

## **FOOD DISTRIBUTION FOLLOWING THE REVIVAL OF THE DPRK RATION SYSTEM**

North Korea restarted the official state ration program in October 2005, but since then a myriad of side effects have become apparent.

While North Korea has strived to maintain the state ration system in order to enforce food distribution at state-mandated prices for all citizens, the economic crisis in the mid 1990s led to a shortage of supplies that crippled the ration network, driving residents to the markets for food. As food production has increased recently, the state has now again attempted to enforce state-mandated prices on food supplies.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this, it is now apparent that food is not at all reaching remote border areas far from Pyongyang such as Hyeryung and other cities in and around North Hamkyung Province.

Good Friends Center for Peace, Human Rights and Refugees, an organization concerned with human rights in North Korea, reported in a recent newsletter, *North Korea Today*, that “food was not distributed in Hyeryung in November [2005], and at the end of December those with ration coupons received only 10 days-worth of rice,” while, “it was priced at 780 won per kg, cheaper than the 850 won black market price. However, because the quantity was insufficient, even some people with ration coupons were unable to receive rice.”

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<sup>1</sup> “WFP monitors are visiting Public Distribution Centres (PDCs) across the country to assess the implementation of the new government policy of reviving the Public Distribution System (PDS). County officials report that they have been instructed by the central government to normalise the PDS rations at the 1994-level of 500 g/pp/day. The goal of 500 g/pp/day is met in most counties this month, mainly with produce from their recently completed harvest in addition to rice provided by the Republic of Korea.” World Food Program, Emergency Report no. 44, October 28, 2005.

According to the newsletter, “in the past, ration proportions were reduced, as if paying taxes, in the name of savings, patriotism, or other moral justifications, but this time rations were distributed in the set quantities,” and that “the rice rationed in December from the food distribution center in Hyeryung was known to be South Korean rice.”

While the North Korean government is re-instituting the ration system, it is also cracking down on black market rice trading. It appears, however, that this crack down is far from uniform as it has not affected the Ranam Market in Hamkyung Province, nor any markets in Hamhung, Anju, Sookchun, Heechun, Bukchang, Daekwan, or Sinuiju, but rather seems to be focused on border towns such as Moosan, Hyeryung, and Onsung.

It has been rumored that as authorities increase pressure, some food peddlers are choosing to sell rice out of their homes rather than in the markets by way of “middlemen,” driving prices up even higher. According to the *North Korea Today* newsletter, the success of the rice trade depends upon knowing the date of distribution of state rations, and as the ration system expands, the relationship between traders and government officials is a key factor in lowering prices.

According to Good Friends’ survey of goods throughout the country in March of this year, prices on all products were relatively similar all across North Korea. This was not the case for rice, corn, and other grains, which differed slightly according to the unique situation in various regions. For example, when comparing Hwanghae Province, North Korea’s “breadbasket,” with rural areas in Hamkyung, Kangwon and Yangkang Provinces, prices ranged from 30 to 200 won. Interestingly, as the weather warms up, prices on wood and coal seem to be falling.