

Food Shortage in North Korea: Humanitarian Aid Versus Policy Objectives

by Timothy J. Min, II

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) has suffered from a food shortage since the early 1990s, when China and the former Soviet Union implemented market price, hard currency payment systems that sharply reduced North Korea's ability to import goods. In the past few years, UN agencies have coordinated an international effort to replenish the North Korean food supply. Sending humanitarian aid to North Korea, however, is complicated by that government's history of hostile activities and by U.S. foreign policy concerns. While the food shortage worsens in North Korea, U.S. policy makers continue to debate linking aid to North Korea with foreign policy objectives.

North Korea's food shortage began with economic problems, but became severe after heavy rains in July and August of 1995 resulted in devastating floods. According to North Korean sources, the flooding destroyed over 350,000 hectares of arable land and approximately 1.5 millions tons of grain, in addition to displacing 500,000 people. The flood also destroyed bridges, roads, and homes, with total damages estimated at \$15 bil-

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lion, according to official estimates. During July and August of 1996, North Korea was again hit with torrential rain and flooding, which has substantially worsened the food shortage.

North Korea historically has practiced food rationing. Before the flooding in 1995, the official daily ration was 600 grams per person, just meeting the minimum standard set by international relief agencies. After the 1995 flooding, the government dropped the ration to 458 grams per day, and it currently stands at 200 to 300 grams per day, a shocking amount when one considers that 200 grams approximately equals the amount

of food one can hold by cupping one's hands together.

UN sources report that North Koreans have resorted to wild foods and roots to supplement their diet. In September 1996, former Congressman Tony Hall reported on his recent visit to North Korea before the Senate Sub-



Photo courtesy of Timothy Min

A UN building separates North and South Korea at the DMZ.

committee for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. He stated that he believed most North Koreans have lost approximately 30 pounds since the beginning of 1996. In recent years, reports of food riots and a rampant black market for food have been reported.

International Humanitarian Efforts

In response to the 1995 flooding, the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs sent an inter-agency group to assess the damages. It issued an initial appeal in September 1995 for over \$20 million in aid. In May 1996, the UN World Food Programme reported that the food shortage was even worse than had been expected and that food stocks were "critically low."

In June 1996, the UN Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs announced that North Korea's need had increased to nearly \$44 million, but as of June 25, the international community had donated only \$31 million for flood-related emergency aid. The Information Office of the Embassy of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) in Washington, D.C. reported in October 1996 that North Korea is still suffering a shortage of 2.5 million tons of food.

U.S. Relations with North Korea

The United States maintains a policy designed to economically isolate North Korea because that government sanctions terrorism. For example, North Korean agents caused the 1983 bomb explosion that killed South Korean officials in Rangoon, Burma, as well as the Korean Airlines explosion in 1987 that killed over 170 people. In addition, the North Korean government continues to threaten South Korea and sell weapons to terrorist states, and has also threatened not to comply with nuclear disarmament agreements. Recently, several North Korean nationals were captured after their submarine became disabled in South Korean waters, an incident of alleged espionage by North Korea which took place after South Korea began sending aid to their neighbor.

Because North Korea has been labeled a terrorist state by the U.S. government, the Foreign Assets Control Regulations strictly limit U.S. citizens' ability to conduct most economic transactions with North Korea. Some exceptions to these regulations exist, such as exports of commercial products if they are intended to meet basic human needs, but the exception requires that the exports be licensed by the U.S. Department of Commerce. Cash donations may be made for humanitarian assistance to victims of natural disasters,

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but the donations must be made through the UN or other authorized international organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Despite its poor relations with North Korea, the United States is one of the largest contributors of aid to that country. During 1995-1996, the United States provided over \$8 million in aid, making it the second leading contributor (after

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characterized by the blocking off and repression which has seized all of western Europe." A UN report earlier this year condemned a perceived wave of racist and xenophobic sentiment in the country, and lamented that France's "image as the homeland of human rights has been damaged." Significantly, ethnically motivated violence is rising in France, according to the NCCHR.

A new bill, announced in October in the wake of the Saint-Bernard incident, incorporates several proposed reforms of the Pasqua laws. In addition to closing loopholes in the existing legislation, the bill would ease visa requirements for spouses of French citizens and for children entering France other than via family reunion procedures. It would also provide increased protection against expulsion where humanitarian considerations are present.

Reactions to the bill by human rights organizations and other reform advocates were mixed. Some expressed concern that the situation of undocumented aliens in France would be worsened in certain respects. For example, the bill

would make it more difficult to obtain certain documents required for short-term visas, and would enhance the government's ability to oppose a judge's rejection of a deportation order. Most, however, welcomed the prospective liberalization of the 1993 provisions, as indicated by a Socialist Party spokesman who stated, "This is an acknowledgment

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that the Pasqua laws were inhuman and could not be enforced."

Meanwhile, opponents of the Pasqua laws are working to take the matter to the European level. Sympathetic mem-

bers of the European Parliament are pressing for a resolution requesting that Member States grant residence rights to immigrants who have settled in the Union for legitimate reasons, in accordance with humanitarian principles. Such a measure would be symbolic, however, because coordinating policy on non-European immigrants remains essentially a matter of intergovernmental jurisdiction. Proponents of the resolution nevertheless are hoping that the crisis of France's *sans-papiers* will serve as the catalyst for progress toward a common immigration policy.

Both supporters and critics of the Pasqua laws consider that the new French bill and the European initiative will provide the occasion for much-needed dialogue on the divisive immigration issue, an issue whose legal, economic, cultural, and ethical implications loom large over western European politics. Yet many observers wonder, as Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger of Paris speculated after the Saint-Bernard expulsion, "was it necessary to sacrifice three hundred [people] . . . in order to obtain real political debate on such a fundamental question?"

China) in general humanitarian aid to North Korea. In response to the UN's appeal for emergency humanitarian assistance in 1996-1997, the United States has made an initial pledge of \$6.2 million, fulfilling 38.5% of the worldwide UN appeal.

U.S. foreign policy objectives, however, are stirring debate on whether or not humanitarian aid should be given to North Korea. Some critics of U.S. aid believe that in the long-term, human rights are better served by not giving assistance to highly repressive governments. Others believe that North Korea is using conditions caused by its inherently unproductive economy to obtain international assistance while not attempting to reform its policies. For example, Dr. Bill Taylor of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, speaking before a Senate subcommittee, posited the view that North Korea's present condition is an inherent result of its economic system. He implied that North Korea has exaggerated the food shortage for the purpose of "getting as

much as they can out of the international community for humanitarian assistance."

The debate has focused on U.S. foreign policy concerns. Some foreign relations experts believe that the decision of

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whether to send aid for the food shortage must take into account national security as well as humanitarian concerns. For example, Stanley Roth of the United States Institute for Peace believes that aid to North Korea should be provided but should be heavily monitored. He also indicated that aid should be given to North Korea to sustain stability in the region, since "we may decide it's in our national security interests to provide North Korea with food . . . because

we think that failing to provide food could lead them to make the desperate decision to attack the South."

Still others believe that humanitarian aid should be completely divorced from any foreign policy concerns. Former U.S. Ambassador Robert Gallucci has noted that linkage of policy issues with humanitarian assistance "[is] bad ethically, morally and . . . politically." Although the argument may be made that sanctions should be applied or aid withheld to encourage a civilian population to rebel against a repressive government, the moral grounds for such a policy must be called into question when its deleterious effects are felt so strongly by the civilian population.

Foreign policy objectives aside, it is not disputed that North Korea is suffering an acute food shortage and that recent floods in North Korea have destroyed scarce resources. Policy makers need to keep in mind that while they debate the politics of communism versus capitalism, children in North Korea, ignorant of such concerns, are continuing to survive on a handful of food per day.