CURRENT ISSUES

North Korea: Famine in Slow Motion

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Ronald Reagan, a leader whose credentials as a Cold War warrior few would dispute, once succinctly summed up the ethos underlying the provision of humanitarian assistance to countries in need, regardless of their ideological persuasion. "A hungry child," the former American president said, "knows no politics."

In North Korea today there are 2.6 million children under the age of six who, as yet, know little or nothing of politics. They are, however, intimately acquainted with hunger.

Technical dissertations of the sort that appear in economic journals such as this one tend to treat their subjects in a scholarly fashion. But I am neither a technocrat nor a scholar. I am a humanitarian. So I shall be blunt about it: In the coming months, many of these children will die unless the world acts now by providing North Korea with more food–much more food–than it has received since the inception of this crisis.

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Famine, in the absence of war, is a tragedy in slow motion–one in which the distended bellies, match-stick legs and other obvious physical deformities that one associates with similar crises in places like Africa only

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appear on stage in the final act, as the macabre drama is drawing to a close. In North Korea, these signs have been particularly slow to appear.

Normally, in an African context, the social safety net of a country threatened by famine can be expected to fail the most vulnerable groups in society first–the infants and small children, the elderly and pregnant and lactating women. But because of the extraordinarily egalitarian nature of the Public Distribution System, the state-run mechanism through which most North Koreans receive their food rations, the affliction of hunger has been more evenly spread. Rather than tear, the safety net has been lowered, inch by inch, to the point where practically the entire society is near rock bottom. It is partly for this reason that aid workers long ago dubbed the North Korean food crisis the "Silent Famine."

Ever since the African famines of 1980s, humanitarian organizations and donor governments have been trying to develop early warning systems, based on certain pre-famine indicators, to help predict, and hopefully prevent, the onset of major food shortages. But even though in North Korea famine wears a different face than it does in Africa, there are a number of very disturbing similarities which suggest that a crisis is upon us.

These include the onset of natural disasters, crop failures, increased gastro-intestinal complaints, vitamin deficiencies, the disappearance of farm animals and pets and the consumption of non-traditional "food sources" such as roots, leaves and bark. WFP has been working in North Korea since November of 1995 and these are the signs that, increasingly, we see around us every day.

When I visited North Korea in March, I was shocked to see not only malnourished children but also many of the other indicators which signal that a famine is already well under way.

In the nurseries and kindergartens, we saw many children whose skin lacked muscle tone and elasticity; children who, without exception, were extremely small for their age and who seemed very lethargic, drained of the energy one normally

associates with four, five and six-year-olds. A few even had orange-tinged hair and the beginnings of distended bellies and many had respiratory or skin infections.

WFP and UNICEF officials who live and work in North Korea report that absenteeism is high and that hospitals are seeing an alarming increase in the number of children admitted with bronchial infections and diarrhea. Doctors report that half the children admitted to these hospitals are under weight.

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North Korean officials have been extremely reluctant to release mortality figures, but they recently confirmed that children have begun to die.

I did not see the hospitals on my recent visit, but I was disturbed to find that school attendance was very low. No more than 20 per cent of the students were present in the schools we visited and many of the classrooms were not only empty, but appeared to be unused.

A lack of both food and fuel for heating would appear to be one reason that many of the schools are closed. Indeed, the fuel shortage is dramatically evident whereever one goes in North Korea. In the countryside, whole hillsides have been stripped bare of trees in the search for fuel. In Pyongyang, even government buildings are unheated, blackouts are common and street lights are no longer turned on after dark. Factories are idle and few cars are on the streets. However, another reason is that schools have no food, and parents don' t have enough food at home to send food or their children to school.

During my visit, I toured schools, homes and food distribution sites in North Hwanghae Province, an agricultural center south of Pyongyang that was badly damaged in the floods of 1995 and 1996. The food aid arm of the United Nations, WFP has been active in this area for the past 18 months and now supports projects that pay North Korean farmers with food to rehabilitate agricultural land still buried under silt and other debris left behind by the

floods.

Each participant in these WFP "Food-for-Work" projects receives an average of 450 grams of grain per day. It is not very much and the work consists of hard manual labor–each worker moves more than half a ton of debris on his or her back each day to earn it.

But the participants in these projects consider themselves fortunate. The 450 gram ration they receive is four times what most other workers in North Korea receive today.

Because no one in a cold climate can live and work for long on such meager rations, North Koreans are attempting to cope by supplementing their state-provided diets with vegetables grown in backyard plots, or purchased from the informal farmers' markets. More seaweed is being harvested for consumption, and small factories are manufacturing cakes made of ground empty corn-cobs and pea pods, rice and corn stalks, leaves and tree bark. There is no nutritional value to this at all.

In home after home, the only "vegetables" we saw stored in the kitchens were kimchi, which has very low nutritional value, dried vegetable leaves and a powder made from the crushed cobs of corn or the stalks of sweet potatoes.

Ordinary North Koreans told us that the farmers' markets are now held only erratically and that meat and eggs have not been available in a long time. In home after home, the only "vegetables" we saw stored in the kitchens were kimchi, which has very low nutritional value, dried vegetable leaves and a powder made from the crushed cobs of corn or the stalks of sweet potatoes.

And this, moreover, is the situation as it exists in the relatively prosperous, southern "breadbasket" region of North Korea. By all accounts, the situation in the more remote and less accessible northern half of the country is far worse. There, people are said to be so hungry that they are eating boiled bark stripped from trees. Indeed, one official told me that hospitals and clinics in that region report a rising number of patients suffering from intestinal bleeding caused by the consumption of bark.

The origins of the current food shortage in North Korea have been debated, discussed, analyzed and documented by U.N.

organizations, academics and other specialists for some time now and there is no need to revisit that discussion in great detail here. Suffice it to say that two years of successive flooding severely aggravated the underlying problems of a food deficit economy that was already experiencing severe stress following the collapse of concessional trade relations with China and the former Soviet Union.

Surveys conducted jointly by WFP and the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) estimated that, in addition to causing widespread infrastructural damage, the floods of August, 1995, destroyed 200,000 hectares of standing rice and maize crops, resulting in the loss of some 900,000 tons of cereals. A similar survey following the 1996 floods estimated a further crop loss of 300,000 tons. But because as much as half of the surviving maize harvest was consumed early in the form of green corn, North Korea actually entered 1997 in a position significantly worse than the one it was in at the outset of the previous year.

Clearly, North Korea's need is greater than what the humanitarian community alone can provide. Ultimately, the only way to bridge this gap is through large scale, government-to-government assistance.

The WFP/FAO assessment estimates North Korea's total food deficit this year at 2.36 million metric tons. Perhaps a bit optimistically, North Korean authorities have indicated to us that they expect to make up as much as 1 million tons of that deficit through barter trade, credits and other concessional arrangements.

WFP, in its current appeal, is seeking 203,626 metric tons of food aid assistance for North Korea, an amount that would cover what we see as only the most immediate and urgent emergency needs.

Of this amount, roughly half would finance food-for-work projects benefiting 1.1 million flood-affected collective farmers and their families, while the other half would support supplementary nursery and kindergarten school feedings for all 2.6 million children under the age of six in North Korea.

To date, WFP has received about $38.5 million of this $95.4

million appeal, with the United States and South Korea being the largest contributors ($25 million and $6 million, respectively.) But even if the appeal is fully funded, and even if North Korea succeeds in obtaining 1 million tons of food on its own, it would still leave a deficit of more than 1.1 million metric tons.

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A hungry child knows no politics. But unfortunately politics can still make a child very hungry. North Korea's children have been the prisoners of our politics for far too long. They need our help.

WFP stands ready to assist in this in any way it can. But unless the international community resolves to stop this famine in its tracks, a tragedy of truly horrific proportions will begin to unfold on the Korean peninsula. The curtain is about to go up on the third act. The time to respond is now.

In closing, let me just add this: As head of a humanitarian agency, it is not my place to debate the political pros and cons of assisting North Korea. I would be remiss if I failed to note, however, that the military and the political elite will not be the first victims of the famine in North Korea. The first to succumb will be the very young and the very old.

Ronald Reagan, of course, was right. A hungry child knows no politics. But unfortunately politics can still make a child very hungry. North Korea's children have been the prisoners of our politics for far too long. They need our help. And we must help them. Now. Before it is too late. EKR