

WATCHING BRIEF WB15-4: NORTH KOREA'S HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

North Korea is a difficult country to feel compassion for. The regime's egregious human rights violations have been amply documented and widely denounced, most notably in a February 2014 United Nations Commission of Inquiry led by respected Australian jurist Michael Kirby.¹ North Korea's determined pursuit of a nuclear weapon has also been met with an ever-thickening array of UN and unilateral sanctions, including by Australia.² Amidst the world's righteous anger at North Korea's leaders, humanitarian challenges facing the North Korean people have once again slid from international attention.

This Watching Brief seeks to remind us that the people of North Korea continue to face grinding poverty, with serious consequences for their health, development, and education. We review the humanitarian challenges, compare international responses, and suggest policy options for Australia and advocacy opportunities for Friends.

A Protracted Food Crisis

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) began to face a sustained economic decline by the early 1990s due to the inefficiencies embedded within its socialist economic model, aggregated by a loss of financial support from first the Soviet Union and then China. Following a series of floods in 1995 and 1996, the country slid into a terrible famine. Estimates of famine deaths range from 600,000 to one million people, out of a total population of only 22 million.

Although international aid, belatedly accepted by Pyongyang, halted the famine, the country has remained in a 'nutritional deficit' ever since—unable to provide enough food to meet the basic needs of its population. As a result, large swathes of North Korea's population have suffered from chronic malnutrition since the mid-1990s.

Over the past two years, North Korean farmers were able to modestly expand food production, due largely to increased availability of fertilizers, fuel and electricity. Yet the UN's World Food Programme (WFP) still classifies 2.8 million North Koreans as vulnerable to malnutrition, most notably children and women, as well as disabled, chronically ill, or elderly individuals. WFP staff warn that "the situation remains fragile," with chronic child malnutrition and poor dietary diversity.³ A drought earlier this year has meant a throttling back of government rations for ordinary citizens,

¹ "Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," A/HRC/25/63, February 7, 2014.

² For a complete list, see: <http://www.dfat.gov.au/sanctions/sanctions-regimes/dprk.html>

³ "Nutrition Support for Children and Women" in DPR Korea, *Quarterly M & E Bulletin*, April-June 2014, https://www.wfp.org/sites/default/files/PRRO%20200532%20M&E%20Bulletin%202014_2nd%20quarter.pdf

which fell to about 250 grams a day. As a result, the WFP predicts a surge in acute malnutrition this winter.⁴

The long-term effects of the food shortage are deeply disturbing. As Marcus Noland points out, recent UNICEF surveys suggest that ten percent of the country's two-year-olds are afflicted with severe stunting. "Stunting of that degree at that age is irrecoverable and confers a lifetime of physical and mental challenges."⁵

Humanitarian Assistance

While seeking to promote long-term solutions to the DPRK's "protracted crisis," the United Nations, led by the WFP, has been forced to retain food assistance at the center of its "sustained humanitarian response."⁶ In providing assistance, the WFP remains heavily dependent upon dedicated contributions from UN member states. Yet as North Korea has tightened restrictions upon the WFP's freedom to independently monitor food deliveries, and as the diplomatic and security situation has continued to worsen, member states have steadily reduced their contributions.

From 2008-2010, donors provided the WFP with less than 25 percent of the target for its emergency appeal. In April 2011, the WFP launched a new, one-year emergency appeal, seeking 300,000 metric tons (MT) of grain to feed over 3.5 million vulnerable people, and yet it received less than one-third of its target. The funding shortfalls continued—in February 2014, the WFP stated that donations were less than 40% of its targeted amounts.⁷

The pervasive funding shortfalls have now become dire. In September 2014, Dierk Stegen, WFP director in Pyongyang, warned that the program "may need to scale down or think about closing altogether."⁸

Bilateral Aid

Four countries, China, South Korea, the United States, and Japan, have provided over 75 percent of all food aid to North Korea since 1995, either directly or via UN agencies. The US has been the single-largest contributor to the WFP's North Korea appeals, providing \$708 million since 1995.

Since 2009, the US, South Korea and Japan have provided almost no bilateral aid and dramatically reduced their multilateral assistance in response to the DPRK's pursuit of a nuclear weapons program. Only China has continued to provide significant food aid. Yet most of China's food assistance is provided bilaterally, rather than via the UN, with distribution unmonitored by outside observers.⁹

Australia in Focus

⁴ Jonathan Cheng, "U.N. North Korea Food Program in Danger," *Wall Street Journal*, 25 September 2014.

⁵ "Should the World Fund Food Aid to North Korea," *The Guardian*, 10 September 2014.

⁶ See the website of the UN country team in DPR Korea, at: <http://kp.one.un.org>

⁷ Mark E. Manyin and Mary Beth D. Nikitin, "Foreign Assistance to North Korea," Congressional Research Service Report, 2 April 2014.

⁸ Cheng, "U.N. North Korea Food Program."

⁹ James Reilly, "The Curious Case of China's Aid to North Korea," *Asian Survey* 54:6 (2014): 1158-1183.

Australia suspended bilateral development assistance to the DPRK in late 2002 following revelations about the DPRK's nuclear program. DFAT's website explains: "since 1994, Australia has provided over \$50 million [via the UN] in humanitarian assistance with a focus on food and nutritional supplementation which targets vulnerable groups."

Although Australia resumed diplomatic relations with the DPRK in 2000, it never opened an embassy in Pyongyang. The DPRK re-opened its embassy in Canberra in 2002, but then closed it for financial reasons in January 2008. Since then, the official relationship has remained essentially frozen. The Australian government maintains a de-facto visa ban, declining requests by Australian organizations to invite DPRK citizens to visit Australia, and providing no support for Australian organizations to deliver humanitarian assistance to the DPRK. DFAT's website states:

The Australian Government is prepared to take forward its bilateral relationship, but for this to occur, Australia would need the DPRK to make substantial progress towards denuclearization and cease all provocative actions that reduce the stability of the Korean Peninsula.¹⁰

Canberra's Options

Providing humanitarian assistance to North Korea poses potential dilemmas for the Australian government. Some experts warn that food aid enables Pyongyang to divert resources to its military programs and avoid embarking upon much-needed economic reforms. Yet these concerns are unrealistic: the military will retain primacy in government funding regardless of external assistance while outside engagement opens the DPRK up to new ideas and practices.

Unlike Australia, South Korean President Park Geun-hye pledged in 2013 to de-link its humanitarian aid from the nuclear standoff. Seoul has since modestly increased its aid provision—providing \$12 million in 2013 for UN programs. The Park government also encouraged South Korean non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide aid, with over a dozen groups providing US\$8 million in aid over 2013 and early 2014.¹¹

Australia also stands outside from many of its closest allies in its extreme approach to isolating North Korea. Having retained an active Pyongyang embassy, in 2013 the British government provided US\$660,000 in aid to North Korea, funding English-language education programs in Pyongyang and international exchange programs. In 2008-09, Washington channeled nearly 100,000 tons of its food aid via domestic NGOs. While its official food aid is largely frozen, the US continues to approve visas for North Koreans invited by American NGOs. Organizations such as AmeriCares, Eugene Bell Foundation, and the American Friends Service Committee retain active programs of humanitarian assistance and engagement with North Korea.

Canada's University of British Columbia has hosted several rounds of six-month training programs for North Korean scholars, with visas and indirect support provided

¹⁰ http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/dprk/dprk_brief.html

¹¹ Manyin and Nikitin, "Foreign Assistance."

by the Canadian government.¹² Many European countries also retain close diplomatic relations with Pyongyang, providing humanitarian support through NGOs. In August 2014, for instance, Germany provided US\$600,000 in medical aid via Caritas International.¹³

Quaker Action

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) responded with emergency relief when the DPRK economy collapsed in the 1990s, and by 1998 had established an ongoing agriculture program with co-operative farms. Since 2005 the program has focused on pragmatic, farm-tested interventions to improve long-term food security and on education and training to address issue of practical concerns to Koreans. In 2011 the agriculture assistance program and the knowledge-building activities were better integrated into a single DPRK Development Assistance Project. AFSC also has an advocacy goal to create the conditions for constructive engagement between the DPRK and the US governments. See www.afsc.org

Advocacy Options for Australian Friends

- Urge the Australian government to follow South Korea's lead in de-linking humanitarian assistance from nuclear issues, and restore its multilateral aid for North Korea via the United Nations;
- Encourage DFAT to retract its de-facto visa ban so that Australian universities and NGOs can invite North Koreans to visit Australia for exchange and training programs;
- Support Australian organizations to engage in humanitarian and development programs with North Korean counterparts.

Canberra, March 2015

¹² "North Koreans Learning Economics in Canada," 19 November 2012, <http://www.nkeconwatch.com/2012/11/19/north-koreans-learning-economics-in-canada/>

¹³ "German Government offers TB assistance to DPRK," 26 August 2014, <http://www.nkeconwatch.com/2014/08/26/german-government-offers-tb-assistance-to-dprk/>