

# Famine threatening millions in North Korea

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News has emerged in recent months indicating that one quarter of the North Korean population is in need of food aid, in a country which two decades ago suffered a famine that wiped out hundreds of thousands, if not millions.

Despite repeated appeals by the Pyongyang regime and warnings by the World Food Program in March that six million people were threatened with malnutrition, only a fraction of the United Nations' food target for the country has been met.

While the details of the food crisis are lacking, partly due to the near complete absence of international media access in North Korea, there are signs of a deepening humanitarian crisis.

Between one half and two thirds of the population depends on the state-run food distribution system to survive. In the past year, the government has cut rations from 700 grams of cereal per person per day, to 200 grams, significantly below the government's own minimum requirement of 573.

In the past, most North Korean workers and peasants could depend on "black markets" for food, rather than the dysfunctional state system. Analysts fear, however, that the "currency reform" of 2009—which replaced old currency notes with new ones at a ratio of 100 to 1 and wiped out much of the limited savings of the population—could have exhausted the ability of many people to purchase food.

Five US aid groups were permitted to visit the country in March. Kenneth Isaacs from the Samaritan's Purse told the *Voice of America*: "The spread of the severe acute malnutrition, and the rapidity of it, has caused great alarm ... And we feel that if there is not an intervention in the next six to nine months we will see numerous deaths."

In June, Valerie Amos, head of the UN office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, told AFP: "We're facing a situation where about six million people are in danger of not getting enough to eat. People are only getting

about 25 percent of the rations that we think are necessary for survival."

The food crisis has been exacerbated by a harsh winter followed by flooding between July and August. A Reuters Alertnet team that was allowed a week-long trip in September to the South Hwanghae region, which provides one third of the country's cereal supply, reported widespread damage due to flooding.

In Haeju, 40 percent of the city's 27,000 people were still without water due to damage to the water mains, forcing residents to trek four kilometres for supplies. The rains had also washed away a medical clinic, which served nearly 5,000 people. The clinic's doctor reported: "The water supply is heavily contaminated—wells are polluted. So people are suffering diarrhea and digestive disorders. Also, it's getting colder, so people are getting pneumonia and bronchitis."

The team visited orphanages in North and South Hwanghae. In one orphanage, arm measurements of muscle wastage registered in the orange or red danger zones for 12 out of 28 children, "meaning some could die without proper treatment." At another facility, 11 out of 12 orphans were critically malnourished. The facilities had no oil, sugar or protein to provide proper nutrition.

According to the UN, one third of children under five in North Korea suffer malnutrition, with child stunting rates as high as 40 percent in rural areas. Delphine Chedorge of MSF France commented: "I've never seen stunting like this before—not even in Ethiopia." The average life expectancy in North Korea is 11 years less than in South Korea.

In January, the government appealed for international food assistance and allowed a UN delegation to investigate the extent of the crisis. The UN appealed in March for 430,000-tonnes of cereal donations to help women, children and the elderly. Only 30 percent of that target has been met, because none of major powers is willing to help.

In July, the European Union announced it would donate a mere €10 million even though a delegation concluded the country was in “the most difficult period of the worst year for food production in recent times.” Russia announced in August a donation of 50,000 tonnes of food.

The US and South Korea, previously among the largest donors, have refused to provide any food aid. South Korea’s conservative President Lee Myung-bak came to power in 2008 and took a hard line stance against Pyongyang by scrapping the previous “Sunshine Policy” to economically engage the north.

The Lee government halted aid to North Korea, which averaged between 400,000 and 500,000 tonnes of rice and other cereals per year between 2000 and 2008. Last week, South Korea’s unification minister Yu Woo-ik bluntly told the parliament: “I don’t think (the food situation) is very serious.” He did not explain why.

Since late 2008, the six-party talks over North Korea’s nuclear programs, involving US, China, Russia, Japan and the two Koreas, have been stalled, primarily due to Washington’s demand that North Korea demonstrate verifiable steps to dismantle its nuclear facilities. The US accused North Korea of failing to honour a 2008 agreement but Washington deliberately upped the ante on verification, virtually assuring the deal’s collapse.

As part of the 2008 agreement, the US pledged to donate half a million tonnes of food within 12 months, but by March 2009, only 170,000 tonnes had been delivered. This ultimately led Pyongyang to cut off American food aid, which Washington was using as a lever to get the regime to agree to US demands.

Former US President Jimmy Carter, who visited the country in March, was compelled to criticise the actions of Seoul and Washington. “One of the most important human rights is to have food to eat,” Carter said, “and for South Korea and the US and others to deliberately withhold food aid to the North Korean people is really a human rights violation.”

In the face of these criticisms, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton denied in August that the US government was refusing aid in order to place pressure on the North Korean government.

The US donated a paltry \$900,000 worth of plastic

sheeting, tents and housing equipment in response to the floods in North Korea in August, but refused to include any food, on the grounds that it would be diverted to feed North Korea’s army.

Last Friday, US State Department Spokeswoman Victoria Nuland cynically declared: “The United States remains deeply concerned about the well-being of the North Korean people.” She admitted: “We haven’t made any decisions on food aid. We did have our assessment trip. We are continuing to evaluate the results of that.” The assessment was carried out by a US delegation in May, more than five months ago.

The global economic crisis is having a direct impact even on this highly isolated country. North Korea normally has a cereal shortfall of one million tonnes per year, which it offsets through imports and aid. Its ability to purchase basic cereals has been impacted by the rise in commodity prices. Corn futures jumped 46 percent in the year to September, according to *Bloomberg* news agency. The food index of the Food and Agricultural Organisation gained 26 percent in the 12 months to August this year. International sanctions have further starved Pyongyang of funds to import basic grains.

Successive US administrations have maintained sanctions on North Korea since the end of the Korean War in 1953, and exploited Pyongyang’s nuclear programs as the pretext to impose new ones. Over the past two decades, the nuclear issue has been used to pursue a two-track policy—either bring about the economic and political collapse of the North Korean regime, or force it to the negotiating table on American terms.

Such are the motives of the Obama administration. The US and its allies are using food as a means to effectively starve North Korea into submission.



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