

Food shortages leave millions of North Koreans facing starvation

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While US officials from Bush down regularly accuse the North Korean dictatorship of “starving its people”, the protracted food shortages in the country are being aggravated by Washington and other powers and are being exploited to further their political ends on the Korean peninsula.

In June, Washington offered North Korea 50,000 tonnes of food aid. US officials denied the donation was conditional on Pyongyang agreeing to restart the six-party negotiations between the US, North Korea, South Korea, Japan, Russia and China, which are aimed at forcing Pyongyang to shut down its nuclear programs. There is little doubt, however, that one factor in the North Korean regime bowing to the demand for talks was to obtain the food assistance.

North Korea once again faces famine. Since the beginning of the year, food shortages, caused in large part by the curtailment of US and Japanese food donations since 2002, have led to the steady reduction in the government-subsidised rations that most of the population depends upon. In January, the state-run government Public Distribution System (PDS) slashed the subsidised ration of cereals that it provides urban households from 300 grams per day to 250 grams—less than 40 percent of the internationally recommended minimum daily intake.

Millions of North Koreans who cannot either grow or afford to buy sufficient additional food are totally dependent upon supplementary assistance given by the UN’s World Food Program (WFP) to avoid starvation. At present, the WFP seeks to provide food for 6.5 million people out of the population of 23 million. The WFP had appealed for donations of 504,000 tonnes of food aid during 2005. Before the US offer in June though, just 240,000 tons had been donated—the bulk of which had already been distributed and consumed.

By early August, the situation had become dire. Speaking in South Korea on August 9, James T. Morris, the WFP executive director, told journalists: “We have a crisis in front of us that requires the international community to respond and provide resources.”

The WFP reported it was unable to provide extra rations of cereals to nearly one million North Koreans, mostly elderly people and poor urban families. If no new pledges of food come in, this figure will rise to 1.3 million in September, 2.9 million in October and 3.2 million in November.

Stocks of more nourishing food types are severely depleted. At least 1.8 million nursery and kindergarten children, orphans and women of child-bearing age who are entitled to a WFP ration of pulses no longer have this vital source of protein because of the lack of stocks. Over 2.7 million children, women and elderly are no longer receiving a ration of enriched vegetable oil—a vital source of fats essential for physical and mental health.

A large-scale random sample conducted by WFP, UNICEF and the North Korean government last October found that the rate of chronic malnutrition among young children had declined to 37 percent, down from 42 percent in 2002 and 62 percent in 1998. Children suffering from acute malnutrition comprise 7 percent of the population, while 35 percent of all women are malnourished and 32 percent are anaemic.

The slight improvement compared with previous years is being quickly reversed. The urban population is the most vulnerable. Their rations from the PDS are less than those received by people living on cooperative farms and they have no land to grow gardens or keep livestock. They also have far less opportunities to gather wild foods.

Gerald Brooks, the WFP's North Korea spokesman, described the desperate measures that people are taking: "What you see is people walking up into the hills with sacks and coming down with grasses, nuts and roots. They mix it with maize husks to make a kind of porridge. It fills them up, but does terrible things to their digestive systems, especially to the young and the elderly."

A range of free market economic policies being introduced by the North Korean regime have made the situation far worse. Farmers are now able to sell part of their production on the open market. Prices for cereals tripled in 2004 due to excess demand, while wages have barely moved.

The ration cutbacks and the deterioration of purchasing power has left 70 percent of households who depend on the PDS as their main source of nourishment spending two-thirds of their income on extra food and still not able to cover their basic energy requirements. The group perhaps most at risk of malnutrition are families of the large numbers of workers who unemployed or underemployed. Figures gathered by WFP indicate that 40 percent of factories are no longer functioning and another 30 percent are operating below capacity.

In the aftermath of the six-party talks, the South Korean government pledged bilateral assistance to North Korea of 500,000 tonnes of rice and 350,000 tonnes of fertiliser. If it arrives in time, this food should be enough to prevent large numbers of deaths this year, but it will not address the disastrous conditions that exist for the North Korean masses.

The crisis in North Korea is the product of well over a decade of economic decline. Following the end of the Korean War in 1953, the Soviet Union functioned as the Pyongyang Stalinist regime's sponsor, supplying technological assistance, cheap supplies of fuel and markets. After 1991 and the dissolution of the USSR, the aid and subsidies were cut off. The North's highly mechanised agriculture was plunged into crisis by shortages of fuel, fertiliser and spare parts. Whole sectors of industry also collapsed. North Korea's energy output, for example, is estimated to have halved since 1990.

From 1995 on, the country was struck in succession by severe hailstorms, major floods, a drought and then a typhoon, which devastated farming production for

well over four years. As many as two million people, or close to 10 percent of the population, are estimated to have starved to death.

For all the empty declarations of concern from Washington, the attitude of the American ruling elite towards the North Korean population since the early 1990s has been to use the steadily escalating catastrophe to work toward "regime-change". The Bush administration is making accusations that Pyongyang is attempting to construct nuclear devices in order to justify an ongoing economic blockade and military threats. The long-term US ambition is the establishment of a client state in North Korea, as part of a broader agenda of maintaining US hegemony in north-east Asia.

One calculation in Washington is that, at a certain point, the Pyongyang regime will collapse politically due to the economic and social crisis, opening the way for a US-led intervention. Meanwhile, millions of North Koreans hover on the verge of starvation.



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