsula

[1 April 1999]



To contact the WWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact