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## Let them eat Juche

Posted by Zia - 2008/05/10 03:48

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A DECADE after a famine killed 500,000-1m people in North Korea, recent news from the benighted country suggests it is once again on the brink of mass starvation. The state food distribution system seems to have broken down everywhere, including the capital, Pyongyang, which usually gets special treatment from Kim Jong Il's regime. In the absence of public distribution, North Koreans rely increasingly on informal or illegal markets for grain. There, a new paper by the Peterson Institute for International Economics (IIE) in Washington argues, recent extreme price rises appear consistent with the onset of famine (see chart).

Good Friends, a Buddhist human-rights group in South Korea, says that in rural areas families are again adding tree-bark and grass to their diet, and foraging for food in the wild. It says that in South Pyongan province in west-central North Korea, people are already dying of starvation, while listless farmers ignore officials' calls to plant this year's rice. Last month the World Food Programme (WFP) called for urgent help to avert a "serious tragedy".

North Korea, admittedly, has a chronic food crisis. The 23m-odd population is large for the country's arable land, and the weather is often unfavourable: late-summer floods in 2006 and 2007 caused widespread damage. But North Korea's neighbours, China and South Korea, share similar features without going short of food. By contrast, North Korea is both international ward and pariah. Its reckless foreign policy hinges on nuclear blackmail, which deters foreign donors, and the regime frustrates efforts to ensure aid goes to those who most need it. It has suppressed agricultural markets while failing to spend on rural infrastructure or even fertiliser. Crucially, an unreformed economy means inadequate exports of goods or commodities that could pay for food imports.

Calculating North Korea's food needs is a politicised game of inadequate data. The IIE paper, by Stephan Haggard, Marcus Noland and Erik Weeks, reckons that the country needs 4m tonnes of grain a year (one-fifth less than estimates by the WFP). The authors conclude that, in the absence of the massive food aid that was supplied in the years after the famine, there is now less than 100,000 tonnes to spare.

In one sense the situation is more critical than in earlier years. In 2005, after a decent harvest, the regime sought to stamp on burgeoning markets, redirect grain supplies through the public-distribution system and get people to return to their work units: male vendors were banned from markets and then, last year, women under 50. Yet the public system is under strain. Andrei Lankov of Kookmin University says that some cities have not accepted ration coupons for food since last year. It is not just grain itself: electricity and fuel for threshing and transport are also short. People are forced on to the black market, where rice has shot up from 860 won (about \$6) a kilo a year ago to 3,100 today. Income per head is perhaps \$500 a year.

In theory, America is ready to assist with big supplies of aid, but that could take time and, possibly, a satisfactory declaration of North Korea's nuclear programmes. The WFP struggles to raise money and awareness over North Korea's plight. Yet since late 2005 North Korea has restricted its operations in the country.

Grain can come fastest from China and South Korea. But China is concerned about its own food supply, imposing taxes and quotas on exports as global prices rise. China is coy about food donations, but North Korean ingratitude probably reduces the potential amount. After last summer's floods, China refused to ship UN grain by rail until North Korea returned at least some of its 1,800 missing wagons.

As for South Korea, previous levels of aid are now in doubt under the new administration of Lee Myung-bak. Mr Lee has tied future South Korean assistance to the North to denuclearisation and human rights. Emergency aid is exempt from such conditions, he says, but the North must request it. Having reacted furiously to Mr Lee, Mr Kim's regime will be loth to do so.

Tens of thousands of North Koreans escaped the previous famine by fleeing to China. Covert cross-border trade also helped alleviate some misery. This year, ahead of the Beijing Olympics, China wants no trouble, while North Korea has also cracked down at the border. Good Friends says that in February 13 women and two men were executed for planning to cross into China. The regime calls the first famine the "arduous march" under Mr Kim's glorious leadership. If there is to be a second march, it seems no North Korean is to be allowed to escape its rigours.

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