# Typhoon compounds North Korean food shortages

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The typhoon that struck the Korean peninsula earlier this month has compounded chronic food shortages in North Korea, which has been afflicted by widespread famine over the last five years. The rain broke the drought, which was affecting this year's harvest, but only created new problems. Even before the full force of the typhoon hit the country, torrential rains left more than 40,000 hectares of farmland submerged. The typhoon itself killed 42 people and left nearly 40,000 homeless.

The Korean Central News Agency reported that thousands of hectares of arable land had been swept away or buried under silt. Thousands of houses and other buildings were badly damaged, as were more than 5,000 stretches of road and over 1,000 bridges.

Prior to the typhoon, crops were being devastated because of record temperatures and extremely low rainfall especially in agricultural areas. Rainfall had been a quarter of expected levels and the new season's crops were withering.

These weather conditions have created havoc for aid agencies trying to reestablish the crops after five years of floods and droughts. World Food Program (WFP) head Catherine Bertini said last week the situation had improved in North Korea as compared to two years ago, but warned that the country was still heavily dependent on outside assistance for food.

According to estimates, the country is producing about 1 million tonnes of food less than it requires to feed its population. The shortfall is being made up by food aid from China, South Korea, private food agencies such as the Red Cross, and the World Food Program that draws on the US.

"If the United States stopped aid it would be devastating to our program," Bertini said. "It would literally mean more children would starve to death, more children would be stunted. It would have a devastating impact on the health and life of people in North Korea."

According to a report by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) published in June, funding shortfalls meant that only 16.1 percent of aid programs were being met. The Public Distribution System had been closed since April because it had run out of food, and much of the population of were not receiving regular allocations of food from last year's harvest.

WPF staff found that 83 percent of people in urban and industrial sectors had been almost entirely reliant of "alternative foods," usually of very poor quality, since April. These included cakes or noodles made from cabbage stalks, cornstalks and grasses or seaweed, ground up with cereal. The substitutes have almost no nutritional value and act simply as a "stomach filler". Fed especially to the elderly and the very young, they are causing major digestive problems.

Red Cross representative Jon Valfells commented that because many people remained in their homes, the famine's effects were not highly visible. "The striking thing about this famine is that it's not occurring in the way that African famines unfold. People tend to be ashamed of being hungry and are staying at home. You don't have large-scale population movements between different parts of the country. People stay in their own province or locale. They hope for the best. They try to get food and if they don't succeed they quite simply starve at home."

But the statistics on the levels of malnutrition are staggering. Institutionalised children, who depend on "alternative foods," are at most risk, with 82 percent suffering symptoms of malnutrition, as compared to 62 percent for children in the general population. Every

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age group is suffering from malnutrition although the statistics for children are more widely available and publicised.

The continuing famine is the product of a number of related factors.

The country has faced an economic crisis since the beginning of the decade following the collapse of the former Soviet Union. The North Korean economy, which was reliant on the USSR for economic and technological assistance as well as markets, has contracted dramatically. According to South Korean President Kim Dae Jung, between 80 and 90 percent of factories are idle, due to fuel shortages and the lack of spare parts and other materials.

The economic collapse has compounded the impact of a series of natural disasters. In 1995 and 1996, flooding destroyed crops and farmland, as well as homes, coal mines and other infrastructure. In 1997 the country was devastated by a typhoon that left hundreds of thousands more homeless, followed by a drought.

The country is now dependent on international aid to feed its people. But food, like other forms of economic assistance, is being used by the US, Japan and other countries as a political tool to pressure the North Korean regime to make concessions in other areas—particularly in the dismantling of their weapons programs.

While the US administration routinely denies using food aid as a means of blackmail, it continues to maintain an economic blockade of the country thus exacerbating North Korea's economic crisis and its capacity to use tractors and irrigation equipment, and produce fertilisers and pesticides. Japan has refused to supply food aid since North Korea's test firing of a ballistic missile last August.

Earlier in the year, right-wing US Republicans threatened to cut off limited oil supplies unless Pyongyang agreed to open an underground excavation for inspection. On its web site under the sub-heading “Famine as a Cold War weapon,” World Vision notes: “Many critics, in the US and elsewhere, say that providing too much aid will merely prolong and stabilise the regime." With speculation rife about another missile test by North Korea, calls are being made in the US Congress and press to cut off all aid.

Already five years of food shortages have taken a terrible toll, with estimates that as many as two million may have died. Earlier this year, the North Korean regime published its own figures for the first time indicating that the number of deaths had increased by 37 percent between 1995 and 1998—or 220,000 extra deaths as a result of the famine. An end to food aid would have catastrophic consequences.

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