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Aid groups caught in crossfire of sanctions against North Korea

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Sanctions may be constraining North Korea's regime, but leaders of international aid organizations say sanctions have also blocked the flow of much-needed humanitarian aid into the isolated nation, where the United Nations is increasingly wary of spiraling food shortages.

While a recent U.N. report cited food scarcity among nearly half of North Korea's 25 million people, aid groups say heightened U.S. sanctions are making it all but impossible for the outside world to respond with the most basic assistance for thousands facing serious malnutrition, including the elderly and children.

The U.N. created a North Korea "needs and priorities" list in 2018 to help international charities and non-profit groups focus their programs aimed at combating food insecurity issues in the nation.

The list has gotten scant media attention in the backdrop of the North Korean nuclear crisis, which has seen the Trump administration scramble over the past two years to pursue diplomacy with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, while also significantly ramping up economic pressure his regime.

The core of Washington's pressure campaign is a slate of economic sanctions targeting businesses that interact with North Korea, while also tightly regulating the movement of any goods into the country — even humanitarian aid.

"There are things we would have no problem shipping immediately to respond to calls like this but given the current regulations, we're not able to do so," says Daniel Jasper, the advocacy coordinator for American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker organization that spreads humanitarian aid internationally.

Mr. Jasper spoke at a June 11 event, hosted by the Libertarian-leaning Cato Institute in Washington, titled "Peering Beyond the DMZ: North Korea Behind the Headlines."

He explained how his organization introduced a project in 2007 that included plastic rice trays aimed at helping North Korean farmers. The trays were designed to protect rice seedlings. Mr. Jasper said it worked, with crop yields improving by as much as fifteen percent for farmers who got access to the trays shipped into to North Korea.

These trays are one example of materials on last year's U.N. "needs and priorities" list for North Korea that have been delayed by sanctions regulations that require organizations like Mr.

Jasper's to obtain special humanitarian aid licenses from the U.S. government to continue shipping such materials — a process that can be cumbersome.

In the wake of an early-June U.N. report highlighting food scarcity issues for millions of North Koreans, the government of South Korea responded by committing \$8 billion in food aid to the North.

The move was politically sensitive and involved a delicate phone call by South Korean President Moon Jae-in to President Trump, who agreed to allow the South Korean aid package to go forward without any sanctions hang-ups.

However, the administration did not lift sanctions and has kept regulations in place impacting aid organizations such as the American Friends Service Committee.

Mr. Jasper suggested the Trump administration should remove or modify certain sanctions-related travel restrictions and embrace humanitarian exemption clauses that have been proposed by the United Nations.

“We'd like the U.S. side to really see humanitarian issues as a bridge, not a stick,” he said.

Pilot projects like the rice trays initiative had “gone on for upwards of a decade, but with recent policies in place, this has been very difficult to do on a regular schedule as we had done before,” Mr. Jasper said.

Others lament that the sanctions are also impacting the movement of medical supplies into North Korea.

While national security analysts often warn of the risks that expensive medicine included in humanitarian aid packages will be siphoned off by Kim regime officials for profit or use by elites in Pyongyang, aid advocates stress the medicine is still needed by poor North Koreans.

Heidi Linton, executive director for Christian Friends of Korea, says she made an early-June trip to North Korea, where she was able to meet with her organization's clinics there and a local doctor.

Ms. Linton explained during the recent Cato Institute event that the doctor had traveled over 40 dusty miles to reach the clinic and to retrieve results for a patient's blood test. With the results showing positive for Hepatitis B, the doctor implored the clinic's staff for medicine to be carried the 40 difficult miles back to his patient.

“There are many many people [in North Korea] who live incredibly difficult lives,” Ms. Linton said. “They care about their patients. They care about their families. They are desperate for an answer to their medical issues, to their malnutrition issues, and we have the possibility of stepping into this and reaching them.”

Access to clean drinking water is another area of concern. UNICEF's 2018 annual report said 60 percent of North Koreans lack safely managed drinking water, with 23.5 percent already drinking contaminated water.

Randall Spadoni, the North Korea program director for an organization known as World Vision, says he traveled to North Korea in March as part of an effort that has provided thousands with clean water.

“At least in the middle of all the politics, challenges, sanctions, everything, at least we can point to those people and say that we’ve changed their lives in some way,” Mr. Spadoni said at the CATO Institute event. “That gives me some hope. We face so many challenges and so much discouragement sometimes.”

He noted that an impending World Vision shipment to North Korea, has taken a year and a half to get into the country. The organization needed special licensing from the Treasury Department, travel permissions, and a U.N. exemption, Mr. Spadoni said.

“I don’t think there’s a country in the world, maybe there are a few, that have as many barriers to humanitarian organizations working there,” he said. “Every one of those restrictions affects the quality of our work and our ability to reach more people and that’s just the reality of it. I don’t think it’s the intention of the people who put the sanctions together but that is the way it’s worked out.”