



Policy Forum 11-35: Outside Aid Has Failed. Only an ‘Intrusive Aid’ Approach Will Work?



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Outside Aid Has Failed. Only an ‘Intrusive Aid’ Approach Will Work?

By Nicholas Eberstadt

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I. Introduction



Workers unload food aid in the Sinuiju region of North Korea on December 11, 2008. Photo: Reuters

Nicholas Eberstadt, Henry Wendt Chair in Political Economy, American Enterprise Institute, and Senior Adviser, National Bureau of Asian Research, argues against providing humanitarian aid to the DPRK without strict international oversight. Instead Eberstadt proposes what he terms 'intrusive aid', which would require North Korea to comply with independent data collection and distribution of food aid. He writes, "The program of intrusive aid would be indivisible and non-negotiable...If Pyongyang agreed, the aid program would go forward. Otherwise the mission is scrapped — because Pyongyang refused to accept the conditions under which genuine humanitarian aid might have worked."

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II. Article by Nicholas Eberstadt

- "Outside Aid Has Failed. Only an 'Intrusive Aid' Approach Will Work?"

By Nicholas Eberstadt

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea launched its first frantic diplomatic appeals for international food aid in early 1994 — over half a year before the September 1994 flooding, it is worth noting, that was subsequently used as the official justification for the doctrinally awkward call for foreign aid by this ostensibly self-reliant juche state.

Pyongyang's appeal for international food aid continues to this very day: this year, North Korea has reportedly lodged requests for emergency humanitarian relief to the United Nations World Food

Program (WFP), the South Korean government, the US State Department and even a number of Third World countries. Thus North Korea's "temporary" food emergency has entered its 18th consecutive year, notwithstanding billions of dollars and millions of tons of humanitarian relief from the international community in the interim. So far as can be told, North Korea has lost the capacity to feed itself — an astonishing historical first for an urbanized, literate and industrialized society. Why should Pyongyang — a government that seems to manage such tasks as building and testing atomic weapons and launching long-range ballistic missiles — be so manifestly incapable today of the basic task of feeding its own population? We must address, and convincingly answer, this fundamental question before we can even hope to craft a successful international strategy for redressing hunger in North Korea.

Very broadly speaking, North Korea's now-permanent food crisis must be understood as the consequence of four defining factors — all of them integral to the very nature of the North Korean state.

The first, of course, is North Korea's distorted Soviet-style economy, which is more distorted than the Soviet Union's economy ever was: much less productive, much more inefficient, permanently and desperately dependent upon flows of foreign aid just to keep on going in its own sputtering manner. The second is the regime's completely wrongheaded food self-sufficiency policy: this Northeast Asian economy is densely populated, with limited amounts of arable land, and long periods of cold weather, and the notion that it should be trying to grow its own food rather than exporting labor-intensive products to buy inexpensive calories abroad is an open-ended invitation for trouble. The third factor is the North Korean government's unique and long-standing war against its own consumers. Apart perhaps from Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge, Pyongyang has more completely demonetized its economy, and more successfully reduced its subjects to dependence upon direct provision of supplies from their rulers, than any modern government; when the supply pipeline dried up, many hundreds of thousands of those subjects were condemned to a rendezvous with death. All of these are structural problems, and are plain enough to see. But there is also a fourth structural aspect to the North Korean hunger problem that is much less widely understood by outsiders: this relates to North Korea's songbun system of politically assigned class status. In an important forthcoming study, Robert M. Collins explains the workings of this system, with its 50-plus distinct strata, ranging from highly favored "core" classes to the so-called "hostile" classes at the bottom. [\[1\]](#) Life as a member of a designated "hostile" class in North Korea is full of peril: tragedies deliberately inflicted by the state. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the most desperate hunger North Koreans suffered over the past decade and a half was concentrated in the country's Northeast: in the provinces where the "hostile" class members were predominantly resettled after the Korean War. Plainly put: during times of extreme food shortage the North Korean regime didn't care too much if "hostile" class members perished — and may actually have perceived some slight political benefit in those deaths.

More than a decade and a half of humanitarian relief initiatives for North Korea have been financed by well-meaning but essentially clueless bureaucracies in the international community oblivious to, or unwilling to face, the ugly realities that account for North Korea's hunger problem today. To no great surprise, these clueless programs of supposed humanitarian relief have been a resounding failure. Or to be a little more precise: they have done a wonderful job of nourishing and supporting the North Korean regime — they have only incidentally and episodically mitigated the distress of the victims for which they were intended. Thus the unending calls for more food aid for North Korea — a pattern that in itself should awaken us to the basic bankruptcy of our current approach.

DARing to demand

Is there a role for international humanitarian assistance for North Korea? I believe there is — but it must be completely different from the hapless programs we have underwritten to date. I'd call my approach "intrusive aid."

Very briefly: intrusive aid would require North Korea to provide detailed internal data pertaining to health and nutrition throughout the country — death rates, heights and weights of children, and the

like — and not just the sort of obviously falsified data that the World Food Program and others have meekly accepted in the past. [2] Intrusive aid would also require free and unconditional access by large numbers of Korean-speaking outsiders to the country as a whole, so that they could conduct their own independent assessment of need. Further, intrusive aid would be administered by the representatives of the aid organizations themselves, not simply handed over to North Korean officials to use as they promised, or saw fit: trusting the good intentions of the Kim Jong-il regime would not be part of the program. Finally, and not least important, in consonance with the two basic principles of humanitarian relief — impartiality and non-discrimination — the program would demand access to all of North Korea's people: including the "hostile" classes, and yes, the prisoners in Yodok and other dreadful concentration camps.

The program of intrusive aid would be indivisible and non-negotiable: that is to say, no haggling, "salami tactics" or official interference allowed with any aspect. If Pyongyang agreed, the aid program would go forward. Otherwise the mission is scrapped — because Pyongyang refused to accept the conditions under which genuine humanitarian aid might have worked.

I am aware that my modest proposal for intrusive aid will be unpopular with many "aid professionals" and those who advocate continuing the failed approaches of the past, and will be regarded skeptically by other specialists and policymakers as well. How, critics may reasonably object, can we believe that Pyongyang could possibly agree to such conditions on outside aid? My reply is simple: we will never know unless we are bold enough to ask. We have seen what nearly two decades of timid, supine humanitarian aid has brought the North Korean people: food insecurity without end. Isn't it time to fashion an aid program as if the North Korean people really mattered?

III. References

[1] Robert M. Collins, *Marked for Life: North Korea's Apartheid, the Sung-boon System and its Impact on Human Rights*. (Washington, DC: US Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, forthcoming).

[2] Incidentally, the WFP's own method for estimating food needs — the so-called "food balance sheet" approach — is all but useless: it is akin to trying to guess a country's unemployment rate on the basis of its gross national product.

IV. Notes

How Songbun Defines North Koreans - and Can Destroy Them

Former CIA economist and political analyst Helen Louise Hunter detailed the songbun ethic, which ranks people according to their political class, in her 1999 book *Kim Il-song's North Korea*, written largely from debriefings of defectors. Here are two extracts:

Who's In, Who's Out

In North Korea, one's songbun is either good or bad, and detailed records are kept by party cadre and security officials of the degree of goodness or badness of everyone's songbun. The records are continually updated. It is easy for one's songbun to be downgraded for lack of ideological fervor, laziness, incompetence, or for more serious reasons, such as marrying someone with bad songbun, committing a crime, or simply being related to someone who commits an offense. It is very difficult to improve one's songbun, however, particularly if the stigma derives from the pre-revolutionary class status or the behaviour of one's parents or relatives.

A 50-Step Hierarchy

The highest distinction goes first to the anti- Japanese guerrillas who fought with Kim Ilson and second to the veterans of the Korean War; next come the descendants of the prerevolutionary working people and the poor, small farmers. Together, these favored groups constitute from 25 to 30 percent of the population. Ranked below them in descending order are 47 distinct groups in what must be the most class-differentiated society in the world today.

V. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this report. Please send responses to: bscott@nautilus.org. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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