

View from the Ground

Surviving Food Insecurity in North Korea

Diana Park

Surveying the ruined landscape thirty kilometers south of Pyongyang, I whispered to my fellow research assistants, asking for my digital camera stored in the van's backseat. We needed to keep quiet because our government minders had fallen asleep, allowing us a short opportunity to take pictures of the crop damage, mudslides, and collapsed infrastructure along the next twenty kilometers of the abandoned highway. It grew obvious that North Koreans would face a major food shortage in the upcoming winter.¹

Upon visiting North Korea in August 2007, my lasting impression of the country was its dire need for prolonged aid and investment. While my government minders had attempted to show me only the best parts of Pyongyang and the countryside, the poverty was impossible to mask. Even the privileged children of the capital city lacked proper nutrition and medicine.² While visiting a middle school, I witnessed a child faint from exhaustion, after which the other children tried to mitigate our concerns by saying, "Il-ee upsemneedah," colloquial North Korean for "It's no big deal." Yet, the dark circles under their eyes revealed that, due to constant malnutrition, fainting spells were nothing out of the ordinary for even the most privileged in this country.

Dayea Diana Park is a graduate of Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and was a James A. Kelly/Korea Studies fellow at Pacific Forum CSIS in 2009.

Most North Koreans citizens lack basic human necessities, including food, shelter, and clothing. After experiencing a famine in the late 1990s, severe food shortages have persisted. Meanwhile, survival—for both the regime and citizens—has hinged upon foreign assistance from international donors, mainly the United States, South Korea, Japan, and China.³ However, these donor countries have had little success in affecting domestic policies ranging from nuclear security to human rights. Nevertheless, recent economic and social developments—glimpses of which I saw during my visit—made it clear that the government was struggling desperately to retain its decades-long control over the population.

The Regime. North Koreans lack political freedoms as well as basic human necessities. Previous efforts by the international community to address the human rights situation in North Korea have proven difficult due to backlashes from the regime. According to Andrei Lankov, a scholar on North Korean society, “the regime is remarkably immune to outside pressure.”⁴ The regime has hitherto held a monopoly over information to “extremes unprecedented even among Communist dictatorships” in order to keep the population under tight control. The United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), South Korea’s Lee Myung-bak government, the United States, and others have issued resolutions and statements decrying the regime’s human rights record. North Korea, however, remains highly suspicious of international calls for human rights improvements, and has denounced resolutions

adopted by the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) and UN General Assembly as politically motivated.⁵ The argument that such resolutions constitute “human rights attacks” and an “infringement on our sovereignty” was often used against outside efforts to address this issue.

According to *Juche*, the North Korean socialist ideology, state sovereignty and self-reliance are necessary precursors to the enjoyment of universal human rights. In the meantime, the government often refers to what it calls “our-style human rights.”⁶ Faced with mounting international pressure, such a response is typical for a regime preoccupied with its own survival. According to an analysis by the Korea Institute for National Unification, “the leadership perceives two fundamental imperatives at any given juncture: regime security and pragmatic needs.”⁷ Thus, over the years, the society has grown extremely isolationist under the Workers’ Party.⁸ Yet, the current economic and social landscape appears more susceptible to change from forces beyond the control of the government.

The 1990s Famine as a Launching Point for Change.

North Korea has experienced major societal ruptures since the mid-1990s. Though food scarcity has long been a constant concern for the country, the recent famine was particularly devastating. Observers have attributed to the famine anywhere from 1.5 to 3 million deaths. According to Human Rights Watch, the failure of the Public Distribution System (PDS) to deliver adequate amounts of food to the population was the culprit for the disaster. In

addition to the overall deficit in food, the rationing system was based on loyalty and status rather than on need.⁹ As a consequence, whole segments of the population received no food through the PDS during the height of the famine. Until restrictions on food trade and farmers' markets were lifted during the latter part of the crisis, most North Koreans were hard pressed to find viable options for survival.¹⁰ As part of the program, the government also severely restricted travel within its borders and required its citizens to obtain visas for traveling from one town to another.

individuals."¹² People were able to travel outside of their home districts to buy food or to establish farmers' markets.

Perhaps fearing that these minimal liberalizations had eroded its authority, the government officially re-established the PDS on 1 October 2005. The regime cracked down on unofficial markets and asked the World Food Programme, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and other organizations that require control over their own food distribution to leave. Despite these setbacks, some changes in North Korea's economy and

Recent economic and social developments—glimpses of which I saw during my visit—made it clear that the government was struggling desperately to retain its decades-long control over the population.

Facing intense international pressure and constant media coverage, Kim Jong-il eventually discontinued the PDS in 1996, allowing people to find food on their own.¹¹ Ironically, tearing down the PDS and allowing private trade enhanced overall access to food. According to Human Rights Watch, major changes occurred in the previously tightly controlled agricultural sector that allowed for improved food production and distribution: "The central government allowed provincial governments to engage in food trading, which had been its exclusive domain, allocated farmland to factories and urban households and not just to cooperative farms, and largely turned a blind eye to private food trading by

society have been increasingly difficult for the ruling regime to reverse.

The ubiquity of the black market has emerged as one lasting change. People across the social spectrum, including government officials, now depend on the secondary economy to acquire goods for their survival. This is a setback to a regime that should in theory control the entire economy. This economic trend also corresponds to the formation of social relationships ("patron-client networks") that help an individual acquire necessities through personal connections, rather than through official processes.¹³ According to the 2008 White Paper on Human Rights, published by Korean Institute for National Unification (KINU):

Most ordinary citizens would spend the day at the market even though they were required to report to work. They would simply check the attendance (“punch-in”) and leave for the market. High officials who could not engage in private business themselves would engage in peddling through family members or receive money from the peddlers by looking after their problems.¹⁴

Patron-client networks also had a profound impact on the spread of information. During the famine, these informal networks and the unprecedented movement of the population provided a means of communication outside of official outlets, a freedom which the regime heavily restricted before the famine. In the past, the North Korean government held a tighter control over communication and a monopoly over the supply of food and other necessities. Now, however, the leverage that the government once maintained over its people through the social security system has largely deteriorated.¹⁵

A Regime Struggling to Maintain Control. The regime has been trying assiduously to reclaim its command over the economy. The 2009 currency devaluation was seen as a measure to eradicate black market activity. The devaluation, however, incited only devastating chaos: “the reform crippled markets, drove up the price of rice and other goods and led to riots and physical confrontations between civilians and police in some places.”¹⁶ Pak Nam-gi, a ranking member of the Worker’s Party

and a key proponent of the revaluation, was fired from his position. Premier Kim Yong-il subsequently apologized for the blatant failure of the measure. In fact, the regime has already “allowed use of foreign currency and eased restriction on market activities.”¹⁷ The fallout from the currency revaluation suggests that the government can no longer dictate economic measures and that the public now has a larger influence on the regime’s actions. Previous economic measures, however disastrous to people’s general livelihood, had not merited an apology such as this one.

The currency devaluation is the government’s second attempt in eliminating the black market. In 2002 Pyongyang enacted major economic reforms to counteract its dramatic rise through various measures, including the official recognition of some informal markets already in existence. It also relaxed collectivism in the agricultural sector and tested a pilot private farming initiative. Unfortunately, this only led to partial economic alleviation—mostly for political elites—and worsened general economic conditions through unemployment and extreme inflation for necessities such as food. The price of rice, for example, increased three-fold in 2003 and 2004, which would require approximately 80 percent of the income of a non-elite citizen living in the city.¹⁸ Therefore, the 2002 reforms exacerbated the inflation and unemployment problems that made the shadow economy the best solution for most people. Again in 2009, the government tried passing reforms to counteract the black market. Yet, they are in a position to fail, as the government has already taken the unprecedented step of

apologizing for the extreme inflation that swept the country as a result.¹⁹

The regime has been struggling with more than simply the black market. The growing rate of defections and illicit movement to China has also proven difficult to reverse. During the famine in the late 1990s, North Koreans began crossing the border into China for food and other resources.²⁰ Although it violates the terms of its ascension to the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, the North Korean regime still prohibits the free movement of its citizens in and out of the country. Nevertheless, the defection rate continues to rise. In 2008 the Chosun Ilbo reported 2,809 defections to South Korea, an increase of 10 percent from the previous year, with approximately 15,000 total defectors resettled in the South.²¹ In addition, according to the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, there are approximately 11,000 North Korean refugees in China.²² KINU estimates that 20,000 to 40,000 escapees have fled north.²³ The upward trend in defections throughout the late 1990s and 2000s has prompted increased enforcement and harsher consequences for illegally leaving the country.

The growing use of police force to maintain control over its population, coupled with a failing economy, suggests that the government is struggling more than ever to retain its power through the use of fear. In 1998 the North Korean government briefly relaxed the law for people crossing the border to China for “economic” reasons, but then forced most returnees into labor camps for one to six months.²⁴ In 2004 the government increased the

penalty for leaving the country to five years in prison. Family members of defectors who remain in the country are reported to “have been forcibly relocated to remote areas.”²⁵ When another food crisis emerged in 2006, the North Korean government did not relax its policies on defections, as it had in 1998; instead, it increased control over the nation’s borders, signing an agreement with China to curtail the rate of defection. In December 2006 officials conducted a nationwide “absentee check” as the Border Patrol Command carried out an “arrest campaign,” continuing to crack down on attempted defectors.²⁶ Despite these economic and police measures, black markets and defections persist, indicating a certain permanence to the changes that have happened in North Korean society.

A First Hand Account. As a member of an American NGO visiting the country, I expected to see grim-faced pedestrians in drab clothing walking the streets of Pyongyang. Yet, I was shocked to encounter ladies who were wearing pink, orange, yellow, and bright blue. I was even more surprised to see food kiosks, bike shops, and other signs of entrepreneurship throughout the city. Although the 2002 reforms had caused hyperinflation, private sector activity subsequently flourished and emerged as a continuing trend during my visit in 2007.²⁷ In this notoriously isolated country, I was surprised to see a number of foreign goods. At a public park, I encountered a child wearing a Spiderman shirt, presumably imported from China. I found it ironic that even Spiderman, an American superhero, had already arrived in Pyongyang.

The fact that seemingly irreversible trends, such as black markets and informal networks of communication, have already prevailed proves that change is possible even under a regime such as North Korea's. The strength of these markets and networks has weakened the iron fist of the regime. Persecution will most likely prevail against those involved in unsanctioned activities, such as illegal border crossings into China and the reselling of goods

bought there. The government may also continue its experiment with economic policies designed to discourage black market activity. However, the regime has thus far failed in reversing these trends and would find itself in an even more difficult position as time goes on. In the short term, these developments give hope for further changes in North Korea that will continue to strengthen private society and erode the power of the regime.

NOTES

1 I was traveling with an American NGO to confirm the delivery of medical supplies to a hospital for the disabled in Kangwon, on the country's east coast. The United States Commerce Department shipped them with a special license, which required delivery verification. Although severe damage to the roads to Kangwon disrupted our itinerary, we inadvertently received a rare glimpse of the catastrophic humanitarian situation unfolding inside this secretive state. "Korea, Democratic People's Republic (DPRK)," World Food Programme, Internet, <http://www.wfp.org/countries/korea-democratic-peoples-republic-dprk>.

2 In a 2004 anthropological survey published by the WFP and UNICEF, 32 percent of women with children less than 2 years old suffered from malnutrition. Also, 37 percent of children under six years old were stunted. Democratic People's Republic of Korea Central Bureau of Statistics, "DPRK 2004 Nutrition Assessment: Report of Survey Results," (Pyongyang, February 2005), 10 and 32, Internet, <http://www.nautilus.org/naps-net/sr/2005/0587Nutrition.pdf>.

3 Mark Manyin and Mary Beth Nikitin, "Foreign Assistance to North Korea," Congressional Research Service report for Congress, (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 9 September, 2009), 12, 14.

4 Andrei Lankov, "Changing North Korea," *The New York Times*, 13 October 2009.

5 *Ibid.*, 43.

6 Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea* (Seoul, 2008), 37-38.

7 *Ibid.*, 42.

8 Andrea Matles Savada, ed., *North Korea: A Country Study*, (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research

Division, Library of Congress, 1994), Internet, <http://countrystudies.us/north-korea/60.htm>.

9 Human Rights Watch (HRW), "A Matter of Survival: The North Korean Government's Control of Food and the Risk of Hunger," 3 May 2006, 10.

10 *Ibid.*, 9-10.

11 Andrei Lankov, "North Korea hungry for control," *Asia Times*, 10 September 2005.

12 HRW, "A Matter of Survival," 14.

13 *Ibid.*, 2.

14 KINU, *White Paper*, 267.

15 *Ibid.*, 47.

16 Yoo Jee-ho, "North moving to halt currency reform fallout," *JoongAng Daily*, 13 February 2010.

17 *Ibid.*

18 Manyin and Nikitin, "Foreign Assistance to North Korea," 7.

19 Choe Sang-Hun, "N. Korea Said to Apologize Over Currency Changes," *The New York Times*, 11 February 2010.

20 HRW, "A Matter of Survival," 22.

21 "North Korean Defectors Up 10% Last Year," *Chosun Ilbo*, 6 January 2009, Internet, <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200901/200901060029.html>.

22 U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrant, "China," *World Refugee Survey*, Internet, <http://www.refugees.org/countryreports.aspx?subm=&ssm=&cid=2352>.

23 Korea Institute for National Unification, *White Paper*, 20.

24 *Ibid.*, 22.

25 *Ibid.*

26 *Ibid.*, 23.

27 Manyin and Nikitin, "Foreign Assistance to North Korea," 7.