

Pyongyang Residents Resort to Market Trading

As celebrations take place around the country to mark North Korean leader Kim Jong Il's 65th birthday, even those residents privileged enough to live in Pyongyang are facing economic difficulties. Some Pyongyang residents with friends and family in South Korea have conveyed that these days, life is tough even for those in the capital. While food is still being distributed by the government, it is not possible to live on those meager rations alone.

Laws and decrees are enforced more strictly in Pyongyang than in rural areas, so that nearly every able-bodied man is required to show up at his appointed job. While he reports to work for less-than-adequate rations, the housewives make their way to the central market, or hop trains out into the countryside, in order to trade for enough sustenance to survive. One North Korean stated, "Even Pyongyang residents must trade wholesale in the countryside if we are to avoid a diet of nothing but gruel...While authorities in the North are living better now than during the 'Arduous March' of the 1990s, for the average laborer, there is no difference between living in Pyongyang and in the countryside."

This informant went on to say, "Food is being rationed, but every month, one week's worth of rations are held back, so the food shortage must be made up through market trading," and "not only rice, but also soy sauce, soybean paste, peppers, seasonings, and salt are some of the food items and produce than are available only in the markets."

North Korean authorities divert one week's rations per month, ostensibly for supplying the military. The average worker in Pyongyang brings home between 4,000 to 5,000 won per

month, and with rice selling in the markets at 1,100 won per kilogram, he is able to buy no more than 4 kilograms every 4 weeks. On top of that, if he is required to buy food at the market, surely he must turn there for clothing as well.

North Koreans make up ration shortages through market shopping. Purchases of food, produce, everyday items, clothing, and more have meant that spending reaches 100,000 (DPRK) won per month. In addition, with more than ten years having passed since authorities put an end to the rationing of heating fuel, over 2,000 kilograms of coal have been purchased by those living in Pyongyang today.

And so it stands that now, most housewives are involved in trade. The average North Korean already faces a difficult life if not trading, but now even those living in the “Revolutionary Capital” of Pyongyang cannot survive without markets.

During the food crisis faced by the North in the 1990s, those living in Pyongyang were proud to be in the “Revolutionary Capital,” where rations and gifts were thought to be given out in portions dwarfing those in the countryside. Ten years later, however, the benefits of living in Pyongyang have all but disappeared, and only weariness is abundant.