

Drought raises danger of North Korean famine as US threatens nuclear war

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As Trump threatens North Korea with “fire and fury like the world has never seen,” a drought is raising the danger of famine in the country. With North Korea dependent on food imports to survive, the UN Security Council compounded the danger of famine a week ago, adopting harsh sanctions to isolate its economy.

Last month, the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and the European Commission’s Joint Research Center issued a report warning that the drought severely damaged North Korea’s rice, maize, potato, and soybean crops. Production of early season crops including wheat, barley, and potatoes has fallen by one-third, from 450,000 to 300,000 tons. This threatens severe food shortages until October-November and the main harvest, which is itself already badly affected.

“So far, seasonal rains in main cereal producing areas have been below the levels of 2001, when cereal production dropped to the unprecedented level of only two million tons, causing a sharp deterioration in food security conditions of a large part of the population,” said Vincent Martin, FAO representative in China and North Korea.

The provinces of South and North Pyongan, South and North Hwanghae and Nampo City, North Korea’s key cereal-producing areas, are badly hit. Martin said, “Immediate interventions are needed to support affected farmers and prevent undesirable coping strategies for the most vulnerable, such as reducing daily food intakes. It is critical now that farmers receive appropriate and timely agricultural assistance, including irrigation equipment and machinery.”

“It has been reported that the North Korean government has recently cut the daily food ration for everyone,” former South Korean intelligence chief Rah Jong Yil told German broadcaster Deutsche Welle.

“And while things are not as bad as during the Arduous March period [1993-1998], there are some very small signs of discontent with the regime. There are more conversations among close friends who are asking if the regime is overdoing the threats against the international community.”

The FAO estimates Pyongyang will need to import 500,000 tons of cereals to stave off famine. By pressing for harsh sanctions as North Korea’s harvest collapses, Washington is signaling that it sees the threat of mass starvation, like the threat of nuclear war and trade war, as legitimate weapons in its desperate attempt to assert its fading global hegemony. This crisis also underlies the reckless threats of nuclear counter-strikes against the United States emanating from Pyongyang.

Starting in June, Trump repeatedly threatened sanctions against China’s \$300 billion trade surplus with the United States, including on steel imports, if it did not support US policy on North Korea. The threat of an economic strangulation obtained the desired result from Beijing, which together with Moscow capitulated to Washington and backed sanctions against North Korea in the UN Security Council. Trump celebrated, declaring, “if China helps us, I feel a lot differently toward trade, a lot differently toward trade.”

Beijing’s capitulation produced no lasting benefit in terms of shielding China from US sanctions. Today, Trump is to sign a memo on whether to investigate China on intellectual property violation charges, which could lead to new punitive US economic measures against China.

The danger of a famine affecting millions in North Korea, however, is very real. While it remains unclear whether Beijing and Moscow will fully cut off food aid to Pyongyang, it is clear that North Korea desperately needs enormous shipments, and that Beijing and

Moscow plan to give at most limited support to the North Korean people. The *Washington Post* boasted that the latest round of sanctions “appears to remove parts of the old sanctions that aimed to avoid ‘adverse humanitarian consequences’ for civilians.”

The North Korean famines, which broke out in 1993, are the product of capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union and China by bankrupt Stalinist bureaucracies. In the 1990s, they cut off North Korea, a mostly industrial country with little arable land, dependent on oil and food imports.

As the Russian economy went into free-fall after capitalist restoration in 1991, Moscow demanded payment for its oil subsidies to North Korea. When Pyongyang failed to pay, Moscow cut off shipments of oil, agricultural machinery, and food. China briefly provided the missing aid, but then cut it off in 1993, when it faced a shortage of hard currency for its own trade. The availability of oil and electricity, farm equipment, and food in North Korea all collapsed, a crisis compounded by massive flooding in 1994-1995.

Estimates of the number of North Koreans who died in the 1993-1998 famines range from several hundred thousand to two million. The North Korean Stalinist regime, whose *juche* theory of national economic self-reliance was exposed as a reactionary fraud, executed Agricultural Minister Seo Gwan Hee in 1997 on charges of sabotaging North Korean self-reliance.

Since then, there has been limited economic growth in North Korea—largely based on integration with the neighboring Chinese rust belt region of Manchuria, an ethnically mixed area that itself was devastated by mass sackings, plant closures, and free-market reforms during capitalist restoration. It is clear, however, that the underlying economic problems have not been resolved.

Indeed, these weaknesses have been incorporated into US imperialist planning. When Washington began discussing the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” aimed at China in 2011, a key issue to emerge was eliminating North Korea and creating a unified, US-controlled Korean peninsula hostile to China. This was discussed at the influential Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) think tank, with top officials involved in the US occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The resulting CSIS report, “Challenges for Korean

Unification Planning,” shows that while US officials see the North Korean Stalinists as potential allies in policing the North Korean people, they also anticipate that reunification would entail devastating dislocation in North Korea. On the one hand, the CSIS proposed “keeping elements of the old political narrative, and possibly even [late North Korean leader] Kim il-Sung as a familiar vessel through whom to enact reform and change.”

On the other, however, it acknowledged that the forced reunification would only take place through a major political crisis, in which China and South Korea, as well as the United States, might all seek to intervene in North Korea. This would have dire implications for a country only a few steps away from social and economic collapse.

The report noted that North Korea was different than the Soviet Union, as the Kremlin could provide “food security” to its citizens as it dissolved the Soviet Union. However, it declared, “That is not the case in North Korea. Any disruption of the system is going to cause a serious problem in the country. The second problem is the set of decisions they will make to protect themselves and prevent the collapse of the food system. Currently, the rules of the game for how people eat are relatively stable but fragile. The slightest change can cause people to panic.”

The report added, “There is a lot of literature out on how people act during famines. They steal food to survive, and there is a dramatic collapse of law and order. Two, there will be mass migration. ... A large number of people, up to 50 percent, die during a mass population movement, like in the case of North Korea.”

As Trump and the North Korean regime trade threats of nuclear war, the hopes of the CSIS for a Washington-Pyongyang alliance against China seem dim. However, it is clear that plans to apply the threat of famine to the North Korean people are being acted upon.



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