

On the North Korean Food Crisis

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The North Korean food problem has become a major issue, not only here in Korea but also in the international society. According to estimates by international organizations, the grain shortage in North Korea this year will be around 2 million tons. Without emergency assistance programs, the situation will become more serious as the number of people dying of hunger is expected to increase drastically in June.

Under the circumstances, there are two different viewpoints on the course of action that should be taken by Korea and the international community. One calls for unconditional assistance, and the other for a more cautious approach.

In my view, the North Korean supreme leader is showing two different sides, holding gun in one hand and a rice bowl in the other. Accordingly, we must approach the problem of food assistance to North Korea on two different dimensions: humanitarian and policy.

From the humanitarian perspective, it is impossible for us to ignore the situation in North Korea. After all, North Korean people are our fellow brethren. It is also natural that the United States and other parts of the international society are lending support in the spirit of respect for human life.

It is in this respect that many South Korean religious and private organizations, with approval from the government, have collected food and other supplies worth 3 billion won, and delivered them to North Korea via the Korean Red Cross. The South Korean government has also promised additional assistance, following the WFP's and other international organizations' plea for help.

The above-mentioned assistance is of a relief nature, however. As such, it does not come close to satisfying the needs of North Korea. Without a fundamental cure, the North Korean food

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problem will continue.

It is for this reason that we must approach the problem from a policy perspective. In the event that South Korea, the United States, and Japan provide North Korea with large-scale governmental assistance, there must be clear principles and criteria.

In 1995, the South Korean government provided North Korea with 150,000 tons of rice, but most of this, as it is now known, was given to the military. Following the sea route by which South Korean vessels had delivered the rice to North Korea, a North Korean submarine infiltrated the South Korean eastern coastal area. In other words, North Korea responded to South Korea's goodwill with animosity.

South Korea and the United States are willing to discuss the issue of food assistance together with that of securing peace on the Korean peninsula in the four-party talks. North Korea insists, however, that there must be a prior commitment on the amount of food assistance before it agrees to the specifics of the four-party talks.

Despite the prospect of obtaining both "peace" and "bread" simultaneously through the four-party talks, North Korea is looking the other way, still maintaining the same old confrontational attitude toward the South. Under the circumstances, large-scale food assistance at the governmental level would not be desirable. Rather we must take a cautious approach and be ready to adjust our assistance according to the North's attitude changes.

Moreover, North Korea must make greater efforts at self-help by allocating resources more efficiently and reforming the agricultural sector. If North Korea saves only 3-5% from its annual military spending of 5.7 billion dollars or forgoes raising symbolic buildings for the sake of idolizing Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il (its estimated cost being 550 million dollars), and instead uses that money for buying food, the food problem could be greatly alleviated.

In this regard, the Act passed by the International Relations Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives on May 1st seems a realistic and appropriate measure, as it stipulates five preconditions for U.S. food assistance to North Korea, including prohibition of its use for military purposes, delivery to designated beneficiaries, and pursuit of agricultural reform. ■■■