

North Korean floods compound precarious situation in impoverished country

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Flooding in North Korea caused by torrential rain during the first two weeks of August has forced thousands to evacuate along the country's east coast, leaving homes and farmland devastated. The destruction is being compounded by North Korea's isolation resulting from US-led sanctions and the closing of borders since January 2020 in an attempt to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Following more rain this past week, the state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported on Thursday that Premier Kim Jong Un traveled to South Hamgyong Province in the eastern part of the country to meet with emergency responders. Kim stated that he was going to the flood-stricken region to "learn about the living conditions of the flood victims" and to organize flood relief.

Much of the damage was caused by collapsing river levees, resulting in the widespread inundation of farmland. The flooding this month has forced around 5,000 people to evacuate and left more than 1,100 homes damaged. In some cases, water rose as high as the roof tops and caused damage to about 17 kilometers of roads and bridges, according to the state media.

As much as 300 millimeters of rain fell on parts of North Hamgyong Province on Wednesday. "Downpours have already hit these regions, so we need to prepare thorough countermeasures," said state broadcaster KRT. This included plans "to prevent damage from landslides caused by floods," indicating the danger that continues to exist. During the first week of August, North Hamgyong Province received upwards of 500 millimeters of rain in a three-day span while South Hamgyong Province also experienced above-average daily rainfall.

Other parts of the country have also been hard-hit. The western city of Sinuiju, which sits along the Yalu

River separating North Korea from China, was reportedly flooded and was without power earlier in August. A resident of Dandong, China, across the river from Sinuiju, told Radio Free Asia (RFA) on August 3, "This morning I got in touch with an acquaintance in Sinuiju over text message. He said that the entire city is flooding and that electricity supply to the whole city has been cut off since the afternoon."

North Korea residents living near China are sometimes able to use cellphones that connect to Chinese networks to communicate with those on the other side of the border. The source told RFA, a propaganda outlet for the US government, that Sinuiju residents were preparing to evacuate to the nearby mountains. Another source stated that due to rains on August 2, "every part of the city is flooded and the roads are cut off."

In addition to the devastating rains, the entire Korean Peninsula has also been hit by a weeks-long heatwave. Temperatures this summer have reached as high as 36.5 degrees Celsius (97.7 Fahrenheit) during the day in parts of the North, causing damage to rice and corn crops. The heat wave has been attributed to climate change, as has the increased rains and floods during the region's summer monsoon season over the past several years.

Weeks prior to the onset of the downpours, North Korean authorities attempted to improve and strengthen existing infrastructure including dikes and levees ahead of the monsoon season. However, the impoverished country lacks necessary resources to carry out a full overhaul of its crumbling infrastructure in large part due to the crippling sanctions imposed on Pyongyang by the United States unilaterally and through the United Nations.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken reportedly

discussed aid to North Korea during a phone call with South Korean Foreign Secretary Jeong Ui-yong on August 6, but details were not made public. However, any offer of assistance from Washington would be entirely cynical. The purpose of the crippling sanctions on the North is to weaken and starve the population, either forcing the Pyongyang regime to bow to US demands or preparing the ground for a devastating war of aggression, similar to the invasion of Iraq.

These sanctions have compounded North Korea's already precarious position. Its entire agricultural sector is highly susceptible to weather conditions, with a bad harvest any given year risking food shortages and starvation for the country's working class and farmers. Pyongyang relies heavily on China for food and fertilizer to stave off famine despite UN Security Council sanctions banning large-scale economic assistance.

Over the past year, Beijing has provided large amounts of fertilizer and foodstuffs as the North is also still reeling from poor weather the previous year as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has further damaged its fragile economy. The South's Bank of Korea estimated at the end of July that the North's economy had shrunk by 4.5 percent last year, the most since 1997.

As of late July, North Korea had reported no cases of COVID-19 to the World Health Organisation but had conducted limited testing—a total of just over 35,000 tests. No vaccination program is underway in part because the country needs to develop the infrastructure to store and develop the vaccines. The regime has imposed strict border controls including a three-month quarantine for all goods entering the country, compounding the economic crisis.

In June, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un warned that the country was facing a food shortage. He stated during a Workers Party of Korea plenum, "The people's food situation is now getting tense as the agricultural sector failed to fulfill its grain production plan due to the damage by typhoon last year." KCNA stated at the time that authorities would be "directing all efforts to farming this year."

Last year, North Korea imported 550,000 tonnes of fertilizer from China, an amount the South Korean government called unusually high. Fertilizer and oil also made up the majority of Chinese exports to North

Korea this past spring. However, despite the importation of these materials, much of the strict border controls to prevent the spread of COVID-19 remain in place. North Korea has so far rejected aid from the US and South Korea. Pyongyang similarly rejected any aid following the typhoon and floods last year.



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