

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## North Korea Faces Hunger, Malnutrition, and Maybe Worse

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North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un has warned of food shortages and an “arduous march,” alluding to the terrible famine a quarter-century ago. The result was mass death and hardship. Yet the tragedy was not unexpected: A common fate of communist lands is famine and starvation.

There was the Soviet Union, with millions dead of starvation in Ukraine, the North Caucasus, and elsewhere. It was decades before the full story was told since the foreign press helped hide Joseph Stalin’s murderous handiwork. The People’s Republic of China suffered through the Great Leap Forward, in which tens of millions of people starved to death. Hundreds of thousands of people in much smaller Cambodia, then called Kampuchea, died of starvation after the victory of the Khmer Rouge.

None of these tragedies were exceptional or unexpected, but rather the handiwork of governments bent on social engineering at any cost. For instance, the Great Leap Forward has been called “the greatest manmade disaster in history.” There were varying degrees of knowledge and intent—Mao Zedong was guilty of criminal irresponsibility, ideological blindness, and invincible ignorance more than conscious murder—but the consequences were the same. Horrendous human casualties and social devastation.

The causes and consequences of famine were similar in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Hundreds of thousands or possibly millions of people died. Explained by the Wilson Center: “The North Korean famine was largely caused by the country’s Stalinist economic system—not by flooding, as the government still maintains. ‘North Korea and Cuba are the

world's only Stalinist agricultural systems, where there is no incentive to produce food,' said [former U.S. AID administrator Andrew] Natsios. 'The production of food actually went into reverse during the famine.' In addition, Russia and China had stopped sending heavily-subsidized food supplies and oil to North Korea after the end of the Cold War." Pyongyang made other policy mistakes that exacerbated these problems.

The DPRK eventually recovered, though malnutrition remained common in some areas and the country sometimes suffered from shortages. However, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the North's response, isolating the country from the world, increased its vulnerabilities. In effect, Pyongyang sanctioned itself, largely eliminating both licit and illicit trade, including significant commerce with China.

In April he told the Worker's Party of Korea (WPK): "I made up my mind to ask the WPK organizations at all levels, including its Central Committee and the cell secretaries of the entire party, to wage another more difficult 'arduous march' in order to relieve our people of the difficulty, even a little." Last week he convened the WPK's Central Committee and announced that "the people's food situation is now getting tense as the agricultural sector failed to fulfill its grain production." Naturally, he blamed bad weather, and said: "It is essential for the whole party and state to concentrate on farming."

Unfortunately, it is difficult to assess the nature and degree of the shortages. The North is more isolated than normal. Humanitarian groups have essentially ceased operating in the country and even many diplomats have returned home. Still, from what can be seen there is no evidence currently of anything approaching the situation of the late 1990s.

Nevertheless, the price of rice, a staple, as well as foreign food products, which were sold domestically in pre-pandemic times, have been rising. There are other signs of concern. Reported Choe Sang-hun of the *New York Times*: "Some families have begun selling furniture to raise cash for food, Mr. [Jiro] Ishimaru [of Asia Press International] said. The number of homeless children scavenging for food is also on the rise in some parts of the country, though it is difficult to reliably assess the situation, given North Korea's isolation, he said." More severe problems could emerge by the fall.

The DPRK is likely to turn to Beijing for assistance. Ties have markedly improved since the first Kim summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping in early 2018. Perhaps more important, relations between the People's Republic of China and America have markedly deteriorated. The PRC supports denuclearization but is equally committed to stability. China does not want to see a social implosion on its doorstep or eventual reunification which would leave an American ally hosting U.S. troops on the PRC's border. Beijing likely would do what was necessary to keep its small neighbor afloat, at least as long as Pyongyang avoided red line provocations, such as another nuclear test.

What, if anything, should Washington do?

With neither evidence of need nor a request for assistance, about all America can do now is wait and watch. However, the Biden administration should clear a path for Americans to help if the situation deteriorates, which would surprise no one, least of all the North Korean leadership.

First, Secretary of State Antony Blinken should lift the travel prohibition to the North, which inhibits humanitarian operations. The ban was myopic from the start. Otto Warmbier's death was tragic, but the episode was more complicated than commonly portrayed. The DPRK did not kidnap Americans, and after the Trump summits, Kim's government likely would exercise greater caution in its treatment of U.S. visitors.

Second, State and Treasury should review sanctions, both substantive and procedural issues, which might obstruct NGOs providing food, medical, and other forms of aid. Problems have been many and well-documented. The time to fix the process is now.

Third, Washington should raise the issue with South Korea. How can the two governments cooperate if the North finds itself at risk of mass starvation again? Similar contact should be made with Beijing, though Seoul should be encouraged to take the lead in both cases.

Fourth, the administration should consider how a humanitarian crisis would affect its attempt to open negotiations with the DPRK over the latter's nuclear program and other issues. The overt use of the famine as diplomatic pressure could backfire, inhibiting necessary aid and halting nuclear talks before they begin. Deft diplomacy is useful in dealing with Pyongyang under normal circumstances. Such an approach would be even more important in the midst of a famine.

Kim's decision to go public with his concern over North Korea's latest harvest indicates that the prospect of significant hardship is real. Washington should begin to prepare now to respond, keeping in mind both humanitarian and security objectives. If the North ends up in crisis, the Korean peninsula could end up more dangerous than usual.

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