

DPRK TO FACE FOOD CRISIS IN WAKE OF LAUNCHES

North Korea is expected to soon face its worst food shortages in several years. Despite repeated warnings from the international community, North Korea proceeded to test seven missiles on July 5, causing a severe drop in international assistance. In addition, the North was recently struck with severe rains, significantly damaging agricultural areas and leading observers to predict harsh food shortages.

North Korea requires approximately 6.5 million tons of foodstuffs per year. Following the 'Arduous March' of the mid-1990s, when many North Koreans starved, the country has slowly been in recovery, with harvests over 4 million tons each year since 2003. Last year, a year of relatively abundant harvests, the North recorded 4.5 million tons, still falling significantly short of what it needs to feed its people.

Each year, North Korea falls between one and two tons short of necessary harvested food, receiving significant assistance from South Korea and the rest of the international community. Last year, the UN World Food Program (WFP) provided 1.079 million tons of food to the North, an increase of 23.1% over 2004. This makes North Korea second only to Ethiopia in terms of aid recipient nations.

Now, in the aftermath of North Korea's decision to launch missiles in defiance of the international community, the country is facing a crisis in the form of a severe drop in foreign aid. What has especially confounded Pyongyang was the unexpected suspension of rice shipments from South Korea. South Korea has been a significant donor to North Korea, providing 500,000 tons of aid last year. According to the media, both South Korea and China, countries making up the bulk of aid sent to the impoverished North, provided less aid in the first quarter of this year as compared to 2005.

Following the missile launches, countries with hard-line public opinion, such as the United States and Japan, are expected not to provide aid to Pyongyang. Last year, U.S. aid totaled 28,000 tons, and Japan provided 48,000 tons of food to North Korea. In addition, Pyongyang's demand to terminate humanitarian aid and shift to development assistance led to a 50% decrease, to 150,000 tons, in aid from the WFP. The program is currently involved in negotiations with Pyongyang regarding this aid.

To make matters worse, North Korea suffered from severe flooding in July. According to the WFP, 30,000 hectares of agricultural land was flooded, washed out, or buried as a result of the rains, destroying upwards of 100,000 tons of food. Particularly hard hit was the 'ricebowl region' of South Hwanghae Province. In light of North Korea's slow and inaccurate reporting practices in the past, these numbers can be expected to grow. Food already in storage and some fall harvests are expected to sustain North Koreans through autumn, but the country is expected to face severe shortages in the winter.