

The Famine in North Korea:
Humanitarian Responses in Communist Nations

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This issues paper is intended to raise awareness and encourage debate about the current crisis in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Given the level of controversy about humanitarian interventions in North Korea, Sue Lautze has attempted to provide a framework for analyzing the complicated and unique political, military and economic factors not common to emergencies elsewhere in the world. What is presented here should not be interpreted as fully confirmed, solid fact. Indeed, no information about North Korea should be taken as such. Instead, she has sought to provide an alternative, if controversial, methodology of interpreting and monitoring famine in North Korea. This multi-dimensional approach to understanding the intricacies of today's crises is in line with the Center's overall strategy to promote more effective responses to disasters.

Sue, a Mandarin Chinese speaker, lived in the People's Republic of China and worked for the Chinese Government in the late 1980's before joining the World Food Program in Beijing. For much of the 1990's, she has worked on strategic approaches to complex emergencies in the Horn of Africa. She brings a unique background of experience in Asian societies, communist systems, and man-made emergencies. Last year, she was the first person to visit the DPRK with the support of USAID. She continues to advocate for a well-informed, strategic humanitarian response to the crisis in North Korea. Sue raises difficult issues in this paper with the hope that those with access to North Korea will be better equipped to function in that highly complicated environment.

Our current knowledge and assumptions about economic, political and military behavior in complex emergencies may not be directly applicable in communist nations. This paper relates the crisis in North Korea today to the two largest famines to strike communist nations in the twentieth century: the Soviet Union under Stalin from 1931 - 1932 and the People's Republic of China under Mao from 1958 - 1962. The analysis presented is important for understanding famine in North Korea today. This paper warns of the potential weaknesses in the current mode of delivery of humanitarian relief while also providing useful guidance for improving humanitarian responses. Importantly, it explains why the use of food aid as a tool of foreign policy is counterproductive in the DPRK.

We assume that readers are familiar with the basic facts and figures of the disaster response in North Korea that began with the floods of 1995. Today, people are starving in North Korea, a situation which will surely worsen as the year progresses. Funding alone will not prevent the extensive loss of lives and suffering among North Koreans. A highly strategic, politically-informed, culturally-sensitive approach is also essential. However, even under the best of circumstances, the possibility of failure -- in a most humanitarian sense -- remains very high.

The situation in North Korea continues to evolve rapidly, making this a time-sensitive document. Your comments, insights, and criticisms are welcomed by the Feinstein International Famine Center of Tufts University.

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Models of Famine in Communist Nations: Starvation Under Stalin and Mao

Just as the international humanitarian community often looks to Africa to understand complex political emergencies, models of famine in communist nations can inform humanitarian responses to famine in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). In this spirit, it is important to look at the two largest famines to strike communist nations in recent history and adjust these models according to the unique conditions in North Korea. These two famines provide important benchmarks to consider when assessing needs and designing response mechanisms in the DPRK.

North Korea differs from both China and the former Soviet Union, just as they differed from each other. Kim Jong Il is in an unusual and less certain position of power than was Mao or Stalin. Unlike China or the former USSR, the DPRK has warned that the famine will deepen in the absence of large-scale food assistance. It has facilitated a limited number of visits for UN agency, NGO, and donor representatives. These organizations have physically accessed an increasing number of areas in North Korea. Lastly, the DPRK has assigned high-level, empowered officials to work with the humanitarian community.

That said, however, the DPRK's pervasive control of society, its global isolation, collectivized agriculture, precarious military situation, apparent internal political struggles and economic failure bear striking resemblances to the factors that led to massive famine in China and the former Soviet Union. There remain fundamental common characteristics in the communist system that determine the prioritized allocation of limited resources across different socio-economic groups. Understanding, remembering and addressing the inherent weaknesses of the communist system are important tools for humanitarians who are willing to serve in the DPRK.

Between six and eight million people perished in the famine in the Ukraine, the northern Caucasus, and the lower Volga River of the former Soviet Union during the years 1931 - 1932, while over thirty million people died from famine-related causes throughout China from 1958 to 1962. In both of these famines, rural peasants (many of whom lived in traditionally surplus producing areas) bore the brunt of starvation. In both China and the former Soviet Union, state-controlled granaries contained ample food supplies throughout these disasters. Famine conditions evolved due to several factors. Some are discussed more fully in the remainder of this section, including:

- regimes of terror that prevented open disclosure of famine conditions
- competing political interests in western nations
- the rapid collectivization of agriculture and massive, crash industrialization programs
- strict control of social organization and preferential treatment of elites and the military
- cults of personality

Limiting Information At Any Cost

The earlier famines, like today's crisis in North Korea, were man-made and, therefore, political in nature. Unlike the crisis in North Korea, both famines were marked by genocide, e.g. the Ukrainians under Stalin and the Tibetans under Mao. Of critical note, the Soviet and Chinese famines occurred under the shadow of secrecy enforced by brutal means, including torture, execution, public humiliation and exile. The absence of tolerance for internal dissent and external review raised the death toll in both of these famines dramatically. Public officials who spoke out against government policies (such as the collectivization of agriculture and the enforcement of quotas) faced retribution ranging from dishonorable demotion to torturous execution. While still hotly debated in academic circles, it now appears that neither Stalin nor Mao was aware of the true extent of famine in his country during the early periods. It is now known, however, that they both became aware of the disaster but elected not to pursue immediate measures to alleviate suffering due to personal and political concerns.

Only a handful of westerners visited either the USSR or China during the famines, and government officials in both countries did a masterful job of disguising the extent and nature of famine. In 1960, Edgar Snow spent five months touring China and saw no famine conditions. The rural population did not dare talk to the visitors out of the well-justified fear of reprisals. In both the former Soviet Union and China, the streets where visitors went were swept clean of beggars. Starving peasants were forcibly sent to rural areas.

Foreign visitors saw occasional signs of acute malnutrition, but almost unanimously denounced "rumors" of famine. Likewise, the Chinese vigorously denied there was starvation in the country. Because the authorities had successfully duped all foreign visitors, they were able to maintain the myth that food shortages in China were due to natural disasters, especially flood and drought. Mao ordered that official meteorological data be rewritten to reflect unusual and disastrous climatic activity, even though weather patterns remained mostly favorable. This myth was maintained not only for the outside world. While life was hard in urban areas, most urban residents (almost 20% of the population) were also completely unaware of the extent of famine in the countryside.

The level and nature of internal, famine-related discourse in North Korea today is unknown, at least among humanitarian agencies working there. This includes the critical issue of the quality, veracity and quantity of the famine-related information disseminating from lower officials to the upper echelons of the DPRK Government. Recent foreign visitors have reported that some DPRK officials traveling with them outside of Pyongyang have been caught off guard by the extent of malnutrition and hunger witnessed in the countryside. North Koreans with access to relatives in the People's Republic of China are writing letters to them describing conditions in North Korea and begging for assistance. Further, some degree of internal displacement is being silently tolerated, providing at least occasional opportunities for inter-communal exchanges of information. Certainly, the international community has more information about the current famine than it had during either Mao's or Stalin's disasters.

The role that the free exchange of information plays in preventing and alleviating famines and prompting

effective responses has been well-documented. Politically-informed indicators of the degree of famine-related information exchange among affected communities, DPRK officials, and the rest of the world must be monitored throughout the crisis. Many in the west today are ambivalent about the impact of humanitarian interventions in North Korea, but the sheer value realized by the access and presence of UN agencies, donor observers, private foundations, and NGOs should not be underestimated. However, current limitations on presence and access are having negative impacts on the prospects for survival of vulnerable populations in North Korea.

The problems resulting from a lack of transparency and accountability have gravely weakened the case of those humanitarians who advocate for changes in donor policies. There are critical gaps in information about the socio-economic, political and geographic distribution of suffering in North Korea. These include very limited access to areas known to be inhabited by politically or economically marginalized and vulnerable groups. The international humanitarian community's inability to assess the degree and nature of the fungibility of relief assistance has heightened suspicion. Some fear that relief food may be supporting important urban areas and the DPRK military at the cost of intended beneficiaries and/or the national security of the Republic of Korea and its allies.

The few humanitarian agencies with superior access to vulnerable populations are extremely reluctant to publicly disclose famine-related information for fear of losing access to these populations. Given the fragile nature of external relations with North Korea, it is possible that the total human toll of the current famine will not be known to the west for decades, and then only if and when population data and official records are made available to researchers. As in earlier catastrophes, the North Korean crisis has the potential to continue as a silent famine. This further undermines the ability of humanitarian and political leaders trying to prompt a humanitarian response unencumbered by political differences.

Political, Economic and Military Concerns Among Donor Nations

In the earlier famines, a lack of humanitarian response was not solely the fault of China or of the Soviet Union. Western political concerns at the time also precluded substantial consideration of donor, government-supported humanitarian aid through direct intervention or political channels. The few indications of famine in China that reached the western world were dismissed by those in power despite impressive reporting by some US newspapers. Information about the famine in China reached the US at the height of McCarthyism. Many who did fight for recognition and a humanitarian response were ridiculed and discredited. Importantly, complete details of the extent of the famine in China were unavailable in the west until last year, an astonishing thirty-two years after the famine ended. Military issues played an equally important part in discouraging wide-scale discussion of the famine because China displayed an uncertain relationship with the Soviet Union at the time. Western political distance was justified by the threat of sparking a global war.

In a similar vein, (at least in the United States, South Korea and Japan) political, military and economic issues are currently being employed to justify an inadequate humanitarian response to the crisis in North

Korea. On May 8, 1997, US State Department spokesman, Nicholas Burns, made this abundantly clear, stating:

We do not favor the current economic system of North Korea, which is a communist system, which has clearly failed the people...it is that system that has failed the North Korean people and has led to the starvation and deprivation that millions of North Koreans are now experiencing. So are we going to put into North Korea billions of dollars of American or Western or Asian money...to subsidize a communist economic system? No way...We are not going to spend billions of dollars of American money to prop up a decrepit, ancient oxymoron, which is communist economics.

In spite of considerable effort, the stances of potential donor governments have been unsuccessfully challenged by the humanitarian relief community. This is due in part to the particularly difficult and sensitive working conditions established for relief agencies in the DPRK. Further, just as in China under Mao, the US (and other countries) and North Korea have no formal diplomatic relations, precluding relatively free and easy access to North Korea.

Government Policies at the Expense of Agricultural Output

Under both Stalin and Mao, human and productive resources were redirected to the rapid collectivization of agriculture followed by crash programs of industrialization. Though these policies had clearly failed in the USSR by the time the first five year plan was drafted in the PRC, Mao adopted them with even greater vigor than Stalin had demonstrated. These efforts radically influenced the distribution of starvation among farmers in China, just as they had in the former Soviet Union. In key “breadbasket” areas of cereal production, output fell to near-subsistence levels. Local officials were under great pressure (indeed, their own survival was at stake) to report inflated production figures. These figures later determined the allocation of quotas of cereal to be paid to the state by the collectives. The combined effects of poor production and high taxation meant that starvation was also widespread in fertile areas traditionally immune to such tragedies.

North Korea, however, is in a different stage of development. Collectivization is stable and industrialization has been abandoned due to a lack of resources and the decline of the former Soviet Union, the DPRK’s traditional patron. Nevertheless, the historical issues remain relevant. Some anti-famine measures are in direct conflict with the communist authority’s level of social control and have, therefore, been compromised. For example, the bulk of North Korea’s human and productive resources has been redirected to the maintenance of one of the world’s largest armies. Further, this army is constantly prepared for defense or assault, raising its maintenance requirements beyond the material and physical capacity of the people of North Korea. The DPRK army, as a labor force, has only recently been engaged in wide-scale agriculture production. With the vast resources invested in its military capacity, North Korea has lost potential agricultural production, industrial output, exports, trade, and political relations that might have provided adequate means to avert or address the current famine.

For humanitarians working in this quandary, these facts should influence the design of indicators and emergency interventions. National and local government tolerance of private household agriculture production should be monitored. Household garden plots are managed by women and serve as a critical source of nutrition for families that can benefit from them, including relatives living elsewhere. Individuals have a greater incentive to invest time and resources into these plots rather than into communal activities. In rural areas where the population has been weakened by malnutrition and increased work requirements (e.g. flood-related land clearing), the conflict between personal needs and communal requirements is markedly even greater.

This has important ramifications for Food For Work programs, especially those that are designed to prepare flood-affected communal lands for agriculture production. The trade-off between quantities of cereals (relief food and communal production) and the availability of a wider range of vegetables (household gardens) requires balance. For humanitarian agencies, achieving such balance is very difficult, given that freedom of expression is not tolerated in the DPRK. Further, pervasive ideology dictates that the community and/or nation's needs must prevail over the personal.

Inputs for household garden plots are not a priority for local leadership, but households do go to great lengths to acquire small bits of plastic sheeting, fertilizer, seeds, etc. Where production is tolerated, chances of survival are greatly enhanced. Where household gardens are not tolerated or where households lack the physical or material resources to cultivate, vulnerability is increased. This includes urban as well as rural households.

Since the floods of 1995, the quantity of cereals that farmers are permitted to retain for consumption (set by official quotas) has declined. This is, of course, equivalent to an increase in taxation at a time of decreased production, a familiar warning signal from earlier famines in communist nations. This increases the vulnerability of farming communities, especially in traditionally surplus-producing areas that the state has relied on to supply the Public Distribution System (PDS). The extent of this increase is a function of the questionable quality of information provided through the channels of government. Adequate and accurate information provided by all communities allows for the most efficient taxation system, even when the resulting tax increases invariably increase vulnerability.

Preferential Treatment of Officials, Urban Areas and the Military

Through control of population movements, potential opposition, food supplies and armed forces, Stalin and Mao successfully provided preferential treatment to loyal officials, urban residents and the military at the expense of non-privileged urban and rural families. Population movements were checked via a system of internal passports that prohibited people from leaving their home areas or assigned work units. Urban population size and composition were maintained through forcible displacement. During the famines, the populations of key urban areas were deliberately decreased to maintain a strong and loyal base of support. Through a system of quotas and ration tickets, the distribution of limited quantities of food was tightly controlled by the state. Lastly, in order to ensure social order and national security, military units were least

affected by the famines. Without exception, all of these aspects of life under Stalin and Mao form the basis of social order in North Korea today. The preferential treatment of the North Korean military has been well-documented.

Importantly, there are reports of some silent tolerance for internal displacement from rural to urban areas in the DPRK. However, the “blind eye” nature of this policy makes it almost impossible for humanitarian agencies to address the needs of the internally displaced. Officially, no such community exists. As in other emergencies, voluntary displacement is a desperate measure taken only when all other means of survival have failed. The movement away from family and commune severs the only two safety nets available to the poor. In China, such displacement spelled near-certain death as authorities denied access to urban areas and rural communes did not have resources to share. Parents abandoned young children in deep holes along roads and rail lines in dire hope that someone would rescue them. Alarming, recent reports from North Korea indicate that similar measures are being employed, at least along the rail line to Siniujiu.

Under a communist system, ration tickets are necessary but not sufficient to acquire consumer goods and food staples. Cash is needed for the actual purchase. Despite holding precious grain tickets, unimportant urban dwellers and lower ranking government officials found that no amount of cash or tickets could buy grain at the height of the Chinese famine. Special shops for ranking officials and important urban areas were stocked throughout the famine. Those with access to state granaries often exchanged valuable artifacts and hard currency for grain, much to the advantage of the Chinese government. A similar system, the *torgsin* shops, enriched some members of the former Soviet Union. In China, ration tickets themselves served as a second form of currency while black markets were occasionally tolerated but were susceptible to sudden closure. Understanding this underlying economy leads to important but very difficult indicators to be monitored in North Korea.

As in other societies, preferential treatment is not solely dictated by the governing system. Intra-household allocations are equally important for the survival of the elderly and the young. In North Korean culture, in times of need, the elderly suffer before the children, and able-bodied men eat better than women. During times of desperation in China, intra-household fighting was common and led to incidents of murder and cannibalization. While there are conflicting reports of cannibalization in North Korea today, tensions in intra-household distributions are undoubtedly rising. Indicators, such as official statistics on the divorce rate, can be monitored by proxy.

Mao's and Stalin's Consolidations of Power and Cults of Personality

In the western world, an unspoken and misplaced hope that starvation would lead to a popular uprising further precluded any official humanitarian assistance for the Soviet and Chinese famines. This view seems to be informed by western models of democracy where such extensive suffering would surely result in the fall of government. In fact, the west grossly underestimated the resiliency of the despotic leadership and their extent of control over society. Indeed, Mao's and Stalin's famines precipitated massive consolidations of power, extensive purges of opposition figures, and a broad-based strengthening of their cults of

personality. Obviously, Mao and Stalin maintained control long after the famines ended. The west also underestimated the population's fear of reprisals that prevented them from organizing revolts, stealing food or even complaining about food shortages. In China, most peasants believed that neither Mao nor the communist party would allow them to starve to death. By the time they realized the inevitable, they were far too weak to protest.

Despite the failed theories of earlier administrations regarding the link between famine and political collapse, the same political strategies are again being employed in the United States with respect to the DPRK Government. Some members of the US Congress and the National Security Council are against providing famine relief lest it bolster a communist regime seemingly in decline. There is much discussion among the Japanese, South Koreans, and the United States that a "soft landing" should be engineered for the "inevitable" collapse of the DPRK.

At least in the humanitarian community, Kim Jong Il is an unknown quantity. Will he soon agree to productive four-party talks or will he force his people to endure several more years of famine in order to protect the communist system? The latter option is what a Stalin/Mao model of famine in communist nations would predict. In addition, the prediction would be supported by the nature of the communist system, where one's security has been found only in trusting strong leadership. In North Korea today, the people know no other system, having endured communism for several generations.

Humanitarian Relief Systems in North Korea

The floods of 1995 (and to a lesser extent, 1996) continue to define the context of humanitarian relief in North Korea. However, the nature of the crisis has changed markedly. During 1995 and the first part of 1996, a rather straight-forward (albeit insufficient) natural disaster emergency response was tolerated by all concerned governments. Since then, increasing political, economic, and military concerns have complicated the disparate humanitarian response system. Although quietly acknowledged as a political-economic crisis, humanitarian assistance is still provided under the guise of flood relief. For example, the Flood Damage Rehabilitation Committee (FDRC) is still the main point of contact for relief agencies, while access to line ministries has been limited. The famine in North Korea is no longer solely a natural disaster and requires a more strategic humanitarian framework for monitoring, reporting, logistics, standards and coordination. Failure to change the context of relief operations from a natural disaster to a political/economic emergency will result in inadequate access and assistance for vulnerable populations in North Korea.

In the 1960's, misled foreign visitors praised Mao's reforms and wrongly believed that the system of rationing had fairly distributed hunger across the whole Chinese population. This ration system closely resembles North Korea's Public Distribution System (PDS). Access to state-supplied food (domestic produce, relief or imports) is strictly determined by one's status, with key military units, government officials and urban residents always outranking peasant farmers. In sum, the more important an individual is to the state, the better treated his family will be. This is counter to the humanitarian's objective of serving the most needy first.

From the outset, the UN system and its donors have placed a great deal of faith in the ability of the PDS to deliver relief to areas most in need. Given the limited logistical capacity of relief agencies, this is understandable. This faith, however, rests on a few questionable assumptions. The first is that the priorities and policies of the DPRK Government can be made consistent with those of the humanitarian community, e.g. targeting of the most vulnerable, *useful* access to areas where food is being distributed, free access to areas suspected to be affected by food shortages not directly related to the flood, etc. The second is that the Public Distribution System has adequate resources not only to deliver to populations traditionally served by the PDS, but that it also can be modified to reach populations that are usually self-sufficient in cereal production, i.e., those that would not normally receive cereal rations from the state. At a time of well-known and extensive fuel, transportation and food shortages, it would appear unwise to expect so much of the PDS. To further complicate the matter, external agencies have yet to successfully understand the DPRK's system of beneficiary identification.

Relief agencies, especially the UN World Food Program, have been remarkably candid about their own limitations. Even so, the use of the PDS must be more completely justified. Indeed, it is the responsibility of humanitarian agencies working in North Korea to prove that the DPRK Government is working to address famine conditions *in the worst affected areas*, particularly given the difficult issue of the fungibility of relief aid.

Currently, agencies are permitted to do "spot checking" of relief items at any point along the port-to-beneficiary route. Theoretically, it is possible for a monitor to follow provided relief food from the port at Nampo to grain depots and into the houses of those who qualify for relief assistance. Nevertheless, this can unknowingly amount to useless information and wasted resources in a country where the distribution of national grain supplies (including relief and domestic production) is controlled by central authorities. The possibility that the state is withholding PDS food rations from populations receiving emergency relief food from humanitarian agencies needs to be rigorously investigated.

In addition, there has been no hard evidence of "additionality", i.e., that emergency relief food is being provided *over and above* what others of similar status living elsewhere are receiving. In the absence of additionality, the provision of relief food can supplant the role of the PDS. Where international assistance is supplanting the PDS role, the PDS is able to withhold grain from its central supply and redirect this food for other purposes. Those who are concerned about the potentially negative impact of relief assistance, including the possibility that such assistance may be propping up a regime or supporting the DPRK military, have rightfully raised doubts about this critical flaw in the relief delivery system.

There are reports that the DPRK government has stopped providing food through the PDS to marginalized regions. Given limitations of fuel and fiscal resources, it is only entrepreneurial local leaders, e.g. those that can muster train engines or trucks and fuel, who are able to acquire much-needed relief food to save their hungry populations. Those areas without economic resources or political capital seem to have been left to fend for themselves. In one sense, this is understandable, given the extent of economic collapse and

widespread demands for limited quantities of relief assistance. However, the DPRK's insistence on maintaining a full army and providing for the population of Pyongyang and other important areas at the expense of those who are suffering, diminishes this argument considerably.

During the week of May 19, 1997, the European Union announced the donation of 155,000 MT of relief food for North Korea. However, these quantities are dwarfed by the estimates of the national food requirements for 1997. Hence, the problem of who will benefit from these donations looms as large as ever. There will not be enough to go around. Providing more relief assistance into a system that is logistically and politically incapable of reaching vulnerable areas will be at best, ineffective, and at worse, harmful.

III. Strengthening the Humanitarian Response

Given the limited information about the true "inner workings" of the DPRK, it is difficult to derive indicators to guide an effective humanitarian response to the famine in North Korea. This section outlines some indicators that may be useful to organizations working or aiming to work in North Korea.

1. *Private Household Food Production*

By June, households in rural areas should have already prepared small gardens adjacent to their households or, illegally, terraced on hillsides near settlements. Small quantities of plastic sheeting, fertilizer and other inputs greatly increase production on these tiny plots. In the absence, lateness or inadequacy of these preparations, household vulnerability will escalate as the season progresses. Women are responsible for the preparation, care, harvest and management of this key household food resource.

Barriers to production may include poorly-designed Food-For-Work projects that drain "surplus" household labor, a lack of agricultural inputs, inadequate nutrition due to intra-household discrimination against women, or local leadership that is under pressure to maximize efforts to produce communal output.

2. *Functionality of the Public Distribution System*

It is known that the DPRK possesses an extensive and impressive-looking transportation network of trucks, trains, warehouses, etc. The infrastructure of the PDS is not an issue in this famine. Rather, the current effectiveness of the PDS can be gauged *only* by accurate information reflecting the location and availability of fuel in North Korea. This highly sensitive information is not likely to be available to the international humanitarian community. Fuel rationing for military and civilian uses is managed by separate systems. Aside from extraordinary circumstances, local leaders are only able to attract relief (or other) food to their areas if they control adequate stocks of fuel for civilian purposes. Fuel is in drastically short supply. Control of fuel is a function of a local leader's political

clout, local economic resources (e.g. scrap metal) and potential economic production (e.g. fertile agriculture areas). Humanitarians should not confuse the availability of physical transport with the actual capacity to deliver relief food.

The PDS is not functioning in all areas. Where the PDS is functioning, even at minimal levels, relief food should only be provided if adequate guarantees of additionality (i.e., relief rations in addition to rations already provided by the PDS) can be secured. Otherwise, relief supplants the role of the state, thereby freeing up resources to be used for other, non-emergency purposes, potentially including military supply.

In addition to fuel shortages, inadequate food supplies, weak local leadership, and prioritization of urban and military populations have also forced the failure of the PDS in regions that are politically and economically marginalized. These areas need to be identified, accessed, assessed and served. To do so may involve the in-kind contribution of fuel to ensure adequate and timely delivery of relief food.

The PDS is supplied by quotas imposed on communal farms. Humanitarian agencies need to discuss and monitor the status of quotas in vulnerable areas prior to and during the 1997/98 harvest. Increased quotas are equivalent to raising taxes at a time of presumable further decreases in agriculture production. This combination is a serious threat to the survivability of households organized in communal production.

3. *Markets/Assets*

For disaster-affected households, assets are usually the last cushion between survival and starvation. As household asset bases are depleted, household vulnerability increases dramatically. This relationship between asset bases and vulnerability should be discussed with DPRK counterparts in order to gain cooperation in quietly monitoring official and black markets. The black market is tolerated in North Korea and, to the extent possible, should be watched. Trends in the volume, type and price of goods should be followed. The availability of small livestock (dogs, chickens, pigs), often sold on the black market, is an important indicator. Their absence from the rural areas represents both an important sign of high vulnerability and an opportunity for emergency livestock interventions.

As natural resources (fuel, wild foods) are depleted, there will be an increasing reliance on the black market for goods once freely provided by nature, increasing the need for cash. This will be particularly hard on families with limited kinship ties, flood victims who lost household possessions, and others living in traditionally poorer areas. In addition to grain ration coupons, cash is needed to purchase cereal (and other goods) officially from the PDS, further increasing the demand for cash. The price of PDS-supplied grain should be routinely monitored in household spot-checks. Price increases and deepening reliance on markets will further stress household asset bases.

These types of questions should be monitored: Is the black market still tolerated? Is it growing? Do vulnerable households have access to the markets? What is the official price of grain? What is available on the black market and at what cost? Are there large-scale sales of furniture? If so, will this lead to fuel problems for the poorest households this winter?

4. *Distribution of limited resources*

The ration system does not distribute North Korea's limited resources in an equal fashion. Given increasing strains on available resources, inequalities will deepen. It is safe to assume that the DPRK will, if it hasn't already, determine which areas will receive centrally-controlled cereal supplies (relief, imports and domestic production) and those that won't. It is possible that the DPRK will assign relief organizations to concentrate their efforts in these selected and privileged areas. If this happens, this will further delimit the access of relief organizations to economically and/or politically marginalized populations.

To the extent possible, relief organizations should coordinate their efforts and compare their information about populations they have accessed and been permitted to serve, in order that limited relief supplies are targeted to those who are most vulnerable. There are not enough relief supplies to justify the provision of relief solely on the basis of access granted. Prioritization should be based on need but, bear in mind, this may be in conflict with the system of prioritization employed by the DPRK (e.g. economic potential, political power, etc.)

5. *Information*

Some organizations have quietly gained access to highly vulnerable populations in the DPRK and are doing excellent work to serve these needy populations. This is an important anti-famine strategy and their efforts are to be commended. Given the sensitive nature of access, some organizations have been reluctant to release information about these areas for fear of losing access to these populations. As a note of caution, these organizations may be underestimating the role of information exchange in averting the worst effects of famine. Simple possession of information is inadequate; it is the *open exchange* of information that alleviates famine.

Given the dire need for relief supplies, humanitarians should expect their counterparts to be under extreme political pressure. This requires an even higher level of transparency than in other difficult emergencies. This classic humanitarian dilemma has no easy answers. In general, however, the greater the flow of information, the better coordinated and supplied the overall response to the emergency will be.

There are indications that officials in Pyongyang may not have an adequate understanding of conditions in the countryside. Humanitarian agencies can provide a vital service to the populations

they aim to serve by sharing their findings and concerns with authorities at all levels of government, including line ministries (e.g. Ministry of Health).

6. *Population Movements*

There are continuing reports of internal displacement within and minor refugee flows out of North Korea. The internally displaced are the most vulnerable of all populations in North Korea. Population flows need to be monitored and trends recorded. Official policies that forcibly prohibit internal displacement should be strongly discouraged. Learning the origin of internal displacement and acting upon this information is critical. While internal displacement should not be discouraged, stopping displacement through meeting emergency relief needs in sending areas will greatly increase the chances of survival for these populations.

7. *Capacity Building*

As the crisis in North Korea intensifies, the central authorities have responded by decentralizing responsibility to local leaders. This has yielded new coping mechanisms for areas able to recover scrap metal for barter trade with China or coastal areas able to trade sea products with Japan, for example. On the other hand, it has deepened vulnerability in communities with traditionally weak economic bases or among those that lack strong leadership. This presents a special challenge to humanitarians who must identify and reach (through the types of indicators and strategies outlined in this paper) areas that are without charismatic leadership. On a positive note, this is an opportunity for strengthening the autonomy of local government structures, a necessary development if North Korea is ever to withstand its inevitable and continuing humanitarian crises.

Concluding Remarks

History teaches us that famine may threaten the survival of the people of a communist nation but it will not threaten the dominant political regime. Therefore, a potential donor's use of humanitarian assistance as a tool of foreign policy is not only particularly inappropriate but is counterproductive as well. This paper has argued that it is not a question of whether or not to provide aid to North Korea. Rather, it has sought to underscore the serious challenges that are complicating the effective provision of relief assistance. It is more than a matter of simply providing massive donations of food and medicine, although these are, of course, badly needed. Fully understanding the political nature of this emergency is essential as well.

The humanitarian crisis in North Korea will worsen as this season progresses. Given the overall vulnerability of North Korea's agriculture and ecological systems, it can be expected that any heavy rains (normal or otherwise) will cause further flood damage in this, and the years to come. The 1997/98 harvest will be inadequate and there will be continuing humanitarian needs in North Korea for the foreseeable future. Out of recognition of this trend, this paper has raised difficult issues that need to be faced by humanitarians who are scrambling to do their utmost for those who suffer in North Korea. The more astutely these issues are

addressed today, the greater the chance of surviving this year will be for vulnerable people living in North Korea.

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Comments

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