

Policy Forum 11-34: Forget the Politics, It's Wrong to Ignore the Human Suffering

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Forget the Politics, It's Wrong to Ignore the Human Suffering

By Young-yoon Kim

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I. Introduction



Sacks of wheat arrive in the DPRK in 2008. Photo: AP

Young-yoon Kim, Senior Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for National Unification, analyzes whether or not South Korea should provide humanitarian aid to the DPRK, given the nature of the North Korean regime and problems with transparency. Kim concludes that the ROK should extend aid, arguing that "the South Korean government nor the international community can afford to ignore this serious humanitarian crisis, not only for the sake of good neighborliness and brotherhood, but also for the sake of international obligations and prestige."

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II. Article by Young-yoon Kim

- "Should North Korea Be Provided With Humanitarian Aid?"

By Young-yoon Kim

In discussions about humanitarian aid to North Korea, it is not uncommon in South Korea to hear arguments such as "It is one-way giving with nothing in return," "The North has not changed," "Why give aid when all of it is diverted to the military?" "Why give humanitarian aid when they are developing nuclear weapons?" and so on. Moreover, these arguments are shared by many others in the international community.

In this context, there are two crucial issues for those who oppose aid. One is a question of intent: should we provide humanitarian aid to North Korea, given the nature of the regime? The other involves the problem of transparency.

Both of these issues are oriented solely around politics, not humanitarian issues. People in North

Korea are dying of starvation and suffering from serious diseases and malnutrition that result in stunted growth among children. Humanitarian aid is absolutely necessary to improve this devastating situation. Neither the South Korean government nor the international community can afford to ignore this serious humanitarian crisis, not only for the sake of good neighborliness and brotherhood, but also for the sake of international obligations and prestige.

NORTH KOREA'S FOOD CRISIS

South Korea sent several hundred thousand tons of grain to North Korea each year between 2000 and 2007, but this was stopped in 2008 when the conservative Lee Myung-bak government adopted a policy of linking any large-scale aid to the North's efforts to dismantle its nuclear weapons program. Despite the North's plea for outside aid, some skeptics in the South have argued that North Korea is exaggerating its food shortages in order to hoard food aid in preparation for a massive distribution on the 100th anniversary of the birth of its late leader Kim Il-sung on April 15 next year, a year in which the North has said it plans to usher in a new era as a "strong and prosperous state."

In fact, North Korea's food crisis began long before it became known to the outside world. Severe grain shortages appeared as far back as the late 1980s. Before the famine that began in the early 1990s — the so-called Arduous March that lasted much of the decade and saw up to a million people die of starvation or related diseases — North Korean authorities cut grain rations by 10 percent and launched a nationwide "two meals a day" campaign. As the grain crisis deepened and the famine wore on, rations disappeared altogether and most North Koreans were reduced to living on one meal a day made from the roots of grass and rice plants, the inner bark of pine trees or grass from the mountains and fields.

The causes of North Korea's grain shortages may be traced to several causes. First, a series of unexpected natural disasters, including flooding, sharply curtailed grain output. Between 1994 and 1995 alone, for example, total grain production plunged from 6.7 million tons to 3.4 million tons. Second, with the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the Eastern European states, as well as political turmoil in China in the early 1990s, there was a sharp decline in the supply of strategic industrial inputs such as crude oil, fertilizers and other materials. As a result, North Korea was faced with serious energy shortages that had a direct negative impact on all industrial sectors including agriculture, manufacturing and transportation.

Since 2000, North Korea's agricultural output has been showing some signs of recovery. This was the result of assistance in the form of fertilizer, agricultural equipment, fuel and other materials from South Korea and the international community. In 2010, North Korea produced 4.1 million tons of grain, which still left it with a shortfall of about one million tons. However, the country was able to import only about 350,000 tons that year. Given the persistence of North Korea's grain shortages, the government has made boosting agricultural output a top priority.

A North Korean who defected in 2010 said that the situation in the last several years has been so bad that even people in privileged Pyongyang, where he had lived, received only one week's worth of "grain rations" per month. He added that there were severe food shortages everywhere in North Korea. But the situation was most harsh in the provinces of Hamkyong, Yanggang and Jagang, where access to transportation is poor. With the lack of energy and the collapse of the central rationing system, North Koreans have had to face terrible conditions. Even if the food situation in recent years has not been as bad as it was during the Arduous March, it is dire enough.

ENSURING TRANSPARENCY IN AID DISTRIBUTION

Also clouding the debate about humanitarian aid to North Korea, which makes it different from other humanitarian emergencies, is the issue of aid diversion. If humanitarian aid is diverted for military consumption, the military will then have more money available to spend on other items. This argument has some validity. Food aid should be provided to the people who are actually in need; it is absolutely essential to find ways to ensure that this happens. We should seek the most effective means of sending humanitarian aid to North Korea. However, this does not imply that we should not help North Korea. This is a problem of method, not of intention.

To enhance transparency in the distribution of aid, the South Korean government has made various efforts to inform ordinary North Koreans that the aid is being sent from the South by fellow Koreans in order to foster an atmosphere of reconciliation and reduce antagonism. The South's government, for example, has asked the North to accept goods with South Korean labels and not to remove the labels before distributing them. Moreover, the South has selected aid items that would not be suitable for military use. In addition, the resident International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) representative has participated in the distribution process.

To ensure proper distribution, either the North Korean Red Cross has reported distribution activities to its South Korean counterpart, or members of non-governmental organizations have been dispatched to North Korea to confirm distribution. As a result, the North Korean people are aware of South Korean aid and have expressed their gratitude to South Korean Red Cross workers and NGO personnel. It has also been reported that North Korea has committed to making changes to the aid distribution system so that donors can track their deliveries and be certain that their aid is not being diverted to the military or the ruling elite.

The European Union and the US have put in place very strict aid monitoring systems from delivery at port to the point where the aid reaches the intended recipients. An office has been set up in Pyongyang and the resident staff of the United Nations World Food Program currently monitors food aid distribution. They visit the smallest administrative units in areas where food aid is delivered and inspect the status of distribution.

According to one North Korean defector, it is not accurate to assume that soldiers have been receiving rations simply because the military has been supplied on a priority basis. The amount of food rationed to the enlisted soldiers is quite limited. For the past decade, the South Korean government has only counted the aid that was shipped and unloaded. This is because it was provided as a form of food loan, not as unconditional aid. To guarantee transparency it is necessary to convert loans to unconditional aid. Inspections of city and town-level ration distribution points should be agreed to initially and the range of inspection targets should gradually be expanded to include smaller administrative units.

THE TASKS AHEAD

Several tasks lie ahead if the current problems pertaining to humanitarian aid to North Korea are to be overcome.

First, the international community needs to broaden the scope of its support to North Korea. Assistance needs to be expanded beyond emergency relief in order to promote sustainable development. The UN should increase its involvement in the North Korean development relief effort by making systematic adjustments in its planning. South Korean and international NGOs should also move their focus to development relief projects.

Second, North Korean humanitarian aid should be implemented concurrently in diverse areas. The humanitarian crisis persists throughout North Korea, especially in terms of food, security, health care, environment and education. Consequently, we must strive to provide a balanced distribution of the limited resources to different areas of need. In particular, the amount of aid for health care needs to be increased.

Third, the current North Korean economic crisis basically stems from structural defects that have resulted in shortages of food, energy and foreign reserves. North Korea, however, continues to maintain the politics of confrontation, spending most of its budget on the military. These policies are a major source of the criticism voiced by the international community, and have contributed to a negative image of North Korea and symptoms of donor fatigue. As a result, the most imperative task that North Korea faces is to initiate efforts to revive the economy on its own. Unless it does this, North Korea will not be able to overcome its chronic hardships.

Fourth, while North Korea has become more accommodating toward the demands made by the UN, South Korea and international NGOs, the level of governmental cooperation is still not satisfactory. A truthful evaluation of the situation, unrestricted monitoring, support from the local community and direct involvement by the beneficiaries are prerequisites to effectively utilizing humanitarian aid.

The most pressing task, then, is to convince the North Korean authorities of what needs to be done.

THE HUNGER OF CHILDREN

South Korean humanitarian aid has had a significant impact on North Korea's entire economy. Indeed, it has been a decisive factor in the economy's small but sustained growth. The direct benefit to ordinary citizens may be insignificant, but aid has affected the lives of North Koreans by preventing an increase in market prices. Humanitarian aid has also had a positive influence on the expansion of the market economy. The influx of daily necessities into the market has brought about an increase in economic activity and enabled North Koreans to learn about the market economy. Furthermore, humanitarian aid has had a positive impact on changing North Korean perceptions of the South, mitigating the sense of hostility. This will increase the number of North Koreans who hope for unification with the South, which could act as a substantial force in itself for unification. For these reasons, the South Korean government needs to state clearly its principles regarding humanitarian aid to North Korea.

If we wait until the situation in North Korea deteriorates dramatically, it will be too late. Would it be wrong to give humanitarian aid if it saved innocent civilians? If South Korean rice enables the North Korean people to survive, public sentiment will naturally begin to favor South Korea. This will be a great opportunity to gain the North Korean people's support, which is the most essential element for successful unification. In preparation for unification, it is vital to foster friendly emotions toward South Korea among North Koreans.

Former US Ambassador to South Korea Robert Gallucci has said that linking policy issues with humanitarian assistance is "bad ethically, morally and politically." Human rights are "basic rights, entitled to all people regardless of nationality, sex, age, national or ethnic origin, race, religion, language or other status."

All people are entitled to equal rights by virtue of being human. These rights may exist as natural rights or legal rights. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Can the South Korean government consciously and deliberately ignore the tragic plight of the majority of North Korean people, especially the most vulnerable such as children suffering from acute malnutrition? How can South Korea explain to the international community its refusal to extend the hand of generosity and compassion? The South Korean government must not lose its ethical compass. It would do well to remember the oft-quoted words of former US President Ronald Reagan: "a hungry child knows no politics."

III. Nautilus invites your responses

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