



Dying of Starvation: Hunger in North Korea

Research Institute for North Korean Society

Introduction

North Korea has been having chronic difficulties feeding its population on an almost annual basis. The reasons are manifold and well known. They include low temperature, very irregular precipitation, too little arable land, deforestation that makes floods even worse, droughts that can't be fought properly by irrigation systems because of a lack of electricity, an industry that fails to produce enough fertilizer, and an inefficient agricultural economy that suffers from the limitations of a socialist system. North Korea's comparative advantage clearly is not in staple food production. Imports, however, would need financing by a functioning export industry which does not exist in North Korea as a result of socialist inefficiency, high military spending and international isolation. In this environment survival has hinged on unilateral transfers from the outside, but these rarely come without strings attached. The leadership in Pyongyang has been quite successful in playing its major neighbors and adversaries against each other and using the nuclear issue as a means to hold international attention span so as to assure external aid. As reports like the one below indicate, it has apparently not been sufficiently successful in staving off famine.

Spring famines are hardly new in Korean history, but that doesn't make them any easier. The floods of August and September 2007 destroyed huge parts of that year's harvest with devastating effects. According to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) World Disasters Report 2007, the DPRK had lost over 458,000 people in natural disasters between 1997 and 2006, which accounted for about 38 percent of the about 1.2 million related deaths reported in 220 countries across the world during that period.

Markets for food exist in North Korea, and prices are more or less free although the state now seeks to put a cap on them. The opening of these markets is a good thing for farmers, a minority in this industrialized country, who have higher incentives to increase their production – if they have the means to do so. At the same time, the shortage in North Korea enriches those who manage to smuggle in and trade food from China. The effect of the economic reforms of the last decade on domestic agricultural production is thus far low, since the hidden potential to be set free by market incentives remains small. However, the effect on consumers and the state economy of even this limited market opening is disastrous, because spiral food prices in the market drive up inflation and make workers reluctant to show up at workplaces where they receive a salary that is of continuously declining real value, particularly for securing food.

There have been dramatic reports about food shortages in North Korea before, some of which turned out to be wrong, with some even deliberately exacerbated to maximize donations. But a single trip to that country and a look into the faces of North Koreans makes it obvious that people live on a very limited diet. The problem with reports like the one below is that while they might be true, no matter how precise the specific information provided actually is, it is difficult to confirm. Precisely this uncertainty and especially the looming threat of another

famine make non-action hard to justify, both from a humanitarian and from a strategic point of view.

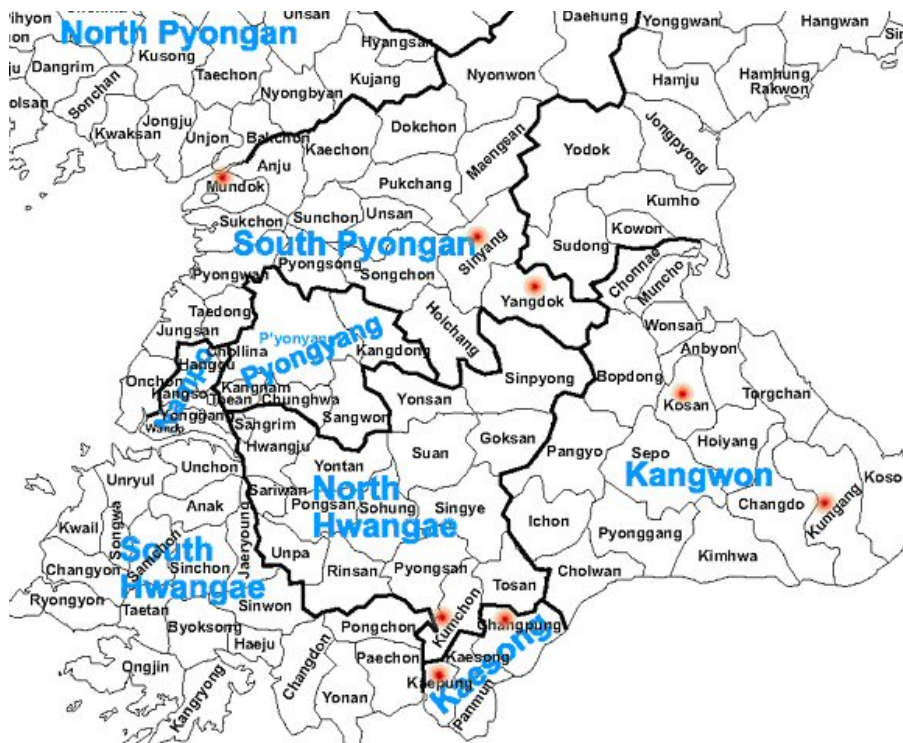
With all the changes in place since the late 1990s, it seems unlikely that the North Korean system can survive another "Arduous March" like the famine of 1995-1997. However, North Korea's neighbors are not yet ready to deal with a collapse that will necessarily bring largescale famine deaths, flight, and perhaps tens of thousands of human casualties. So there is a certain chance that China, the U.S. and South Korea will again step in to prevent the worst and help stabilize the situation. However, more than ever, North Korea needs a permanent solution to its food problem. That seems impossible without a successful conclusion of the Six Party Talks, economic integration into the East Asian region, opening to the world economy and a stable relationship with South Korea and the United States. These are gigantic tasks for the DPRK, but the experience of the past decades and the recent return to conservative socialist positions in official propaganda in reaction to the new government in Seoul suggest that at the moment, long-term solutions are little more than wishful thinking. - Ruediger Frank

Dying of Starvation. Yangduk, South Pyongan province, North Korea

In the farming areas of the township of Yangduk^{1-ê+1}, Yangduk County^{1-ê+êµ°} and the vicinity in South Pyongan Province^{1%al+ê+ê,}, instances of people dying by starvation due to a shortage of food rations are appearing. Currently, there are many individuals who have been so weakened by the lack of food that they are unable to move their bodies, and one or two deaths are transpiring in each village due to starvation. The Yangduk County Party^{1-ê+êµ°ê+1} has stressed the fact that more deaths by starvation will take place if emergency food rations are not supplied, but has not been able to take actions beyond that. Officials in the County party^{êµ°ê+1} and the farms are doing nothing more than intensifying ideological education and saying, "All of us are facing difficult times, so let's tighten our belts and solve this problem. Everyone report to work." Farmer Han Kyung-duk (56) appealed, "Please give us something to eat. If you do that, we will report to work even if you tell us not to. We need to eat something in order to have the strength to work." Currently, the southern regions of the country, starting with South Pyongan Province, are all facing the same situation, and citizens are increasingly worrying amongst themselves that "If the price of food continues to rise and the government continues to do nothing about the food situation, there will be many more people who will die within the month."

Food Shortage Rapidly Spread in Spring





Maps of the Areas Alerted with Food shortage

[Enlarge the lower map](#)

With the start of the spring season, the food shortage is increasing rapidly all across the nation. Areas in South Hwanghae Province; counties in Kaesong City, such as Kaepung and Changpung; Kumchun in North Hwanghae Province, counties in South Pyongan Province, such as Mundok, Yangduk, Sinyang; and counties in Kangwon Province such as Kosan, Kumgang in particular are suffering greatly from the food shortage. Areas that are farmlands are suffering more from the food shortage, and the number of families that are subsisting on only one meal a day is rapidly increasing. Most families only eat one or two meals a day, and there are many families that eat noodles, porridge, grass, or mountain greens that have been boiled with salt. There are also many families that eat such little maize porridge that they are basically rinsing out their mouths with the porridge water rather than eating a full meal. In some of these households, people become very thin and die in their homes without even knowing the name of the diseases they have.

North Korea Requests Food Aid from China

According to an official from Pyongyang, North Korea recently requested food aid from China. However, the response from China was that because of its own problems with food supplies, it could not provide large scale food aid. As a result of this, those within the central party ordered trade workers outside the country to drop everything and focus their attention on securing food supplies. This is the second time this order has been made since January. North Koreans officials are still making contact with their Chinese counterparts and are trying to secure food supplies. The Chinese are said to be adjusting the amount of food aid that they can provide. Recently in the beginning of April, 8,000 tons of maize was delivered to Sineuju and another 10,000 tons was delivered recently. The Section chief of the Food and Grains Administration Bureau personally came down to Pyongyang to oversee the delivery of food aid.

Price of Rice in Hamheung 3,100 won, Price of Rice Skyrockets Nationwide

On April 25th, the price of rice in Hamheung reached over 3,000 won. Only a week before, the price of rice was steady at 2,200 won because of stringent controls by the authorities, but as predicted by rice vendors, the forced controls did not last for more than a few days. After the price of rice reached over 3,000 won, the residents of Hamheung and other regions were in a commotion upon hearing the news. People are agitated because they believe that if the price of rice stays above 3,000 won for over a month, reports of deaths will soon occur, much as they did during the period of the Arduous March. Ryoo Jung yun (38 years) of Hamheung, who attended the Founding Day of the Military festivities and returned

to her hometown of Heungnam, worried and said “Is this a world that people can live in? The price of rice is so extraordinarily high at 3,000 won that it doesn’t seem real. There is news that people are already dying in the lower regions. We will face the same prospects sooner than later.”

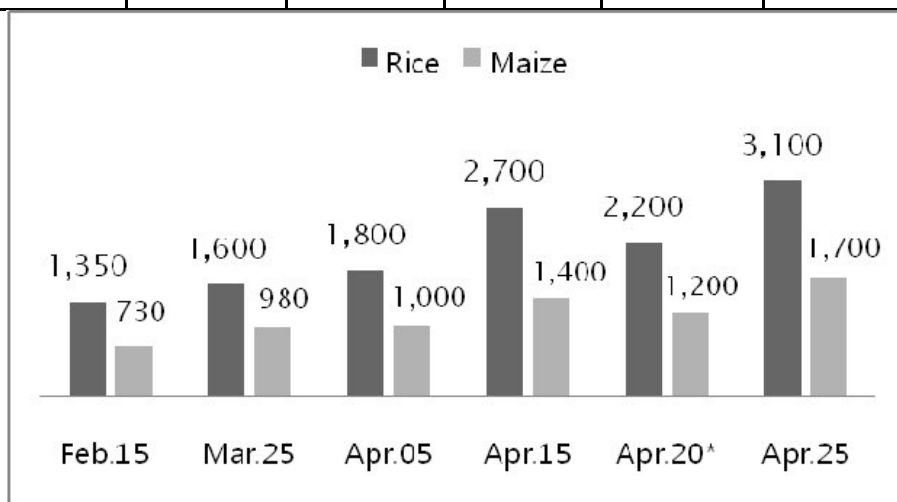
A fellow worker, Ko Young Bok (48 years) said, “They say that the doors to the Great Nation will be completely opened in 2012. I don’t understand why they are working so hard to protect it. I’m not the only one who feels this way. Everyone has these doubts. Go ask that lecturer. Even the lecturer has the same doubts as us, but just doesn’t show it.”

Grain Price Fluctuation

From Feb.15-Apr.25 2008

	Feb.15	Mar.25	Apr.05	Apr.15	Apr.20*	Apr.25
Rice	1,350	1,600	1,800	2,700	2,200	3,100
Maize	730	980	1,000	1,400	1,200	1,700

(Units: kg/ North Korean Won)



Grain Price Fluctuation From Feb.15-Apr.25 2008

(Units: kg/ North Korean Won)

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Price of Grains in the Major Cities on the April 25, 2008

	Pyongsung (Sth Pyungan)	Hamheung (Sth Hamgyung)	Wonsan (Gangwon)	Chungjin (Nth Hamgyung)
Rice	2,900-3,000	3,100	2,900	2,700-2,800
Maize	1,650	1,700	1,700	1,450

Scarce Food Supplies Causing Serious Malnutrition

In institutions that are in operation on the county level around the country, children are leaving

because of a lack of food supplies. The children roam around the marketplaces or restaurants and beg or steal for food. In homeless children’s institutions in places like Lanam, Chungjin city, or Gilju County, the physical developmental state of children is extremely bad because of the food shortage. Children who are two years old are unable to walk, and some children are even unable to get up because they are afflicted with rickets. Furthermore, the number of children who are suffering from nutritional deficiencies and are also afflicted with diarrhea is increasing, and these children are dying because they are unable to take medicines and keep it within their system. Children are often given water because there is no milk, but this only makes the childrens’ stomachs distended while their bones become more brittle because of their nutritional deficiency. The teachers at the homeless children’s institutions say that the items most desperately needed by the children are food supplies and vitamins.

A Quarter of the Farming Population Subsisting on Grass Porridge

With the current food crisis, it is expected that a quarter of the farming population is only eating one meal a day consisting of grass porridge. An official in the cabinet said, "Out of the 8 million farm workers, approximately 2 million are currently suffering due to the food shortage. Last year, in South Hwanghae Province, there was an initiative where the individual farmers would get 30% of the harvest while the submitting the rest of 70% to the government, however, this was resulted in a grave offense to the Socialist's ideology that all the related officials were dismissed. If the private cultivation was allowed, the food situation would not get as bad as current state." He also added it is a pity that the government does not seem to reform the agricultural policy.

"Life is more than difficult – it seems like everyone is going to die."

As the food shortage worsens, the complaints of residents, particularly those in South Hwanghae Province, are greatly increasing. Particularly in areas that were affected by the flood last year, residents can be heard saying "With food prices on the rise, life is more than difficult – it seems like everyone is going to die." In farms across South Hwanghae Province, except for a few areas such as Anak^{안악} and Eunpa^{연파} which are well-off, the vast majority of families only eat one meal a day and subsist on a porridge made of grass. Kim Won Sun (41 years), a rice merchant who travels to places such as South Hwanghae Province, Pyongyang, and Wonsan, said, "In the past 20 days, the price of rice has gone as high as 2,800 won and the price of maize has reached 1,800 won. The days of 3,000 won rice are not far off. There is much discussion amongst people that if the present conditions worsen for 2-3 more months, the conditions will be worse than those during the Arduous March and many people will starve to death. These are not the words of some isolated person. Everyone is worrying about and saying these things." In farms in the Yonan County^{연안군} region of South Hwanghae Province, there are many concerns because of a shortage of manpower. The reason for this shortage is that people are not reporting to work because of the lack of food. As a result, the farming duties can only be expected to be finished with the help of workers from factories, businesses, each units and other places. Because too many people are not reporting to work on the farms, it is difficult to maintain a fixed schedule, and farm workers are complaining that more factory workers need to be sent to the farms.

"The food shortage is not just limited to our country. It is a worldwide Phenomenon."

Beginning on April 21st, printed media sources in North Korea have begun to say that the food shortage is not merely a problem limited to North Korea, but one that is affecting countries all over the world. These sources say that the rapid increase in the price of commodities internationally is increasing the problem of poverty. At a Neighbourhood unit Meetings, it was emphasized that "The food crisis is not limited to our country and is striking nations all around the world. Everyone, let's tighten our belts and defeat the problem."

Ruediger Frank is Professor of East Asian Economy and Society, University of Vienna. This article appeared in the May issue of North Korea Today, published by the Research Institute for North Korean Society, a journal of [Good Friends](#), a South Korea-based organization. Posted at Japan Focus on May 6, 2008.