



North Korea and the International Politics of Famine

By John Feffer

Introduction

Access to food is a basic human right. For several decades, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) prided itself on meeting the food needs of its population, although it has little arable land. Like many socialist countries, North Korea emphasized this success—along with high literacy rates, an equitable health care system, and guaranteed jobs for all—as proof that it upheld human rights, that its record in fact exceeded that of Western countries. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, a deteriorating economy and a steep rise in the cost of energy, followed in mid-decade by a series of natural disasters, undercut North Korea's capacity to feed its population. The public distribution system collapsed, and famine ensued.¹ Pyongyang appealed to its neighbors and then the world at large for help.

Through the United Nations, famine relief for North Korea became a global concern. The UN's World Food Program (WFP), in the largest aid program in its history, fed more than one-third of North Korea's population. For most countries, bilateral food aid became their only significant form of engagement with the DPRK. For many aid organizations, famine relief not only equaled engagement, it represented human rights work. "There is no hierarchy in human rights," explains Erica Kang of the South Korean nongovernmental organization (NGO) Good Friends. "But if you don't have any food on the table and your child is undernourished, the first thing on your mind is food. The right to food is one of our first priorities."² Food aid helped to meet the needs—and uphold the right to food—of millions of North Koreans.

The correlation between food and human rights in the DPRK has not been an altogether positive one, however. In the 1980s, human rights organizations began to document the extent of North Korea's violations in the civil and political sphere including political labor camps, the lack of freedom of speech and assembly, and the collective punishment of families for the crimes of an individual. In the 1990s, these accounts became more detailed and cross-checkable via interviews with an increasing number of North Koreans in China and South Korea. The same food crisis that prompted humanitarian relief also supplied the outside world with more details of the political and social reality within the DPRK.

At this time, too, allegations surfaced regarding the diversion of food aid, the distribution of food according to political classification, and the designation of parts of the country as lost causes. Complaining that Pyongyang restricted their humanitarian operations, groups like *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) and CARE pulled out of North Korea and rejected further engagement with the DPRK. Reports in 1999 from the U.S. General Accounting Office and the U.S. Institute of Peace echoed these criticisms. In its first term, the Bush administration responded to concerns about inadequate monitoring by reducing its U.S. contributions to the WFP.

What had previously been two relatively separate approaches to North Korea—food aid versus human rights criticism—have thus converged. The right to food, which humanitarian organizations emphasized in their operations, has become yet another arena in which critics have castigated Pyongyang's record. A former rationale for engagement has morphed into an argument for disengagement.

Although both the MSF and *Action Contre la Faim* (ACF) published some materials in support of their decision to withdraw from North Korea in the late 1990s, the first major broadside in the language of food as a human rights issue came from Jean Ziegler, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. In his February 2001 report, he penned the much-cited sentence that after 1995, "it gradually became clear that most of the international aid was being diverted by the army, the secret services, and the Government."³ After a short interval, human rights organizations zeroed in on the issue. Amnesty International published *Starved of Rights* in early 2004,⁴ and the South Korean NGO Good Friends issued its report *North Korean Human Rights and the Food Crisis* in March of the same year.⁵ In September 2005, Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland distilled these concerns into a report for the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea.⁶ Human Rights Watch followed up with *A Matter of Survival* in May 2006.⁷

All of these reports leveled charges against the DPRK. Haggard and Noland put the charges in the strongest terms: Pyongyang was "culpably slow" in responding to the famine, did not use funds to import food during the worst of the crisis, diverted food aid away from the neediest recipients, and blocked assistance to the hardest-hit parts of the country.

North Korea is not the first place to experience the collision of human rights and humanitarianism. In international conflicts such as Kosovo and Rwanda and in other famine situations such as Biafra and Ethiopia, champions of human rights and humanitarian relief often butted heads. Humanitarian organizations focused on delivering essential goods and services to satisfy basic human rights (to food and shelter). But they sometimes drew criticism for not addressing the situation of civil and political rights or systemic political abuses—in other words, the structures within which they had to operate. This dilemma was both tactical (what problems should be tackled first?) and philosophical (is there a hierarchy of human rights, with food being the most important, or should all human rights, economic as well as political, be treated with equal emphasis?).

To understand this conflict between human rights and humanitarianism in North Korea, we will separate the problem into four questions. (1) Was the DPRK famine the result of: unexpected external causes such as weather, unanticipated failures of state and local policy, or easily foreseeable system breakdown? This question will require analysis of North Korea's agricultural system and the difficulties it encountered in the 1980s and 1990s. (2) How can we evaluate the factual basis of the subsequent charges that North Korean officials engaged in human rights violations in the sphere of food policy during the famine era? This question will necessitate a closer semantic scrutiny of terms such as diversion and monitoring. (3) How have agricultural and market reforms more generally altered the food policy calculations in North Korea, particularly as they pertain to meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged? This question will spark a discussion of the relationship between famine/food aid and market mechanisms. (4) What are the policy implications of this debate about food and human rights? This discussion will lead us to an evaluation of strategies of linkage, the relationship between food aid and political change, and the current controversy over bilateral versus multilateral assistance.⁸

In answering these questions, this essay will reflect a philosophy that integrates human rights concerns with economic engagement. Humanitarian disasters in illiberal environments require such an integrative approach.

To understand North Korea's particular dynamic, though, we must also tackle the question of power as it relates to sovereignty. Cognizant of transborder issues such as environmental pollution, nuclear proliferation, and accelerated financial flows, most countries have relinquished a certain portion of their national sovereignty to craft global solutions to global problems. This trend has intensified since the Cold War. The DPRK, though it belongs to several international organizations and is a party to numerous international agreements, remains locked in a Westphalian political model that stresses territorial integrity and national self-determination. Relations with other countries fall under the communist-era rubric of "peaceful coexistence." This divergence on the issue of sovereignty isolates North Korea in an increasingly globalizing era.

But the conflict is not as simple as the DPRK versus the rest of the world. Nation-states practice essentially three types of sovereignty. Employing a sovereignty of the weak, countries like North Korea use Westphalian notions as a fragile shield against challenges from the outside. Wielding a hegemonic sovereignty of the

strong, the United States and other superpowers place their national interests above those of other countries and justify intervention on the basis of an assumed consensus of values such as democracy and stability. Citing a sovereignty of international law, mid-level states attempt to contain the hegemonic impulses of the strong and acquire a level playing field for the rest. Countries might deploy different understandings of sovereignty depending on the situation.

The battles between North Korea and those providing it with food aid might appear to revolve around different definitions of human rights. Beneath this surface conflict, however, is a more fundamental disagreement over sovereignty, with Pyongyang perceiving superpower designs behind the sovereignty of international law. The conflict between human rights and humanitarianism cannot be resolved without clarifying this underlying dispute about sovereignty.

Although the controversy regarding food and human rights in North Korea largely stems from matters now a decade old, the issue is all-too-current. Heavy rains and flooding in July 2006 have once again plunged the DPRK into a precarious food situation. Pyongyang is ambivalent about receiving international food assistance, and charges of human rights abuses in the food realm have once again surfaced. The United States, meanwhile, has put restrictions on financial dealings with North Korea and pressured other countries to do likewise—bringing to a virtual halt economic reforms within North Korea that might eventually help to solve the food crisis and point the way toward a more prosperous nation. The conflicts between international human rights norms and conceptions of state sovereignty continue to bedevil efforts to save lives in North Korea—and have considerable implications for how the world approaches similar humanitarian crises elsewhere in a changing world system.

Part One: Agricultural System

Both South Korean and North Korean agriculture have roots in the Japanese model promulgated during the colonial period. Approximately 30 years more advanced than Korea in its agricultural science, Japan applied its technological advances in seeds, irrigation, and fertilizer and pesticide use on the Korean peninsula in the first half of the 20th century.⁹ In the post-war period, when the Japanese system became the initial model for the Green Revolution—on the basis of its dwarf grain varieties and reliance on high-energy inputs—both Koreas continued to use heavy applications of fertilizer and pesticide to boost yields.¹⁰ Both countries, too, relied on mechanization to increase efficiency. Agricultural productivity came to depend on rapid industrialization.¹¹ Higher agricultural yields, particularly in the early years of the Cold War, were not merely a sign of the success of the farming sector but a litmus test for the very legitimacy of the respective regimes.

After a half-century of colonialism, both North and South Korea valued food self-sufficiency. For North Korea, such a goal was not an entirely unreasonable proposition. Although lacking arable land, North Korea's ratio of cropland to population is comparable to the United Kingdom and better than that of Israel and Vietnam. More to the point, North Korea's ratio is higher than that of Japan or South Korea—0.11 vs. 0.04 and 0.05 respectively.¹² Its overall climate is colder than Japan or South Korea. But the region that became North Korea served as an important agricultural supplier of the Japanese empire—specifically potatoes and millet¹³—and agriculture continues to employ about one-third of the population.

Self-sufficiency was not, however, easy for North Korea to achieve. Pyongyang often had to fall back on importing food, for instance between 1969 and 1974 and increasingly between 1986 and 1993.¹⁴ But at some point in between, according to the CIA, the DPRK attained near self-sufficiency in grain.¹⁵ North Korea even claimed production of 10 million tons of grain at the end of the second seven-year plan in 1984, though South Korean sources provide a more realistic figure of 6.26 million tons.¹⁶

In the 1970s, North Korea made two policy mistakes, one common and the other uncommon. The uncommon mistake was to continue on the path of food autarky while South Korea and Japan began to integrate themselves into the international food system. North Korea even began to deviate from the Soviet bloc. At this time, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe went from net exporters of food to net importers as they concentrated more on manufacturing consumer products and importing enough grain to support increased livestock production. The citizens of the Soviet bloc ate higher off the hog but at the expense of their government's new dependency on international grain markets. While North Korea was willing to adapt its *juche* philosophy of self-reliance in the 1970s to take out loans from Western countries—largely to import technology for its industrial sector—it continued to pursue its special form of food-security policy.

The common mistake that North Korea made in the 1970s was to continue to base its agriculture on the foundation of relatively inexpensive energy. As energy became more expensive, first during the two oil crises of the 1970s and later when the Soviet Union and then China moved to hard currency transactions, agricultural inputs such as fertilizer and pesticides as well as the fuel to power mechanized equipment became costlier. Large agricultural producers such as the United States and Canada could rely on domestic sources of energy. North Korea had coal and hydroelectric power but no oil or natural gas to speak of. It did not help that North Korea's farm machinery was quite energy-inefficient, that DPRK agronomists didn't recognize until 2000 the declining utility of large-scale fertilizer application, and that expanded production to marginal land contributed to wide-scale soil erosion.¹⁷ In other words, cheap energy had concealed for some time that North Korean agriculture was ecologically unsustainable.

As a result of these two principal errors, North Korea's food problems began to accelerate. South Korean scholar Lee Suk points to the steady decline in rations in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁸ A foreign resident of Pyongyang reported in 1987 that "apart from grain, there is not much else to eat."¹⁹ The 1987 allocation of wasteland for rural factory workers to use for private farming and the increased frequency of farmers' markets in the late 1980s (expanding from once every 10 days to daily) both suggest that the public distribution system was losing its capacity to meet basic needs.²⁰ Heavy flooding in 1990 prompted North Korea to cut daily food rations nearly in half and for the first time to appeal to international aid organizations.²¹ The "let's eat two meals a day" campaign, clearly a euphemism for greater scarcity, began in 1991. According to defectors, food riots in 1991 led to the mobilization of 4,000 People's Army troops and, when the soldiers joined the rioters, 3,000 political security troops.²² Interestingly, in response to the North Korean government's first request for aid, the UN World Food Program visited the country in 1991 and found no grounds for humanitarian relief.²³ It is tempting to speculate that the government invited the aid agency for economic reasons but couldn't divulge people's actual living conditions for political reasons.²⁴

The end of the Cold War in Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union only made matters worse, for Pyongyang could no longer leverage its geopolitical position vis-à-vis Beijing and Moscow. By the beginning of 1992, Kim Il Sung announced in his New Year's Address that the year would be one of "put-greater-efforts-into-agriculture."²⁵ In 1993, cold weather reduced the food supply by 500,000 tons. Hail damage in 1994 caused a 1.2 million ton reduction.²⁶ A poor Chinese harvest reduced 1994 exports to North Korea by half, so the DPRK turned to South Korea and Japan in 1995 for aid and commercial imports.²⁷ According to Andrew Natsios, North Korea also asked for food aid at this point from the United States but was told that only conditions of famine would release any shipments.²⁸ When the heavy rains and floods hit in 1995, famine indeed struck the country, and Pyongyang appealed to the international community for assistance. This time, the international community responded.

This historical discussion is necessary to establish several important facts. Unlike catastrophes in other planned economies, North Korea's food crisis did not originate in the decision to collectivize farms, to starve a political opposition, or to implement untested agricultural reforms. The famine resulted from a continuation of policies, not a radical departure from them. It was the sad but logical consequence of relying on high inputs of energy and striving for self-sufficiency in the interest of national security. Pyongyang's failure to come to grips with the unsustainability of its agricultural enterprise during an era of cheap energy resembles the predicament of many nations seduced by Green Revolution promises. The second error, the policy of self-reliance, was common in East Asia in the postwar era. But the DPRK maintained an autarkic food policy—even after its communist allies abandoned theirs—influenced by the same nationalist urge to retain strict sovereignty that inspired Park Chung-Hee's New Village Movement (Saemaul Undong)²⁹, and Japan's postwar efforts to achieve rice self-sufficiency, and China's attempts to maintain basic food self-reliance. Also, as Randall Ireson plausibly argues, it was not North Korea's pursuit of food self-sufficiency per se that was at issue but rather the way it pursued this goal. Observing environmental and economic constraints, North Korea could even today attain a measure of self-sufficiency in the agricultural sector.³⁰

Although Pyongyang clearly recognized the decline in agricultural production, the effects of the natural disasters that intensified in 1995 were unexpected. The flooding and drought did not cause the famine, but they could be said to have triggered the crisis and caught government officials unprepared. As such, neither as a result of policy errors nor as a function of natural disasters can the ensuing famine be construed as a deliberate or a desired outcome for the North Korean government.

Nor can the DPRK leadership be accused of “culpable slowness” in its response to the unfolding crisis.³¹ Pyongyang attempted agricultural reform, though of the too-little, too-late variety. It began to ask for international assistance as early as 1990. Its food imports rose between 1986 and 1993 to cope with shortages. It approached its traditional enemies—South Korea, Japan, and the United States—for assistance even at the risk of undermining its central doctrine of self-sufficiency. According to a 1999 interpretation of the right to food by the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, “It is important to distinguish the inability from the unwillingness of a State party to comply.”³² North Korea was willing but ultimately unable to ward off famine. If anything, it is the international community that reacted with culpable slowness, for it took two years before international donors responded on a significant scale to Pyongyang's requests.³³

The tragedy of North Korea's food policy in the 1980s and early 1990s was not one of criminal negligence but rather of blind allegiance to the modernizing ideology of high-energy agriculture and the nationalist chimera of complete food self-sufficiency. This was bad policy. Considering that as much as 10% of the population died in the late 1990s, this was in fact atrocious policy. The question remains, however, whether placing this tragedy in a human rights framework helps clarify the causes of the famine, the North Korean government's response to it, or international policies adopted in the aftermath. In determining causality, this framework has proven unhelpful, though the human rights perspective does clarify other issues.

Part Two: Human Rights Violations

When Medecins Sans Frontieres withdrew from North Korea in 1998, the first major humanitarian organization to do so, it raised many of the same concerns that continue to echo today in reports on food and human rights: the misuse of public funds for grand projects rather than food imports, the distribution of food according to political classification rather than need, the lack of monitoring, and the diversion of aid away from the neediest.³⁴

These are serious charges. But they are not new charges. In part, the human rights versus humanitarian readings of the North Korean crisis derive from different understandings of the origins of famine. One school looks at natural causes—local weather patterns or climate trends such as El Niño.³⁵ Another school focuses on economic issues, such as the impersonal play of the market forces of supply and demand. A third school stresses politics. As Lord Bauer sums up this last view, “The cause of famine, starvation, and acute hunger is not overpopulation, or bad weather, or debt, but government policies.” Lord Bauer was not concerned here with the negligent policies of powerful countries such as England (for instance, during the Irish famine) but those of Third World governments, which he considered inefficient, incompetent, or just plain venal.³⁶ Amartya Sen's assertion that democratic countries don't suffer famines is a more current and diplomatic restatement of this philosophy.³⁷

According to the political school of analysis, North Korea, by rejecting economic orthodoxy, political liberalization, and the stewardship of more powerful countries, has not suffered the slings and arrows of external misfortune but rather has brought the crisis upon itself. If Pyongyang had responded to worsening circumstances with the right policies—importing more food, distributing aid equitably, changing its budget priorities, and instituting democratic reforms—famine would either have been averted or quickly remedied.

The application of this political school of analysis to the case of North Korea has entailed a shift from a policy frame to a rights frame. What had hitherto amounted to criticism on the grounds of political failures has now been recast as violations of human rights. We thus exit the realm of policy and enter the realm of ethics, moving from political ineptitude to moral culpability, from largely domestic problems to actionable offenses in the international arena.

Whether North Korea's domestic behavior after 1995 constitutes human rights violations or is more prosaically the result of policy miscalculations depends a great deal on how one approaches a set of terms: political classification, diversion, monitoring, triage, and budget priorities.

Political classification

The information that North Korea divides its citizens into three major classes and 51 subdivisions within those classes appeared in English for the first time in the Human Rights Watch/Minnesota Lawyers International Human Rights Committee 1988 report on the DPRK.³⁸ According to the CIA and South Korean sources for this material, North Korean citizens are loyal, wavering, or hostile toward the government, with the subdivisions related largely to family history. These classifications affect employment, education, residence, and so forth. Although this class system had its origins in the immediate aftermath of the North Korean revolution, it became official only in 1967.³⁹ This picture of a society rigidly stratified according to political affiliation remains a fixture in analysis of the DPRK. Haggard and Noland, for instance, argue that this political stratification has meant that “deserving households—including politically disfavored households—are not getting the food intended for them or are being denied relief altogether.”⁴⁰ Amnesty International (AI) draws a correlation between political stratification on the one hand and proximity to Pyongyang and political privilege on the other.⁴¹

There is no question that North Korea is a highly hierarchical society, combining the traditional categories of Confucianism with the new classes associated with communism.⁴² But it is not clear whether the precise stratification identified above still applies in today's North Korea or whether it has had any influence over food distribution. It is quite likely that this classification system has changed over time, particularly since the categories often related to collaboration with Japanese colonial authorities, an event now more than 60 years in the past. “During the factionalist strife around the Korean War, the North Korean authorities needed a system under which they could punish their enemies,” economist Ruediger Frank explains, “but this system outlived its usefulness.”⁴³ Stratification, contends Erica Kang of Good Friends, still exists in the DPRK but is comparable to class categories in England: “There's stigma attached to it, but it doesn't buy you food.”⁴⁴ Analyst Michael Schloms quotes defectors who clarify that age and profession, not political loyalty, determined the size of rations.⁴⁵ “The significance of the songbun system,” writes Andrei Lankov, using the North Korean term for social hierarchy based on origin, “has greatly diminished over recent years.”⁴⁶

By the 1980s, new systems of privilege were emerging in North Korea. Average citizens, and not just highly placed Party members, began to have access to hard currency, to private agricultural plots, and to products available in private markets. During the famine years, relations with friends or family over the border in China became an important factor for survival. A classification system built solely on one's grandparents' collaboration under colonialism—or even on Party membership—gave way to different, informal status categories. Those who have profited under these new systems may well be those who parlayed their political status for economic gain, like the “red capitalists” of the East European and Soviet transitions. But those at the bottom of the hierarchy also engage in risky behavior because they have nothing to lose. Thus it was that ordinary women, generally a low-status group in North Korean society, acquired real power in the household and in the community at large. Scrounging small amounts of capital, these women became involved in cross-border and domestic trade, peddled wild greens or homemade food, raised domesticated animals, and sold produce from kitchen gardens.⁴⁷ Other low-status groups such as Japanese-Koreans and citizens of Chinese ethnicity also profited under the new dispensation.⁴⁸ A useful comparison could be made to the reconfiguration of social status at the end of the Choson era, as the sons of concubines, among other secondary-status groups, advanced politically and economically under the new system of Japanese colonialism.⁴⁹

Was food aid directed to the politically loyal? International aid agencies such as Caritas provided food aid to orphanages, where it is unlikely that political criteria played any part. The UN World Food Program distributed much of its provisions through food-for-work programs that may have been subject to unseen political screening, though this too is doubtful. Marcus Noland notes that the WFP also provided food to institutions, and political considerations may well have shaped decisions over how such provisions were distributed.⁵⁰ But such decisions would have taken place at a local level rather than by central directive, which blunts any charge of systematic human rights violations. In both cases, however, the WFP's country director for North Korea, Richard Ragan, insists there is no evidence of political considerations affecting distribution.⁵¹ The fact that targeted populations showed declining rates of malnutrition, particularly between the nutrition surveys of 1998 and 2002, provides some evidence for Ragan's assessment.⁵²

Political considerations may even have inadvertently benefited those most in need. As Erica Kang explains, some portion of food aid, which North Koreans considered of the lowest quality, found its way to the political labor camps. If anything, then, the perceived lower quality of the multilateral food assistance (as distinct from bilateral rice aid from China or South Korea) ensured that it went to the intended population. In other words, to the extent that political classifications applied to multilateral food assistance, they may well have benefited the neediest people, at least after the initial worst period of the famine.

Diversion

Humanitarian relief organizations operate according to the principle of proportionality: the greatest aid to the greatest need. Haggard and Noland discuss the "diversion" of aid to "less deserving groups."⁵³ This formulation raises two complex issues: the definition of diversion and the definition of deserving."

During the Victorian era, there was much discussion of the "deserving poor:" the virtuous poor who conform to majority values as compared to the poor deemed to be lazy and shiftless. Such Victorianism distorts the debate on humanitarian aid, for it encourages moral evaluations of who is and who is not properly deserving of food. Ethicist Peter Singer argues instead for effectiveness as a primary criterion: preventing as many people as possible from starving to death.⁵⁴ "If the way to do this is to aid those who are actually starving, then we should do so," Singer writes, "but if we can save more by employing other criteria as well, that is what we must do."⁵⁵ Such a strategy might mean directing food to farmers so they can grow more or to industrial workers so they can produce goods that can be sold to import more food. Everyone is deserving of food—that is, after all, the meaning of the right to food. But in a situation of scarcity, governments and aid workers must come to agreement over strategic allocations." Thus it is more useful to speak of "targeted" recipients rather than "neediest" recipients.

The word "diversion" suggests a concerted effort to channel food away from the targeted recipients. When the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Jean Ziegler, asserted in 2001 that "most of the international aid was being diverted," he based his charge largely on Action Contre La Faim documents that do not speak of diversion but only point out that the most vulnerable populations were not within the public structures of food distribution.⁵⁶ Ziegler later qualified his statements after consulting with his UN colleagues in the World Food Program, who discussed their efforts to improve monitoring and access.⁵⁷ Ziegler might also profitably have consulted an almost-identical back-and-forth between the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) and Rep. Tony Hall (D-OH) over a 1999 GAO report that made similar charges of diversion.⁵⁸

Subsequent claims of as high as a 50% diversion rate were stated in the Haggard/Noland report.⁵⁹ Good Friends, the source cited in the report, quoted a figure of 30% of international food aid going to the military, 10% allocated to workers in the munitions industry, and 10% to the staff of Kim Il Sung holiday houses. On the surface, this adds up to 50%. However, it turns out that Good Friends lumped all international assistance in this figure, including Chinese bilateral aid that had no strings attached and cannot therefore be considered diversion. Furthermore, Good Friends was careful to note that its assessment was based on a single eyewitness account.⁶⁰ Marcus Noland defends the diversion figure in his report by attributing it not only to Good Friends but also to interviews with a range of humanitarian organizations, some of which spoke of diversion, others of loss, and others of certain "taxes" paid to officials.⁶¹ Since these additional sources remain confidential, it is difficult to assess them. After noting that a 10% "spillage" rate is common in food aid deliveries around the world, the WFP's Richard Ragan declares that, "We bring in non-preferred commodities like corn and wheat, we process food at the factories, and we did between 300 to 500 visits a month, so I'm pretty confident that our food, that is, the WFP's food, largely went where it was targeted."⁶²

Some foreign aid has indeed turned up in unexpected places. Haggard and Noland cite a European NGO report of diversion of therapeutic milk.⁶³ Since the aid, intended for certain provincial hospitals, ended up in provincial baby homes, North Korean officials apparently interceded with their own ideas of the appropriate targeted population. Though unwise, given the training needed to dispense such milk, this example of redirecting aid is not comparable to, for instance, the can of foreign food found on a North Korean submarine that ran aground in South Korea. That was a clear example of diversion. Beyond these cases, there are rumors of diversion and allegations from defectors, but the meager evidence so far suggests that no significant or systematic diversion took place.

Still, it is plausible that Pyongyang might allow international aid to reach targeted populations so that it can then redirect to the military the domestic production that would otherwise have fed civilians. Given the DPRK's "military-first" policy, this kind of sleight of hand would not be surprising. First of all, the government could argue that such a redirection is a national security priority. Second, since the military has been the most effective work force in the country, akin to the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, this practice might qualify as a strategic allocation according to Singer's criterion of effectiveness. Less justifiable, of course, would be reallocation if domestic resources that had previously fed the general population were reallocated to party cadres who already enjoyed a better diet.

But how well did the military and party cadres fare during the food crisis? Even under the military-first policy, the North Korean military has suffered severe shortages of food.⁶⁴ In fact, as the 2004 report from Good Friends points out, hunger among the rank and file in the army presented a major social problem: the plunder of civilian stocks.⁶⁵ In the army divisions that obtain higher food rations, "The military supplies go into the society through several routes," one defector has written. "Moreover, the military supplies disappear because the officers save them for their families, and people who are in the army try to save as much as they can while they are in the army."⁶⁶ Party cadres, too, suffered during the famine. One high-level DPRK official told former top North Korean government adviser Hwang Jong Yop before he defected, that 10% of those who died of famine-related causes in 1996 were cadre members, a figure that roughly matches the rate of Party membership in North Korean society.⁶⁷ This anecdotal evidence of hunger and malnutrition among soldiers and cadre suggests a more egalitarian distribution of food than alleged in human rights reports.

Perfect information about the food needs of a population, particularly one in a crisis situation with a rather poor communications system, is impossible. "All international humanitarian action is subject to some irremediable constraints," famine specialist Alex de Waal writes.⁶⁸ As Christopher Barrett and Daniel Maxwell note, measurable need is only ever one of several criteria for distribution, and food transfer is both difficult and time-consuming and therefore subject to considerable "targeting errors."⁶⁹ They cite several studies in the Horn of Africa demonstrating "that food aid flows as frequently to the richest, most food-secure districts and households as it does to the poorest, most food-insecure ones."⁷⁰

Political considerations—social classifications, military-first designations, or in capitalist countries, economic class strata—do not warp a perfect humanitarian aid system. Each aid system has inherent structural limitations that produce the abovementioned spillage rates. Targeting is not a hard science. It must be negotiated within countries and between governments and aid agencies.⁷¹ Targeting is, in other words, a matter of contested sovereignty—a power struggle over who makes the ultimate decisions regarding allocation of resources.

Monitoring

Without careful monitoring, it is very difficult to determine whether food reaches its intended population. Aid organizations and critics have complained that DPRK authorities have placed numerous obstacles in the path of monitors. Korean speakers have traditionally not been permitted on monitoring teams. Random, unannounced inspections are not allowed. Certain provinces are off-limits. These restrictions have given rise to the notion that North Korea has something to hide.

Monitoring is not an on-off proposition. Rather, there is a spectrum of coverage, and monitoring, like targeting, requires negotiation. Action Contre la Faim left North Korea in 1999, complaining that the country only accepted unconditioned aid.⁷² But other organizations, including the UN World Food Program, gradually negotiated better terms during the course of their stay in the country, and managed to change the conditions under which their aid was dispersed. The WFP was only able to target its aid geographically beginning in 2001,⁷³ but it eventually established five regional offices and considerably increased the number of monitoring visits it conducted (before renegotiating a lower level of aid and access in 2006). The South Korean NGO Good Friends developed a direct relationship with authorities in the North Korean province of Rajin-Sonbong and has reported an improvement in monitoring conditions.⁷⁴ Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFB) insists that the quality of monitoring in the DPRK "exceed[ed] the average monitoring of CFB programs."⁷⁵

But monitoring has become more than simply an index of the effectiveness of aid distribution. For North Korean authorities, monitoring has represented a level of invasiveness permitted to a certain extent with agencies trusted to a certain degree, but the activity has always been unacceptable from a national security point of view. For donor countries, monitoring has come to be seen as an indicator of whether North Korea was willing to play by international rules of conduct. This politicization of aid—in which monitoring is perceived as more than an instrument of judging effectiveness—has transformed negotiations between international agencies and North Korean officials into a power struggle over, ultimately, sovereignty. Food crisis situations elsewhere in the world haven't received comparable scrutiny. As one aid worker who has worked extensively in North Korea quips, in referring to food aid delivered to Afghanistan after the toppling of the Taliban, "How is food aid monitored when it is thrown out of an airplane?"⁷⁶ In situations where sovereignty struggles are not germane—Afghan sovereignty had been all but abrogated—monitoring is a political non-issue, even though questions of targeting and effectiveness remain.

Currently the debate over monitoring has shifted to whether the Republic of Korea (ROK) can require the same level of transparency for its bilateral aid that the WFP achieved in its multilateral assistance. Seoul argues that, like the WFP, it has improved its monitoring activities over the years as a function of building trust

and relationships.⁷⁷ It is also interesting to note that NGOs initially criticized the WFP for setting a low monitoring standard.⁷⁸ Now it is the WFP that is held up as the benchmark by which all other monitoring should be judged. We'll return to this question of South Korean assistance in the section on policy implications.

Triage

The largest number of North Korean food migrants and refugees in China come from the DPRK's northeast provinces. Interviews with these refugees suggest that the famine hit this region hardest. Nutritional surveys also indicate that malnutrition varies significantly by province, with children in North and South Hamgyong and Ryanggang provinces worst affected.⁷⁹ That food monitors were not allowed into certain areas of North Korea prompted speculation that officials deliberately cordoned off certain parts of the country in order to save other ones. Andrew Natsios wrote in 1999 that Pyongyang had triaged the Northeast. According to Fiona Terry of *Medicins Sans Frontieres*, in a 2001 *Guardian* article, Kim Jong Il asserted in a 1996 speech that only 30% of the population needed to survive in order to rebuild North Korean society.

North Korea's northeast provinces have traditionally been food-deficit regions that relied on transfers of food from the South. When the famine hit, the government began to apply the self-reliance doctrine of *juche* at the provincial level. Since the center no longer had surplus food to distribute, each province was on its own. Individual counties negotiated contracts directly with Chinese authorities across the border; entire factories, reduced to scrap, were traded for food.

The question from a human rights perspective is whether Pyongyang exacerbated this situation. The northeast provinces are home to economically important industries (mining) and have been political strongholds for the Workers Party.⁸⁰ On the face of it, then, it wouldn't make sense for Pyongyang to deliberately starve a politically and economically important part of the country. The situation does not appear comparable to Moscow's approach to the Ukraine in the 1930s or Addis Ababa's posture toward Tigray province in the 1980s. Although the northeast provincial capital of Chongjin was the site of a possible military coup in 1995, there is no evidence that this city was a bastion of political opposition.⁸¹

Yet DPRK authorities resisted initial requests from international relief organizations to provide assistance to the Northeast. World Food Program aid reached the East Coast only in 1997 and 1998, and only one-fifth of the WFP's total aid went to feed the third of North Korea's population that lived in this area.⁸² Though Pyongyang later agreed to an expansion of the WFP program in the Northeast, it is difficult to explain the two-year lag in response to conditions there.⁸³ Political scientist Wonhyuk Lim speculates that the central government was reluctant to show the worst of the crisis to foreigners.⁸⁴ He points out, though, that food aid did make it to the Northeast in 1995, when South Korea shipped provisions to Chongjin, a primary port in that area.⁸⁵

Meanwhile, food monitors were barred from 45 of 303 DPRK counties in March 2005. Aid workers offer various explanations, including potential military sensitivity or the location of prison camps in those counties. Disputing the notion of any area being cordoned off, Good Friends staff person Erica Kang counters that even the labor camps, which have the highest concentration of the politically suspect, received foreign aid because this food was considered to be of the worst quality.⁸⁶

Pyongyang's greatest policy error at this time was its attempt to uphold laws restricting freedom of movement. Travel restrictions made it difficult for the population in the Northeast to move around legally to obtain food.⁸⁷ Ultimately, however, the formal travel pass system began to lose its hold, and even cross-border movement became more feasible, though not without hardships or grave dangers. Meanwhile, though, the application of *juche* on a county level may have been a sensible accommodation to reality, this provincial extension put the Northeast in very difficult straits.

Beyond a doubt, the DPRK's food crisis hit hardest in the Northeast. Although there is no solid evidence that Pyongyang deliberately cut off this province, distribution of food was a significant problem. In retrospect, given what we know of the consequences of the famine in the Northeast, Pyongyang should have directed more food aid there between 1995 and 1997, particularly in the period when South Korean aid dwindled and international aid had yet to begin. It would be a mistake, though, to argue that the central government was either unaware of the regional problem or did nothing to rectify it. Pyongyang's major failing seems to relate more to the overall amount of available food than to its distribution. So now we must turn to the government's budget priorities.

Budget priorities

During the famine period, North Korea continued to spend large amounts of money on its military and on projects extolling its past and current leadership. This approach to budget allocations might be considered a human rights violation, since it deliberately deprives the population of its right to food. Such political decisions have indeed been appalling. Unfortunately, North Korea is not alone in this regard. Not only do many countries in the world spend money on the military when portions of their population are malnourished, but the global order itself tilts in favor of military purchases rather than food distribution to the poor. In most free trade agreements a national security exception exempts military budget decisions, such as direct subsidies of contractors, from trade liberalization—which suggests that the sovereign right to exclusive control over military spending remains strong even when global institutions and treaties have trumped sovereign control over other budgetary matters.⁸⁸

Still, despite the generally poor track record on budgetary priorities around the globe, international agencies, NGOs, scholars, and activists have increasingly come to view development as a human right and to see political and civic freedoms as important to securing economic improvement.⁸⁹ The lack of opportunity for groups within North Korea to voice their dissatisfaction—about economic priorities or the distribution of economic goods—is a significant concern. That this problem exists to a greater or less extent in other societies, including democratic ones, does not let North Korea off the hook.

So, did Pyongyang's budgetary decisions exacerbate the famine? Though North Korea did increase its commercial imports of food as its agricultural situation deteriorated in the late 1980s, the levels declined in the mid-1990s (along with all imports) and sagged again from 1998 on. Was this part of a plan to deliberately starve the population? Wonhyuk Lim rebuts any such claim. With more food aid finally entering the country in the late 1990s, the government decided that it did not need to import a surplus. "One may suggest that the planners should have allowed a bigger margin of error before reducing commercial imports to prepare for unexpected changes in domestic production or food aid," he writes, "but it would be a stretch to argue that the planners reduced commercial imports with intent to leave the population vulnerable to starvation. Western donor countries have significantly reduced their food aid to North Korea since 2001, but scholars don't assign such a sinister motive to these reductions."⁹⁰

The DPRK's food crisis took place during a period of general economic collapse. The country's leadership also perceived that it remained within a generally hostile international environment that required continued military expenditures. The loss of the country's first and only leader in 1994 also generated what might be considered a legitimization crisis, and the ruling elite became more anxious about maintaining power. With budgetary resources declining, it had to make strategic allocations, and it invoked its sovereign right to do so. The decision to rely on international food aid, although directly threatening to the governing ideology, begins to make sense in the context of an overall budgetary crisis. Since a hungry population and a malnourished military do not make for a stronger security policy or a heightened sense of government stability, the decision not to import more food in the mid-1990s would appear to be a miscalculation rather than a deliberate or callous attempt to starve the population.

North Korea's decision in 2005 to phase out humanitarian food shipments has been highlighted as another example of government policy that deliberately puts the population at risk.⁹¹ But Pyongyang, recognizing how ill advised dependency on food aid is, has long called for a shift from aid to development. Rather than a function of inept agricultural policy or a criminal disregard for still-vulnerable populations, the government's decision seems based on a longer-term assessment of the requirements of the economy.

Whether Pyongyang is in error depends in part on calculations of grain shortfall. According to conventional estimates, the DPRK needs approximately 6.5 million tons of food annually to feed its population. Its best harvest recently was in 2005, when it produced 4.8 million tons. Its shortfall, therefore, was approximately 1.7 million tons, which it has to make up in aid or trade. Ruediger Frank, however, calculates a lower overall requirement of less than 5 million tons.⁹² If North Korea maintains its 2005 yields, the government faces virtually no shortfall at this lower figure. From his estimates, Frank believes that Pyongyang's decision to phase out humanitarian aid shipments is rational rather than irrational.

If, however, reports of the 2005 harvest are considerably inflated—if, for instance, the production level was more like 3 to 3.5 million tons⁹³—then aid from China and South Korea will not entirely fill the gap, and hunger will worsen in 2006. The DPRK has negotiated a two-year program of development assistance with the World Food Program that would provide aid for nearly 2 million children and women of childbearing age in the industrial East and mountainous North, but this too would be insufficient if overall grain calculations are unwarrantedly optimistic.⁹⁴

The 2006 floods further complicate the situation. The extent of the damage remains unclear. The North Korean government claims “hundreds” dead, while the South Korean NGO Good Friends estimates over 50,000 dead or missing.⁹⁵ The loss of arable land, according to the World Food Program, suggests a decline of as much as 100,000 tons of food from the expected harvest.⁹⁶ The significance of this shortfall depends on the level of bilateral assistance. Seoul has reversed its initial suspension of humanitarian aid after North Korea’s July missile launches, and South Korea’s Red Cross has offered 100,000 tons.⁹⁷ If Seoul resumed sending its annual contribution of 500,000 tons of rice, the shortfall would be covered. Much also depends on China, for this erstwhile ally has reduced its oil shipments in the aftermath of North Korea’s missile launches in July 2006. For its part, Pyongyang was initially reluctant to invite international assistance back into the country (over and above the negotiated World Food Program amounts) but has more recently shown greater receptivity.

Some critics have charged the WFP with subsidizing the DPRK’s military program by supplying assistance to populations that the government should responsibly use its budget to feed.⁹⁸ The truth is, however, that humanitarian organizations find themselves in this position virtually everywhere in the world—including rich countries such as the United States—because government budget priorities are set according to political considerations not humanitarian ones. The problem in North Korea is that those who suffer because of a humanitarian crisis have no political voice and have little hope of affecting official policy except indirectly in the government’s calculations of its overall stability.

Thus we have two separate but related divergences on the issue of sovereignty. In the first divergence, North Korea has asserted its right to determine policy within its territory and has been loath to accept the demands of other governments or NGOs concerning the production, distribution, and accountability of its food system. In the second divergence, North Korea adheres to a notion of state sovereignty in which power is invested in the institutions of government; many other countries believe to one degree or another in popular sovereignty, in which power is invested in the people. In other words, Pyongyang clings to an older, Westphalian model in an age of globalization and democracy. The question remains whether any of this will change as a result of ongoing reforms within North Korea.

Part Three: Reform

The North Korean government is caught in a double bind on market reforms. Either it implements modifications that critics dismiss as lukewarm or it introduces sweeping changes that threaten the social safety net and plunge the already poor into more abject poverty.⁹⁹ In the first case, Pyongyang is guilty of perpetuating injustice by not properly fixing a broken system; in the second, it shows the same callous disregard as neoliberals for those who can’t command market access in order to purchase food. Viewed another way, the current DPRK system appears to be experiencing the worst of both worlds: capitalism without proper regulation, and socialism without egalitarian distribution. This dilemma poses a peculiar challenge for any transitional economy that hasn’t experienced political transformation: how to change enough to satisfy outsiders (investors, economists, international financial institutions) without undermining the source of domestic legitimacy (a more-or-less egalitarian social contract).

There is an analytical challenge as well. When a government is the sole guarantor of food security, any and all failures to uphold the right to food can be placed at its door. In the current, more complex situation in North Korea, the emerging market and Pyongyang’s ongoing reform project must both be taken into consideration when evaluating the relationship between food policy and human rights. Governments can be accused of human rights violations. On the other hand, it is rarely considered a human rights violation for a market economy to disburse its rewards inequitably. According to the laissez-faire model, political leaders are not obligated to intervene in the economy for the purpose of redistribution; indeed, they are practically enjoined from doing so. The UN’s Human Development Report 2000, however, suggests that each government has a responsibility to work with markets and other mechanisms to lift its citizens out of poverty and that citizens should hold their political leaders accountable to this task.¹⁰⁰ If a country is cautiously nurturing a market economy, can we evaluate its effort in terms of strengthening or weakening the right to food without falling into judgments about what governments should and should not do with respect to the economy?

Let’s first look at Pyongyang’s reform package in the agricultural sector. The government has engaged in a number of attempts to improve agricultural efficiency: double-cropping, introducing a wider variety of crops such as potatoes and broadening the range of livestock with chickens and goats, consolidating agricultural lands for greater efficiency, bringing underutilized land under cultivation, and exploring new seed varieties, nontraditional fertilizers, integrated pest management, and even organic production.¹⁰¹ Some of the changes introduced since the mid-1990s have been de facto responses to altered circumstances, such as a greater reliance on manual labor to substitute for a lack of mechanized tools. Other changes have related to the structure of production, such as reducing the size of work teams and allowing more flexibility over the dispensation of products from private plots. In the last five years, local farm managers have been given broader autonomy to determine what crops each farm should grow and where the surplus will be sold.¹⁰²

This decentralization of control has taken place within the context of expanding private markets that have both stimulated and absorbed surplus production. During the 1990s, the market became a key source of food for the population, as even the North Korean government admitted in its 2004 nutrition survey.¹⁰³ It is estimated that 60-70% of the population now trades part-time or full-time on the market.¹⁰⁴ What had been liberalization on the margins has crept closer to the center, as market relations—and market prices—increasingly shape agricultural transactions in the DPRK. Pyongyang has not wholeheartedly supported these developments at all times, however. During the food crisis, for instance, much of the market expansion was technically illegal, and this resulted in considerable corruption and police shakedowns that continue today.¹⁰⁵

Still, these top-down reforms and the encouragement (or at least the toleration) of bottom-up marketization suggest that the DPRK leaders are seriously casting about for ways to fix the systemic problems that accelerated the food crisis in the early 1990s. These various reforms have led to a moderate improvement in agricultural production as 2005 yields returned to the levels of the early 1990s. By expending considerable effort to revive the agricultural sector, Pyongyang has upheld development as a human right, though outsiders might disagree about the proper proportion that government and market should play in the reform process.

If the market is increasingly influential in North Korea, how can we understand charges that food aid has been diverted to the new private sector? Critics point to photos and video footage of bags of international aid on sale in private markets throughout the DPRK. Although others respond that sturdy bags—a rare commodity in the country—are reused and that the bags in the photos are usually open, there is considerable anecdotal evidence that aid indeed shows up in the market, as people barter their food for other needed items.¹⁰⁶ But the question remains: if food ends up in the marketplace, is it being diverted? And if it does qualify as diversion, should it be discouraged?

Economist Ruediger Frank is blunt: diversion of food to the market should be praised, not condemned, for it contributes to change in North Korea and is more effective than any planned attempts to reform the country.¹⁰⁷ Aid, he further contends, has a multiplier effect if it is monetized in its circulation through the economy.¹⁰⁸ Andrew Natsios holds a similar view: “International food aid has stimulated private markets, reduced the price of food in the markets 25-35%, and undermined central government propaganda concerning South Korea and the United States.”¹⁰⁹ Moreover, the diversion does not apply simply to external aid. Pyongyang’s own reforms stimulated a form of diversion as farmers underreported their yields in order to hold back more food to sell on the market.¹¹⁰ It is even common for humanitarian relief to support markets.¹¹¹ But in the DPRK, individual citizens, not humanitarian agencies, bought and sold aid on the market. Regarding this practice, Marcus Noland raises an important objection. If food aid trickles down through the economy and doesn’t reach those without purchasing power in the market, the result is “suboptimal.”¹¹² Absent policies to compensate the new class of market shutouts, this result reinforces the polarization of wealth inside a country.

The North Korean government has not fully embraced a laissez-faire philosophy, however. In September 2005, Pyongyang announced that it would no longer permit the sale of grains in the private markets, and it resuscitated the public distribution system (PDS) to replace the grain market. There are numerous explanations behind this revival of the PDS: a response to economic polarization, an attempt to combat rising inflation, or a method of reversing absenteeism

(since many workers receive food at their workplaces). But what if this resurrection of the PDS is, as Haggard and Noland maintain, “being used as a tool of control, with favored state employees provided with enhanced access to food in preference to the vulnerable populations targeted by the WFP”?¹¹³ In a volatile and murky market economy, it can be difficult to distinguish between government interventions to correct market inequalities and those designed to reallocate resources for political reasons.

Two problems with subsidized food are the opportunity for arbitrage and the difficulty of ensuring that, as with food aid, the most vulnerable get what they need. There is no formal means of testing in the DPRK. However, given some of the most recent reports out of North Korea, the resumption of the PDS system has had various effects in different parts of the country, with some markets strictly controlled to prevent the sale of grain and others not controlled at all.¹¹⁴ The government attempt to revive the PDS has so far been unsuccessful. The World Food Program reported that as of November 2005, recipients were not getting the target ration of 500 grams.¹¹⁵ PDS distributions in most areas, according to Good Friends, dwindled to nothing by the end of 2005 and had stopped in Pyongyang too by May 2006.¹¹⁶ Moreover, rice is apparently sold from private homes and by way of middlemen known as *doeguri*. Here again, political markers of status (i.e., party affiliation) are gradually giving way to economic markers of status (possession of hard currency). Sometimes these markers overlap; often they do not. Those with little market power, however, are liable to slip through an already-flimsy social safety net. The new, smaller WFP development program can only target a portion of the individuals who lack market access.

Ultimately, though, whether the zigzags of North Korea's economic reforms reflect good or bad policy decisions, the point is that they are policy. In the main, Pyongyang's changes do not appear to be designed to undercut the right to food. Most reforms have been intended to increase the amount of available food grown domestically, and the revival of the PDS attempted to address the problem of distribution. Should North Korea direct state policy toward higher-value-added agricultural production coupled with increased imports of staples? Perhaps. That it hasn't followed this oft-repeated advice, however, speaks more to its sovereign stubbornness—and its reluctance to jeopardize the one-third of its population living in the countryside—than to any deliberate abuse of human rights.

The renewed U.S. campaign to squeeze North Korea economically—by shutting down both its legitimate and illegitimate financial interactions with the world—may also reduce the average person's access to food. While the U.S. moves are designed to cut off the flow of funds to the North Korean elite, the net effect may depress the entire economy. In this new period of austerity, the question of whether economic reform strengthens or weakens North Koreans' right to food becomes moot. Economic reform has largely stopped.

Part Four: Policy Implications

Some have argued that Pyongyang's broad-spectrum violation of human rights justifies a suspension of all efforts at engagement, including food aid, in favor of government isolation and destabilization. As *Medicins Sans Frontières* researcher Fiona Terry wrote in *The Guardian* in 2001: “The purpose of humanitarian aid is to save lives. By channeling it through the regime responsible for the suffering, it has become part of the system of oppression.”¹¹⁷ Others, including Haggard and Noland, advise the continuation of food aid but under altered conditions linked to “political change” in the country.¹¹⁸ Those humanitarian organizations that still operate in North Korea—even as they shift to development as demanded recently by the DPRK government—have continued to favor some form of engagement and have avoided any discussion of sensitive topics related to internal political change.

The critical question is whether food policy—both within North Korea and toward North Korea by outsiders—requires policy change or political change. The former position suggests that the current DPRK government should continue with some manner of economic reform, that the international community should not add contingencies to food assistance, and that the changes that occur in these spheres will be largely technocratic: a mechanism might be improved, a reform might be fine-tuned. This has generally been the approach taken by humanitarian organizations.

The latter position of advocating political change suggests that a more thoroughgoing transformation is required in North Korea in order to guarantee its citizens the right to food. As Haggard and Noland argue, “only political change” can “guarantee a North Korea free from hunger.”¹¹⁹ Moreover, they add, the lack of sufficient food is “directly” related to other human rights violations, namely freedom of expression and freedom to organize.¹²⁰ If this latter position is taken, foreign governments might insist on attaching political conditions to economic assistance. The DPRK, for instance, might not be able to secure substantial development assistance without first dismantling its prison camp system.

Policy change might suggest internal linkages, such as tighter food monitoring systems. Political change suggests external linkages, such as making economic assistance contingent on improvements in civil and political rights. Policy change involves negotiating civilly and respecting North Korean sovereignty; political change requires undermining that sovereignty.

The era of humanitarian aid to North Korea may well be over, given Pyongyang's announcement in late 2005 that it is now only soliciting development assistance and is asking all humanitarian organizations to leave the country. But the issue of policy change versus political change remains relevant. Many of the concerns around monitoring and transparency will inevitably carry over to the development era. Indeed, in this new phase, foreign donors will have much greater opportunities for influencing the course of reform, since contingencies can apply to more than simply monitoring or transparency.¹²¹ Many of the criticisms regarding multilateral aid and NGO assistance are already being applied to South Korean food aid, which, except for a brief period in 2006, continues to flow into North Korea. Calls for more thoroughgoing political change within the DPRK have by no means disappeared; in some quarters they have intensified, particularly after the July missile launches.

External linkage has generally been successful in other contexts when foreign governments are working in conjunction with a domestic constituency pressing for political change from within. The classic case is the anti-apartheid movement's coordination with the African National Congress to link economic trade to political change within South Africa. Other examples might include the U.S. government's destabilization of Chile in the early 1970s—undertaken with the support of the Chilean military and business class—or the current campaign against the Burmese military junta undertaken in collaboration with Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy.

However, external linkage in the absence of strong domestic support in the target country has not had much effect. This was the case with the Soviet Union in the 1970s and China in the 1990s. External linkage also faces the “cat-herding” problem. For example, Washington was unable to persuade U.S. grain traders to submit to a coordinated policy toward the Soviet Union. Similarly, it will be difficult to convince U.S. corporations to accept limitations on trade with China in the case of the (yet to be introduced) Scoop Jackson National Security and Freedom Act of 2005, which would set limits on U.S. trade with China, if Beijing doesn't change its policy of returning refugees to North Korea. Moreover, it is very hard to support external linkages with respect to food assistance in light of humanitarian imperatives exemplified by Ronald Reagan's dictum that a hungry child knows no politics.

This leaves internal linkages, such as improved development project monitoring and fiscal transparency or trainings sessions for government officials and project managers. But has Chinese and South Korean bilateral aid weakened the case for such internal linkages? The amount of multilateral aid flowing to North Korea has declined significantly, from 900,000 metric tons in 2001 to 300,000 metric tons in 2005.¹²² Bilateral assistance has grown as a proportion of overall aid during this period, but, tellingly, South Korean assistance has not increased in monetary value. “So how could South Korea's stable bilateral and multilateral aid to North Korea since 2000/2001 undermine the WFP's negotiating leverage in 2005?” asks Wonhyuk Lim.¹²³ Meanwhile, Seoul has, like the WFP and NGOs before it, made an effort to ensure transparency and to engage in respectful negotiations with Pyongyang. As Dongguk University professor Park Sun Song observes, South Korea has more influence on the DPRK leadership, so the additional good will it accrues by providing bilateral assistance can theoretically be put to more efficient use.¹²⁴

So, should we conclude that linking food aid and human rights through some form of conditionality is counterproductive, even if food availability is to some degree reflective of the overall level of individual and collective freedoms in North Korean society? Alex de Waal entreats us to reconsider: “When famine prevention is recognized as a human right, and fought for using the sorts of political structures that exist when human rights are respected, then famine can be conquered. This is not to abandon humanitarianism, which can again be a force for ethical progress. But a humanitarianism that sets itself against or above politics is futile. Rather we should seek a form of politics that transforms humanitarianism.”¹²⁵ De Waal's answer is not substantively different from the recommendation in the Human

Development Report 2000: that the people enmeshed in a food crisis must mobilize and establish their own priorities in the policy sphere. This is an important point and must serve as an organizing principle in both humanitarian and human rights work, for it is an unfortunate failing of both approaches to treat target populations as victims and not actors in their own right. Both de Waal and the UN report agree that humanitarianism and a rights-based approach should not be set against one another.

At an official level, North Korea has numerous laws that respect the human rights of its citizens. However, at an operational level, it maintained laws, even during a food crisis, that substantially violated the rights of its citizens, whether related to freedom of movement or the freedom to engage in economic activities. At a functional level, though, citizens were able to overwhelm these laws by traveling in large numbers without passes and engaging in gray market activities. North Koreans, although they did not create independent political parties or independent media, carved out new and expanded civil realities under extremely adverse conditions. This third level, wherein North Koreans proved they could act as subjects and not simply objects, is frequently ignored in analyses of "real, existing" human rights in North Korea.

Conclusion: Sovereignty

Humanitarian workers are agents of change both internally and externally. They serve as informants about what is going on within North Korea as they debrief in both formal and informal settings when they return to their countries, potentially contributing to external policy change. When they introduce innovative ideas into North Korea, exposing officials and scientists and farm managers to new techniques and ways of organizing their tasks, aid workers contribute to changing the very environment in which they work. To what degree these humanitarians cross the line and become instruments of their home country's government is difficult to determine. But, as Ruediger Frank argues, North Korea has certainly perceived many of these aid workers as suspect.¹²⁶ In other words, allowing humanitarian workers into the country doesn't only challenge the country's philosophy of *juche* or self-reliance. More importantly, it undermines Pyongyang's sovereign power to introduce change at its own pace, since government loses its monopoly over the control of information.

North Korea's perceptions concerning the politicization of humanitarianism have not been mere paranoia. U.S. food aid, for instance, has always been integrated into political change strategies that challenge the sovereign decision making of other countries. Washington extended its first food aid to Venezuela after a natural disaster in 1823 in order to boost support for a U.S.-friendly political party. Food aid to Europe after World War II—which spread to the Third World during the subsequent development era—was part of a larger strategy of consolidating an anti-communist front. As Hubert Humphrey declared in an unguarded moment: "We have to look upon America's food abundance, not as a liability, but as a real asset ... Wise statesmanship and leadership can convert these surpluses into a great asset for checking communist aggression."¹²⁷ The Food for Peace program, meanwhile, was designed quite explicitly to create demand for U.S. agricultural surpluses, stimulating a taste for dairy products or wheat or corn in countries that had never included such items in their diet. Any notion that the short-term political considerations that once governed U.S. food aid policy no longer apply today is a myth, according to analysts Christopher Barrett and Daniel Maxwell's scrutiny of Washington's food aid policies toward Afghanistan, Iraq, and North Korea.¹²⁸ U.S. government officials claim that aid to North Korea is purely humanitarian. But even as fierce a critic of North Korea as Action Contre la Faim has acknowledged that "U.S. support seeks to make the North Korean regime heavily dependent on U.S. aid while allowing the United States to increase its leverage with North Korea."¹²⁹

North Korea wants to eradicate precisely this type of leverage. The pursuit of its *juche* goal influences Pyongyang's approach to energy sources (nuclear power reduces reliance on Chinese capacity and potential South Korean electricity). It also influences its approach to food aid. To rely on one single source—China, the World Food Program, the U.S. Congress, or South Korea—gives that sole source unacceptable leverage. For the DPRK to be dependent on other countries for largesse—instead of what it views as a short-term infusion of capital to jump-start the rebuilding of its economy—is anathema. North Korea's move away from dependency on humanitarian aid is also pragmatic, given donor fatigue and pressing food crises elsewhere in the world. The DPRK's pragmatism and national security concerns, however, are compromised by its weakness. This weakness has forced the country to fall back on a rather old-fashioned conception of state sovereignty, which it has asserted against both popular sovereignty and the forces of economic globalization and human rights interventionism. On food matters, Pyongyang is forced into a position of choosing who will call the shots (the WFP, South Korea, or China) rather than calling the shots itself. The few levers at its disposal—the resurrection of the PDS, the continuation of market reforms, or the rejection of external linkages—are relatively weak. To import food and go into further external debt only increases the weakness of the government.

This paucity of choices amounts to a sovereignty of the weak. Some countries are powerful enough to systematically disregard the decisions, democratic or autocratic, of other nation-states (e.g., U.S. policy toward Chile in 1973 and toward Serbia in the late 1990s). In this hegemonic "sovereignty of the strong," powerful states assert the primacy of their sovereign powers not only within their own territories but even overseas (e.g., the U.S. opposition to the application of International Criminal Court jurisdiction over U.S. troops in other countries). Meanwhile, mid-level powers often attempt to solicit the support of both the dominant and the weak to construct a sovereignty of international law in order to level the playing field with consistent rules and regulations. North Korea remains suspicious of the latter, perceiving, for instance, a hidden regime-change agenda lurking within international laws concerning human rights standards. The dissembling behavior of overbearing nations and the weak and inconsistent application of standards by institutions of international law—which contribute to Stephen Krasner's notion of sovereignty as "organized hypocrisy"¹³⁰—help us understand North Korea's decision to cling to the outdated Westphalian model.

The South Korean approach to engagement acknowledges the importance that North Korea accords to issues of sovereignty. Seoul's decision to formally eschew the absorption path under Kim Dae Jung has necessarily led to a slow-motion reunification imagined to stretch over several decades. In this context, bilateral South Korean food aid is designed to help support the "progress of North-South relations."¹³¹ Given that anti-communism or boosting exports previously served as legitimate reasons for promoting food aid, South Koreans wonder why the promotion of unification can't be an equally legitimate consideration. Seoul perceives concrete benefits from offering food aid, both short-term (progress in ongoing economic and political negotiations) and long-term (investing a smaller amount now to avoid much larger infusions to resuscitate a failed state later on). The issue is not whether food aid comes attached with strings, but rather which country gets to attach the strings and enjoy the political advantages that ensue. In other words, "who gets the take that accompanies the give" is the subject of important but largely unstated power struggles.

South Korea faces a paradox. As a long-term goal, its conception of North-South engagement would substantially reduce North Korean state sovereignty through a confederal or federal arrangement. In the interim, however, Seoul's approach is reinforcing that same state sovereignty by strengthening the North Korean system. The DPRK can enter the reunification process on a more-or-less equal footing only when the North-South gap in capabilities is narrowed. Yet, from Seoul's perspective, the narrowing of the gap requires strengthening North Korea's central government, not simply maintaining it (and certainly not toppling it). Such strengthening translates, again in the short term, into a reassertion of Pyongyang's sovereign control over its food system, from production to distribution, from import levels to technical reforms. South Korea's strategy vis-à-vis popular sovereignty, a necessarily sensitive issue, is not altogether clear. Greater people-to-people contact might well encourage the seeds of civil society in the North. But Seoul continues to recognize and interact with Pyongyang as the primary interlocutor and locus of power.

South Korea's approach to North Korean sovereignty also runs counter to a brand of humanitarianism currently in vogue. When neutrality was a universally recognized value for international NGOs, the Red Cross won the Nobel Peace Prize (in 1944 and 1963). But, as Michael Schloms points out, *Médicins Sans Frontières* won the award in 1999 for quite the opposite reason. "The main characteristic of this new generation of humanitarianism," Schloms writes, "is the disrespect of sovereignty."¹³²

This divergence within the humanitarian movement mirrors the two main geopolitical approaches to resolving the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula: negotiating with Pyongyang (acknowledging its sovereignty) versus seeking regime change (undermining the state's sovereignty in favor of an imagined popular sovereignty). South Korea's policy on supplying food (or food-related development assistance) necessarily navigates between the shoals of humanitarianism and geopolitics, between supportive and dismissive positions on state sovereignty.

We are left with two difficult questions. Does the human rights framework help us understand the origins of and domestic responses to North Korea's famine? And how can the international community best assist North Koreans to improve their overall access to food?

Regarding the first question, the human rights framework did little to help us understand the sources of the famine, for it introduced the notion of deliberate malice in what can be understood as a combination of policy errors and natural disasters. Few would argue that the Bush administration's response to the Hurricane Katrina disaster was a human rights violation rather than a set of bad policies. The structural racism of U.S. society that ensured that the hurricane would have disproportionate effects on whites and blacks in New Orleans can be compared to the structural inequalities in North Korean society (based on inherited privilege or on differential access to the emerging market). Government policies should be designed to mitigate those structural inequalities. Government policies that don't are bad policies but not human rights violations. So, too, does the human rights framework prove inadequate when understanding the relationship between market reforms and the right to food, at least as it relates specifically to the North Korean context (unless one advocates the broader argument that free markets systematically deprive people worldwide of human rights).

In explaining Pyongyang's response to the famine, the human rights framework proves useful in some respects and not in others. While diversion and triage have proven to be largely non-issues—at least in terms of human rights violations—the human rights framework is useful for understanding the relationship between, for instance, the right of movement and the worsening of famine conditions. Such a framework is also helpful in highlighting the empowerment of the North Korean people as the rightful center of humanitarian policy. As such, food aid is not an apolitical enterprise. It can and should strengthen more than simply the right to food. But should it strengthen the larger bundle of human rights explicitly or implicitly?

This leads us to the second question. External linkages, which challenge North Korea's sovereign right to design and implement policy within its borders, are not likely to substantially improve its citizens' access to food. The DPRK leadership will resist externally induced change, less food will enter the country as a result, and the policy of external linkage will backfire.

It might be argued that the tide of history has turned against Pyongyang's interpretation of sovereignty, so countries frustrated with this outmoded approach should intensify their pressure until North Korea ultimately buckles. By this logic, instead of providing a Band-Aid of food relief, the international community should pressure the DPRK to change its system to conform to the recommendations of economists and the political observations of Amartya Sen. However, external pressures have not led to a change in North Korea's regime, despite many expectations to the contrary. Indeed, as the case of Cuba suggests, external policies that too explicitly challenge state sovereignty help to reinforce government stability by allowing the leadership to employ nationalism to rally popular support (or at least to deflect public dissatisfaction). Even if external linkages were to lead to regime collapse, a great many people might slip backward into famine for an unknown period of time. In other words, even if external linkage successfully attains its interim objective (regime change), it may fail miserably at meeting its overall goal (feeding the hungry). The current U.S. policy of tightening the economic stranglehold over North Korea falls into this category.

Internal linkages that acknowledge North Korean sovereignty, whether proposed by international actors or countries in the region, stand a better chance of not only increasing access to food but also incrementally expanding the social space that North Koreans have courageously carved out for themselves. Such internal linkages—better monitoring and targeting, training sessions for DPRK officials—have a track record of improving access to food in North Korea; the impact of external linkages remains hypothetical. Such internal linkages, to be successful, ideally occur in an atmosphere of political rapprochement. Only then will the larger human rights framework—political/civil as well as economic/social rights—be on the negotiating agenda with Pyongyang.

Paradoxically perhaps, recognizing state sovereignty may also create more opportunities for popular sovereignty to take root. When the North Korean state can incrementally relax its grip on the population—because engagement policies have allayed the leadership's anxieties over the country's weakened sovereignty—social and economic liberalization can proceed. It is at this intriguing juncture that engagement policies and human rights advocacy intersect in many interesting and still-uncharted ways.

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See also Hazel Smith, [Intelligence Failure and Famine in North Korea](#).

End Notes

1. There is some controversy over the use of the term "famine" to describe the food crisis that North Korea experienced in the 1990s. I use the term here to refer to "systematic starvation" as opposed to simply widespread hunger or malnutrition. As for the number of deaths attributable to this famine, it remains difficult to be precise, with figures cited anywhere between 200,000 and 3.5 million.
2. Interview with Erica Kang, December 7, 2005.
3. Jean Ziegler, "[Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights: The Right to Food](#)," Commission on Human Rights, E/CN.4/2001/53, February 7, 2001; accessed April 27, 2006.
4. Amnesty International, Starved of Rights: Food and Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), January 17, 2004; [web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa240032004](#); accessed April 27, 2006.
5. [Good Friends, North Korean Human Rights and the Food Crisis](#) (Seoul: Good Friends, March 2004); accessed April 27, 2006.
6. Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, Hunger and Human Rights: The Politics of Famine in North Korea (Washington: U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2005). Since the Haggard/Noland report has been widely cited in the press to highlight the issue of food and human rights in North Korea, it will serve as a touchstone for much of the following discussion. The Human Rights Watch report, though more recent, is not as comprehensive.
7. Human Rights Watch, A Matter of Survival: The North Korean Government's Control of Food and the Risk of Hunger (New York: Human Rights Watch, May 2006).
8. Given space limitations, this inquiry will not evaluate a range of human rights questions associated with the food crisis such as the situation of North Korean refugees in China and elsewhere, the upsurge in human trafficking, the tightening of restrictions on free speech, and allegations of a rise in torture and public executions.
9. Sang-Chul Suh, Growth and Structural Changes in the Korean Economy, 1910-1940 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 37.
10. On the importance of Japanese agricultural manuals in post-Korean War DPRK, see Balazs Szalontai, Kim Il Sung in the Khrushchev Era (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 167.
11. Sanopi salaya nongopi sanda—industry must live for agriculture to live—was the expression in the North for the dependency of farmers on industrial inputs of energy and machinery. See L. Gordon Flake and Scott Snyder, Paved with Good Intentions (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).
12. Michael Schloms, North Korea and the Timeless Dilemma of Aid (Munster: Lit Verlag, 1994), p. 97. North Korea has .11 hectares per capita compared to the United Kingdom's .12 and Israel's and Vietnam's .10. Randall Ireson calculates this ratio differently, arguing that North Korea has only .06 hectares of land suitable for grain and field crops per person. Even this more conservative estimate, though, puts North Korea slightly ahead of Japan and South Korea. Randall Ireson, Food Security in North Korea: Designing Realistic Possibilities (Stanford, CA: Shorenstein APARC, February 2006), p. 8.
13. Robert Burnett Hall, "Agricultural Region of Asia, Part VII—the Japanese Empire," Economic Geography, vol. 11, no. 1, January 1935, p. 51.
14. Wonhyuk Lim, "North Korea's Food Crisis," Korea and World Affairs, Winter 1997, p. 577.
15. Tai Sung An, North Korea: A Political Handbook (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1983), p. 129.
16. North Korea Business Fact Book (Seoul: Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency, 2001), p. 37.
17. Ireson, Food Security in North Korea. On the soil erosion issue, see also Meredith Woo-Cumings, The Political Economy of Famine: The North Korean Catastrophe and Its Lessons (Tokyo: Asian Development Bank, January 2002).
18. Human Rights Watch, A Matter of Survival, p. 8.
19. Andrew Holloway, [A Year in Pyongyang](#), unpublished manuscript; accessed 10/30/04.
20. Jae Kyu Park, North Korea in Transition and Policy Choices: Domestic Structure and External Relations (Seoul: Kyungnam University Press, 1999), pp. 115, 118. According to Good Friends, the markets returned to once every 10 days in 1992, as the government sought to reassert control, only to revert again to daily in

- 1993 (Good Friends, North Korean Human Rights and the Food Crisis, p. 36).
21. Marina Ye Trigubenko, "Economic Characteristics and Prospect for Development: With Emphasis on Agriculture," in Han S. Park ed., *North Korea: Ideology, Politics, Economy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), p. 156.
22. Jae-Jean Suh, "North Korea's Social System," in Tae Hwan Ok and Hong Yung Lee, eds., *Prospects for Change in North Korea* (Seoul: Research Institute for National Unification, 1994), p. 247.
23. Andrew Natsios, *The Great North Korean Famine* (Washington: U.S. Institute for Peace, 2001), p. 166.
24. Marcus Noland argues that Pyongyang at this time "did not act in the way of a responsible government in the middle of a food crisis." There is some truth to this assertion, though it does not take into account the various departments of the North Korean government and their differing motivations. Interview with Marcus Noland, February 13, 2006.
25. Andrea Savada, ed., *North Korea: A Country Study* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1994), p. 139.
26. Sung-wook Nam, "Feeding the People: Possible Agricultural Normalization in North Korea," *East Asian Review*, vol. 14, no. 3, Autumn 2002, p. 92.
27. Lim, "North Korea's Food Crisis," p. 580.
28. Natsios, *The Great North Korean Famine*, p. 141.
29. John Feffer, *Korean Food, Korean Identity: The Impact of Globalization on Korean Agriculture* (Stanford, CA: Shorenstein APARC, February 2005).
30. Ireson, *Food Security in North Korea*.
31. The Human Rights Watch report also develops this theme: "After a long period of unnecessary suffering, the government of Kim Jong Il belatedly allowed the limited opening of North Korea to foreign food aid ..." Human Rights Watch, *A Matter of Survival*, p. 1.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
33. Interview with aid worker, December 9, 2005; see also Schloms, *North Korea and the Timeless Dilemma of Aid*, p. 155.
34. Fiona Terry, "Feeding the Dictator," [The Guardian](#), August 6, 2001; accessed April 27, 2006.
35. Woo-Cumings, *The Political Economy of Famine*; Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts* (London: Verso, 2001).
36. Stephen Devereux, *Theories of Famine* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 6.
37. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor, 2000).
38. Minnesota Lawyers International Human Rights Committee and Human Rights Watch/Asia, *Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (North Korea), December 1988. Marcus Noland points out that Helen-Louise Hunter described the classification system in her study of North Korea for the CIA in the early 1980s, but this material was only published in 1999 when her book *Kim Il Sung's North Korea* appeared from Praeger. Interview with Marcus Noland, February 13, 2006.
39. Good Friends, *North Korean Human Rights and the Food Crisis*, p. 41.
40. Haggard and Noland, *Hunger and Human Rights*, p. 23.
41. According to Al's Rajiv Narayan, "The higher the strata of the person, the greater the possibility of the person being in Pyongyang or in areas of political power. This also meant better jobs for the party members and their families; and hence better privileges. This conclusion was corroborated by the testimonies we had collected." He notes, however, that "there was not much reportage of the influence of the markets in North Korea around the time of the launch of the AI report to support the conclusion (that access of market matters)." Email correspondence with Rajiv Narayan, May 2, 2006.
42. Charles Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution, 1945-1950* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Michael Voslensky, *Nomenklatura: The Soviet Ruling Class* (New York: Doubleday, 1984).
43. Interview with Ruediger Frank, December 4, 2005.
44. Interview with Erica Kang, December 6, 2005.
45. Schloms, *North Korea and the Timeless Dilemma of Aid*, p. 111.
46. Andrei Lankov, "The Natural Death of North Korean Stalinism," *Asia Policy*, January 2006, p. 116.
47. Soon-Hee Lim, "The Food Crisis and Women's Lives in North Korea," Presentation at the 2005 International Seminar on North Korean Human Rights, Seoul, South Korea, November 3, 2005.
48. Lankov, "The Natural Death of North Korean Stalinism," pp. 116-7.
49. Kyung Moon Hwang, *Beyond Birth: Social Status in the Emergence of Modern Korea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004).
50. Interview with Marcus Noland, February 13, 2006.
51. Email correspondence with Richard Ragan, March 20, 2006.
52. UNICEF, "[DPR Korea: Nutrition Assessment 2002](#)," February 20, 2003; accessed April 27, 2006.
53. Haggard and Noland, *Hunger and Human Rights*, p. 12.
54. Peter Singer, "Reconsidering the Famine Relief Argument" in Vernon Ruttan, ed., *Why Food Aid?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 78.
55. It is important to note here that Haggard and Noland also echo this notion of effectiveness as a criterion. Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, "Noland and Haggard Defend Food Aid Report," [CanKor](#), September 8, 2005; accessed May 24, 2006.
56. Schloms, *North Korea and the Timeless Dilemma of Aid*, p. 176.
57. Ziegler, "Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights."
58. Karin Lee and Adam Miles, "North Korea on Capitol Hill," in John Feffer, ed., *The Future of U.S.-Korean Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
59. Haggard and Noland, *Hunger and Human Rights*, p. 27.
60. Interview with Erica Kang, December 6, 2005.
61. Interview with Marcus Noland, February 13, 2006.
62. Email correspondence with Richard Ragan, March 20, 2006.
63. Haggard and Noland, *Hunger and Human Rights*, p. 26.
64. Good Friends, *North Korean Human Rights and the Food Crisis*, pp. 60-1; Hazel Smith, *Hungry for Peace* (Washington: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2005), pp. 87-8; Human Rights Watch, *A Matter of Survival*, p. 11.
65. Good Friends, *North Korean Human Rights and the Food Crisis*, p. 61.
66. Sung Min Kim, "Painful Life of People's Army," Presentation at Seoul Summit: Human Rights in North Korea, Seoul, South Korea, December 2005, p. 154.
67. Andrew Natsios, [The Politics of Famine in North Korea](#) (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 1999); accessed April 27, 2006.
68. Alex de Waal, *Famine Crimes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 138.
69. Christopher Barrett and Daniel Maxwell, *Food Aid After Fifty Years* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 141, 142.
70. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
71. Moreover, as Alex de Waal argues, all international aid tends to increase the central power of government and create opportunities for corruption (De Waal, *Famine Crimes*, p. 136). Though difficult or impossible to measure, the level of corruption in North Korea rose in the late 1990s but did not approach the levels seen in other food crises, such as the 50% unaccounted losses in Somalia in 1991-1992 (De Waal, p. 168).
72. Christophe Reltien, "Humanitarian Action in North Korea: Ostrich Politics," in *The Geopolitics of Hunger, 2000-2001: Hunger and Power* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001), p. 163.
73. Schloms, *North Korea and the Timeless Dilemma of Aid*, p. 168.
74. Interview with Erica Kang, December 6, 2005.
75. Smith, *Hungry for Peace*, p. 127.
76. Interview with aid worker, December 9, 2005.
77. ROK Ministry of Unification, Public Relations Policy Support, "ROK Refutes Report on Lack of Food Aid Transparency," September 2, 2005.
78. Schloms, *North Korea and the Timeless Dilemma of Aid*, p. 233.
79. South Hamgyong and Ryanggang registered very high levels of stunting; South Hamgyong, North Hamgyong, and Ryanggang had the highest prevalence of underweight children; South and North Hamgyong exhibited high levels of wasting. Central Bureau of Statistics, Institute of Child Nutrition DPRK, "DRPK 2004 Nutrition Assessment Report of Survey Results," NAPSNET, October 27, 2005.
80. Smith, *Hungry for Peace*, pp. 50-1.
81. Barbara Demick, "Trading Ideals for Sustenance," *Los Angeles Times*, July 4, 2005.
82. Schloms, *North Korea and the Timeless Dilemma of Aid*, p. 168.
83. According to a World Food Program report from 1997: "An American ship, the bulk carrier M/V Judy Litrico, arrived at Nampo near Pyongyang on 29 June. While most of the cargo of 24,953 metric tons of cereals is being off-loaded at Nampo, 8,000 metric tons is destined for Chongjin for July distributions in the

northeast part of the country. The shipment will be the first food aid delivered directly to the northeast where aid agencies have not previously been able to operate." In that year, too, according to the WFP report, "DPR Korean authorities have given WFP permission to open a sub-office in the northeastern port city of Chongjin, and have approved additional sub-offices in Hamhung in the east, and in Sinuiju in the northwest near the Chinese border." [World Food Program Emergency Report](#), July 4, 1997; accessed April 27, 2006.

84. Interview with Wonhyuk Lim, March 10, 2006.

85. Email communication with Wonhyuk Lim, March 13, 2006; he supplied clippings from the South Korean press that catalog the shipments to Chongjin from June to August 1995.

86. Interview with Erica Kang, December 7, 2005.

87. Good Friends, North Korean Human Rights and the Food Crisis, pp. 28-33; Amnesty International, Starved of Rights, Section 5.2 .

88. John Feffer, "Globalization and Militarization," Foreign Policy In Focus, February 2002.

89. United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report 2000: Human Rights and Human Development, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

90. Wonhyuk Lim, "Challenging Assumptions about Food Aid for North Korea," [Dynamic Korea](#), February 13, 2006; accessed April 27, 2006.

91. Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, "A U-Turn on Reforms Could Starve North Korea," International Herald Tribune, December 22, 2005.

92. Ruediger Frank, "Economic Reforms in North Korea (1998-2004)," Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy, vol. 10, no. 3, August 2005, p. 283. Frank estimates a requirement of about 4.3 million tons of rice to meet 75% of the caloric needs of the population. This figure excludes seed requirements and loss due to storage and transportation, which would push the figure closer to 5 million tons. Frank also notes that if the population doesn't rely as heavily on grain for its calories, the figure goes back down to around 4.5 million tons. Email communication with Ruediger Frank, May 2, 2006.

93. Good Friends, North Korea Today, Issue 12, 2006, p. 3.

94. "Food Aid for North Korea," The New York Times, May 11, 2006.

95. Choe Sang-hun, "Charity Sees Much Higher Toll from Huge North Korean Floods," The New York Times, August 16, 2006.

96. Associated Press, "UN Says North Korean Crop Loss Heavy," July 24, 2006.

97. Reuters, "[S. Korea Red Cross Plans Rice Aid for North](#)," August 15, 2006.

98. Claudia Rosett, "Food for Nukes?" Wall Street Journal, February 18, 2006.

99. Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, "Noland and Haggard Defend Food Aid Report," [CanKor](#), September 8, 2005; accessed May 24, 2006; Nicholas Eberstadt, "The Persistence of North Korea," Policy Review, October 2004.

100. UNDP, Human Development Report 2000.

101. The consolidation of agricultural lands—"reprofiling"—alone boosts the amount of arable land by 10%. Alexander Vorontsov, "North Korea During the Process of Change," Joint US-Korea Academic Studies, vol. 16, p. 149.

102. A system that gives the work team even greater control than the farm manager presages the same kind of privatization that took place in China in the 1980s. See Tae-Jin Kwon, "Agricultural Policies Under Reform in the DPRK," IFES Forum, July 13, 2005.

103. Central Bureau of Statistics, "DPRK 2004 Nutrition Assessment."

104. Interview with Erica Kang, December 7, 2005.

105. Good Friends, North Korean Human Rights and the Food Crisis, p. 37.

106. Interview with aid worker, December 9, 2005.

107. Ruediger Frank, "Response by Ruediger Frank," NAPSNET. September 13, 2005.

108. Interview with Ruediger Frank, December 4, 2005.

109. Natsios, The Politics of Famine in North Korea.

110. Smith, Hungry for Peace, p. 82.

111. In 2000, according to World Food Program data, NGOs sold 26% of their aid on the market in recipient countries. For bilateral assistance, the number was considerably higher: 73% (Barrett and Maxwell, Food Aid After Fifty Years, p. 15) .

112. Interview with Marcus Noland, February 13, 2006.

113. Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, "Noland and Haggard Defend Food Aid Report."

114. Good Friends, North Korea Today, Issue 12, 2006, pp.1-2.

115. [World Food Program Emergency Report](#), November 25, 2005; accessed May 27, 2006.

116. Good Friends, North Korea Today, Issue 18 (2006).

117. Terry, "Feeding the Dictator."

118. Haggard and Noland, Hunger and Human Rights.

119. Ibid., p. 35.

120. Ibid., p. 38.

121. Rosset, "Food for Nukes?"

122. Mark Manyin, "U.S. Assistance to North Korea: Factsheet," Congressional Research Service, January 31, 2006.

123. Wonhyuk Lim, "When in Doubt, Blame South Korea," NAPSNET Policy Forum On-line 06-13A, February 16, 2006.

124. Interview with Park Sun Song, December 8, 2005.

125. De Waal, Famine Crimes, p. 6.

126. Ruediger Frank, "Food Aid to North Korea or How to Ride a Trojan Horse to Death," NAPSNET, September 13, 2005.

127. Vernon Ruttan, "The Politics of U.S. Food Aid Policy," in Vernon Ruttan, ed., Why Food Aid? (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 2.

128. Barrett and Maxwell, "Food Aid After Fifty Years," p. 150.

129. Reltien, "Humanitarian Action in North Korea," p. 166.

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131. ROK Ministry of Unification, "ROK Refutes Report."

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