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Hungry for Human Rights

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The recent diplomatic attention to North Korea's nuclear ambitions should not distract us from a second, equally grim, problem posed by that country: its chronic food emergency.

In the 1990s as many as 1 million North Koreans died in one of the worst famines of the century. This catastrophe would be the equivalent of roughly 15 million dead in the United States. Now, once again, North Korea's citizens are facing man-made food shortages that pose difficult challenges to other nations.

In the mid-'90s, North Korea was battered by severe weather, including floods. But the country's agricultural decline had begun well before those events. Rather than purchasing food on the world market or seeking multilateral assistance, the regime dithered. The government blocked humanitarian aid to the hardest-hit parts of the country and curtailed commercial imports of food as assistance was ramped up. Pyongyang in essence used humanitarian aid as balance-of-payments support, enabling dubious military white elephants such as the purchase of fighter jets from the Kazakh air force and centrifuges from Pakistan.

Grain production today remains below its 1990 level. With North Korea into the second decade of the food emergency, it is implausible to blame natural disasters. Failed economic policies and a misguided emphasis on food self-sufficiency remain problems, but underneath these proximate causes is a more fundamental political fact: the absence of human, civil and political rights. With no channels for redress, the large urban non-elite -- accounting for roughly 40 percent of the population -- faces a chronic food emergency.

The world community has responded to this tragedy with considerable generosity, committing more than \$2 billion in food aid over the past decade. The United States alone has contributed more than \$600 million, equivalent to 2 million metric tons of grain, and continues to provide assistance despite diplomatic tensions.

Yet at virtually every turn, the North Korean government has placed roadblocks in the way of donors.

The primary conduit of the relief effort has been the U.N. World Food Program (WFP). The WFP still cannot monitor shipments from port to recipient. It still is not permitted to use Korean-speaking staffers (although the North Koreans now allow them to take language lessons), and aid workers are restricted in their movements. Roughly 50 workers -- all the North Koreans will accept -- are responsible for overseeing the distribution of food to roughly 6 million vulnerable individuals in a country the size of Louisiana.

Our estimates suggest that up to half of aid deliveries do not reach their intended recipients. They are diverted to the less-deserving or siphoned off into emerging markets.

North Korea remains ideologically committed to a fantasy of self-reliance; in fact, the country always relied on its socialist patrons, and now it relies on international largess. North Korea will always import food. The issue is who will pay for it: the North Koreans or the international

community? The long-term solution is to export industrial products and import bulk grains -- just as its neighbors South Korea, China and Japan do.

But in the short term, the international community faces an ethical dilemma. It is tempting to walk away in hopes that the intensification of misery will contribute to regime change. But such a stance woefully underestimates the staying power of this dictatorship, and it assumes that others will not step in to fill the gap.

Yet, if the world is going to continue to provide aid, we should be clear-eyed about the terms on which it is provided. Two bilateral donors, China and South Korea, supply large amounts of aid that is essentially unconditional and outside the WFP ambit. This undercuts the agency's negotiating leverage with the North Korean government.

Indeed, the North Koreans recently requested that the WFP terminate its operations by the end of the year. Whether this is a credible threat or simply a negotiating gambit to further erode the WFP's monitoring system is uncertain. What is clear is that large bilateral donors, particularly South Korea, should channel more of their aid through the WFP. Like the United States, South Korea should insist that a significant share of its assistance be delivered to ports in the worst-affected areas. North Korean markets remain fragmented, and such aid, even if diverted, is likely to have a greater ameliorative impact than unmonitored assistance managed by the central government.

The recent progress in the six-party talks offers modest hope of normalizing North Korea's relations with the rest of the world and thereby contributing to the resolution of its food emergency through a process of economic engagement that would get it off the international dole. But the ultimate guarantee of food security will come only when the North Koreans achieve the human, civil and political rights necessary to hold their government accountable.

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