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THE PENINSULA

North Korea Facing “Acute Food Insecurity” but United Nations Plans No Aid

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In the first few days of December each year, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) issues an annual Global Humanitarian Overview focusing on current humanitarian trouble spots and setting the agenda for UN humanitarian aid in the coming year. The [2022 Global Humanitarian Overview](#) issued December 2 this year,

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projected that in the coming year some 274 million people worldwide will urgently need help, nearly 40 million more than were identified in 2021.

In the 2022 Overview, UN aid agencies have called for 41 billion U.S. dollars for life-saving aid for 183 million of the 274 million of the world's most vulnerable people. The recommended action of the UN report does not deal with the entire urgent need it identified because of the difficulties in providing help to some of these needy populations.

The Global Humanitarian report estimates a 17 percent increase in individuals facing urgent humanitarian need in 2022 over 2021. This increase is the result of ever more difficult international conditions. These are largely due to the impacts of global climate change, local military conflicts that have made delivery of aid more difficult and have led to record numbers of displaced persons, and the effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic which continues to be a significant threat around the world.

North Korean Humanitarian Need recognized, but No UN Aid is Planned

The breakdown of urgent regional humanitarian problems anticipated in 2022, the OCHA Report identified three Asian countries among the leading nations globally facing the most pressing needs: "Afghanistan, DPR Korea and Myanmar are facing acute food insecurity situations which are likely to deteriorate further by the year's end."

Despite the acknowledged food insecurity in North Korea, however, the United Nations humanitarian response plan does not include an appeal for assistance to the North. Furthermore, this is the second consecutive year that the UN has acknowledged significant North Korean need for food aid, but has not included the North in any UN assistance plans. The other two Asian countries mentioned in the UN Report, Afghanistan and Myanmar, are both included in United Nations planned aid.

North Korea has long been on the UN radar as a country with significant humanitarian needs, even well before the COVID pandemic raised additional concerns. A UN World Food Program (WFP) report in 2019 concluded that 11 million of North Korea's 25 million people were undernourished and one of every five children are stunted from lack of adequate nutrition. The report said North Korea faces a "wide range of food and nutrition security challenges," and it warned that "even minor disasters can significantly reduce agricultural production and the availability of food" in the North.

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The United Nations and the international community have not overlooked the humanitarian needs of North Korea. In fact, over the last three decades North Korea has received significant international humanitarian assistance through the United Nations and from individual country donors, including China, South Korea and the United States. The largest donor to the North is China, which characterizes the aid as help from a brotherly state. Neither Beijing nor Pyongyang provide details of the amount or types of assistance being provided. South Korea is the second largest donor, and its aid to the North tends to be more motivated by the common historical, cultural and family ties between the two Koreas. Different political priorities for South Korean governments over the last two or three decades have reflected noteworthy differences, however. Greater aid has been provided by progressive governments which seek political engagement with the North, while politically more conservative governments have generally been less generous in aiding Pyongyang.

The United States has also provided significant aid, with over one billion dollars in assistance given to North Korea between 1995 and 2008—about 60 percent in food assistance and 40 percent in energy aid. In discussions with U.S. government officials in Seoul in August of this year, Ambassador Sung Kim told South Korean officials that the U.S. “supports humanitarian aid for North Korea regardless of progress on the country’s denuclearization.” At that same time, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations said that the United States was willing to facilitate provision of humanitarian assistance to the North. By law, U.S. charitable assistance should be given on the basis of humanitarian need. Significantly, these comments indicating a willingness of the United States to provide assistance was made just over a month after the Foreign Ministry of North Korea accused the United States of “sinister political purpose” in providing humanitarian help to Pyongyang. It is difficult to see how providing needed food and medical assistance to sick and hungry North Koreans has a “sinister political purpose.”

It appears that North Korea was excluded from United Nations plans for assistance despite the fact that the urgent need for aid was acknowledged, but because of the complexities and obstacles of providing such aid to the North Korean people. Unfortunately, most of these difficulties are created by the North Korean government.

Impact of United Nations Economic Sanctions on Aid

Providing humanitarian aid to North Korea is particularly difficult because of the economic and other sanctions that have been imposed on the North by the United Nations Security Council in response to Pyongyang's illicit nuclear weapons and missile programs. Significantly, both China and Russia agreed to the imposition of sanctions because of the nuclear and missile programs. The UN Security Council sanctions could not have been imposed without the support of China and Russia, since the two countries are among the five permanent members of the Security Council. Either could veto Security Council sanctions against North Korea.

Some have argued that humanitarian assistance to North Korea takes pressure off the regime, allowing it to use scarce resources for prohibited nuclear and missile development and for maintenance of the North's large standing army. It seems reasonable that humanitarian aid does reduce pressure on the government to use its own national resources for its people's well-being.

The UN sanctions have also created problems that make it much more difficult for donor countries and organizations which may provide humanitarian aid outside of the United Nation framework. A 2017 report from senior UN officials then working in Pyongyang found that "regular disruption" of banking channels after the imposition of sanctions on North Korea "has made it difficult or impossible to transfer funds into the country." The additional time required to secure licenses in order to determine what is or is not a potential violation of the sanctions has resulted in significant delays, which has led many aid organizations to "reprioritize" their aid activities for the North.

Closed Borders for the COVID Pandemic Limits Aid

In an effort to prevent spread of the COVID-19 virus in North Korea, Kim Jong-un's government closed its borders, including that with friendly neighbor China, in order to prevent spread of the pandemic to the country. North Korean government officials continue to report to UN agencies that there are no cases of COVID-19 in the country. Pyongyang has claimed throughout the COVID pandemic that it has not had a single case of the virus within its borders. In a rather curious action in September of this year Pyongyang informed the United Nations that 3 million vaccine doses of Sinovac allocated for North Korea should be redirected elsewhere.

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Although Pyongyang claims it does not have and has not had a single COVID case, many question the accuracy of that claim. But the country has taken draconian steps to prevent COVID transmission, and these steps make it extremely difficult to provide humanitarian aid under conditions that donors require. Closing its borders and prohibiting travel in and out of the country have made it very difficult to provide needed help.

Over 90 percent of North Korean trade is either with, or comes through China, but Pyongyang closed the country's border with China in January 2020 at the very beginning of the pandemic to prevent spread of the virus. On November 1, 2021—some 22 months after first closing the border with China—rail traffic between Dandong in China and Sinuiju in North Korea reopened, but that opening was brief. It lasted for only eight days before the border was again closed. The result of the prolonged border closure is restricted access to food and medicines that are necessary in the North. China has long been a key source of essentials for North Korea, as well as the transportation hub for getting needed imports into the North.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in its December 2021 report identified the DPRK as a “country with widespread lack of access to food” and identified the reasons for this problem: “A large portion of the population suffers from low levels of food consumption and very poor dietary diversity. The persisting economic constraints, exacerbated by restrictive measures to control the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, have significantly reduced imports, including critical agricultural inputs and humanitarian goods, increasing the population's vulnerability to food insecurity.”

Monitoring Aid Distribution Is Now Even More Difficult

North Korea has consistently been a problem country for monitoring the distribution of humanitarian assistance. Monitoring is a critical element in the provision of aid to assure that the help is reaching those that are most in need and to assure that the most effective and most needed kinds of aid are being provided. Pyongyang wants to be able to direct distribution of aid to maintain its political controls, to assure that favored groups and individuals receive benefits. It is an instrument of control that the regime wants to keep in its own hands.

On the other hand, countries that provide aid want to be certain that their aid reaches those for whom it is intended, the neediest and most urgently affected. These donors

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seek to prevent corrupt officials from benefitting. This requires observers, not under regime control, to be able to confirm that the intended recipients are actually receiving the intended help. The North Korean government has consistently made it difficult for UN representatives to assure that aid is reaching those in need, and with the current pandemic, conditions are even more difficult.

Even before the problem of COVID, the North Korean government was difficult to deal with in terms of monitoring and managing assistance. In September 2019, before the pandemic was even on the horizon, North Korea informed the United Nations that it must reduce international staff deployed in the North “due to the politicization of UN assistance by hostile forces.” Once the COVID pandemic hit in early 2020, Pyongyang took even more draconian steps. Tourism, which never involved large numbers, was completely halted, and foreigners who were permitted to enter the country were quarantined for a significant period. Inside the country diplomats and other foreigners are even more limited in their contacts with North Koreans. A significant number of diplomats in North Korea have left and they have not been replaced.

With the departure of many diplomats and UN officials and severe internal travel restrictions imposed on those who remain, the possibility for any meaningful monitoring of UN humanitarian assistance for North Korea seems to be difficult if not impossible.

The demand for humanitarian aid always exceeds the available international help. While the current need for aid in North Korea seems to be clearly established, the obstacles and difficulties for United Nations agencies to provide that aid are such that the effort to help the North is not worth the effort. Many other countries face daunting humanitarian problems, and many have national governments that are far more cooperative in working with the United Nations. The international community has been willing to aid the North Korean people, but the Kim regime is unwilling to make even minimal accommodations to satisfy established international assistance practices to receive the help that is available.

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Return to the Peninsula