

# North Korea's 1990s Famine in Historical Perspective

By Michael J. Seth

*North Korea suffered from a horrific famine in the mid and late 1990s. The immediate cause of the North Korean famine was the widespread flooding in August 1995 that destroyed much of the nation's rice crop. The summer monsoon rains that come each year were especially heavy. Starting on June 26, it rained for ten days, dumping as much as twenty-three inches on parts of the country. Satellite photos suggest that a quarter of the nation's rice paddies were under water.<sup>1</sup> The dimensions of the catastrophe are not fully known, but between 1995 and 1999, hundreds of thousands perished from causes directly or indirectly related to food shortages. Estimates of the number who died run as high as two million; a more probable figure is that between 600,000 and one million of the total population of twenty million people perished in the famine.<sup>2</sup> This was a truly appalling number, amounting to 3 to 5 percent of the total population.<sup>3</sup>*

North Korea's famine, although precipitated by a natural disaster, was primarily political in its origins, but almost all modern famines have been political in the sense that they were caused by war, upheavals, or misguided state policies. Wartime preoccupation and bureaucratic bungling brought about the Bengal famine of 1943. Ethiopia's famines in the 1970s and 80s were the result of the conjuncture of bad weather with the forced collectivization and massive relocations carried out by the radical socialist government that came to power in 1974. Mass famines resulting from failed policies happened in other Communist regimes. Historians estimate that between six and eight million peasants perished in the collectivization of agriculture carried out under the Soviet Union's First Five-Year Plan in Russia between 1928 and 1932. At least one million out of a population of six million died in Cambodia under Pol Pot between 1975 and 1979—mostly from hunger. The Great Leap Forward in China from 1958 to 1962 resulted in the greatest famine of modern times—twenty million may have died from starvation in rural China; some calculations are even as high as thirty million or more. Proportionately, the scale of North Korea's famine, if we assume 3 to 5 percent died directly from food deprivation, may be no greater than in the Soviet Union or in China and considerably less than Cambodia.<sup>4</sup>

Yet North Korea's famine differed. While these other famines took place in the midst of upheavals caused by sudden implementation of radical new economic policies, there were no major upheavals or changes in policy in North Korea. The country's original transition to socialist agriculture went fairly smoothly. This was in sharp contrast with the collectivization of agriculture in many other communist regimes such as the Soviet Union, Cuba, Việt Nam, China, Cambodia, and Mongolia, all of which were marked by severe food shortages and, in some cases, violence. It was only after several decades of accumulating failed economic policies that North Korea plunged into catastrophe. Unlike other famines, it was the culmination of a long decline in agriculture and nutrition levels.

Very few photos have made it out of North Korea showing the reality of starvation. This photo is one of the few from the video, *IST 400 E-Portfolio #2 North Korea Famine*, on YouTube at <http://tiny.cc/m3c32>.



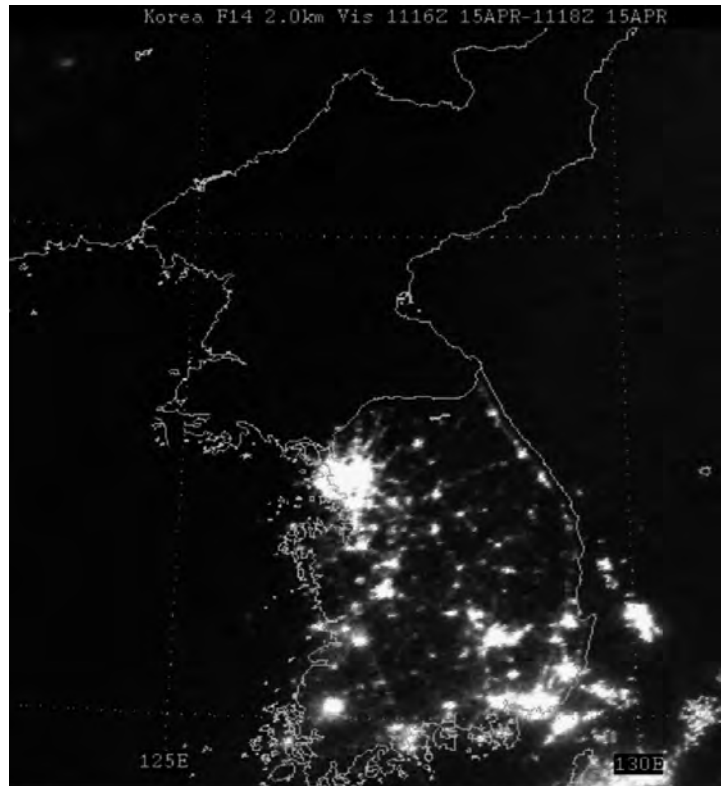
North Koreans had been suffering from chronic food shortages for years. The country, about the size of Pennsylvania with a population of about twenty-two million at the time of the famine, possessed limited farmland and a short growing season. Most of the good agricultural land was in the south. With the 1945 division of the Korean peninsula, this food supply had been cut off. To overcome this handicap, the regime spent large efforts on elaborate irrigation systems, made heavy use of chemical fertilizers, and expanded the arable acreage by filling in the shallow seas along the west coast and by clearing forested mountainsides. Some progress was made in creating new farmland from the sea but at a great expenditure of resources. Geographic limitations were made worse by years of economic mismanagement and the problems inherent in North Korea's socialist system of agriculture. The state carried out a total collectivization in the 1950s that allowed for only tiny family plots, less than in most other communist states. From 1957, all trade in grain was strictly forbidden. Food was collected and rationed through the public distribution system. All decisions on production were made from the capital Pyongyang, where officials issued detailed instructions on what and when to plant at each collective farm. The ruling Korean Workers Party sent out propaganda teams to provide ideological training and encouragement to farmers.

The North Korean state approached agriculture in an industrial manner, emphasizing mechanization, chemicalization, and irrigation. Small plots of land were consolidated to create large fields that could be worked with tractors. Tractors were locally manufactured and put into use although the supply was never enough. Huge amounts of chemical fertilizer were applied to obtain high yields, and elaborate irrigation methods were employed. All this resulted in what one study calls "one of the world's most input-intensive agricultural systems."<sup>5</sup>

With the possible exception of a few years in the 1980s, food production was never able to meet basic nutritional needs, and chronic food shortages were common. Yet, the regime was unwilling to import substantial amounts of food, in part because it gave priority to spending its scarce funds on military-related technology and partly because of its *juche* ideology. *Juche*, loosely translated as self-reliance, was a mix of Stalinism, ultra-nationalism, and a near obsessive concern with self-sufficiency derived from the bitter experiences of Japan's harsh colonial rule and the horrendously destructive Korean War. Yet, North Korea remained dependent on aid from the Soviet Union and China, including the petroleum the former supplied at highly subsidized "friendship" prices. When Moscow demanded payment at the market price for its oil after 1989, North Korean agriculture suffered. Unable to afford the fuel for pumps,

irrigation systems ceased to operate, tractors became idle, and fertilizer production fell because petroleum was used in its manufacture.

The ending of cheap Soviet petroleum imports added to the problems created by unsound agricultural practices. Seeds were closely planted, making the crops vulnerable to pests and exhausting the soil. Rigid regulations made it difficult for farms to adjust policies to local conditions. The greatest problem was deforestation. The forested hillsides of this mountainous country were cleared to expand farmland, even in areas too steep to be suitable for planting crops. One aid official in 1997 observed entire hillsides torn away by erosion due to these shortsighted policies.<sup>6</sup> In a measure to deal with the scarcity of meat, the state encouraged livestock raising, especially poultry and pigs, but



Night satellite photo showing the contrast of the bright prosperity of South Korea against the darkness of North Korea. Source: <http://tiny.cc/3i92e>.

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this required feed. The state launched a campaign to encourage raising goats, although the country had limited grazing land, and goats further contributed to erosion.<sup>7</sup> Deforestation and erosion contributed to the disastrous floods that were the immediate cause of the severe famine of the 1990s.

The result of failed agricultural policies was a slow deterioration in the diet of North Koreans that preceded the terrible floods of 1995. The diet of North Koreans (and of all Koreans) traditionally centers on white polished rice. Indeed *pap*, a common word for meal in Korea, literally means cooked rice. Rice is served with dishes of fresh or pickled vegetables (*kimchi*), soup, and, when available, fish and small pieces of meat. Barley and other grains have traditionally been substituted for or mixed with rice when not enough rice was available. The ideal diet was expressed by Kim Il Sung when, using an old Korean expression, he told his people that, under socialism, they would be “eating rice and meat soup.”<sup>8</sup> The importance of providing rice for the North Korean diet was expressed in his widely publicized slogan “rice is socialism.”<sup>9</sup>

But these plans to ensure that the people would enjoy their traditional foods were not fulfilled, and instead, North Korea suffered chronic agricultural shortfalls. With limited arable land, a shorter growing season, and more modest rainfall than South Korea, the North struggled to grow enough rice and other staple crops to feed the population. Kim Il Sung promoted corn as a substitute for rice, but corn was less nutritional and regarded by North Koreans as an inferior grain. It was often mixed with whatever rice was available to make it more palatable. In the 1990s, Kim Jong Il promoted potatoes to supplement the grain shortfall, but potatoes did not grow well in the acidic soils of the country, were more difficult to store, proved vulnerable to insect pests and diseases, and thus failed to gain acceptance as a substitute for rice.<sup>10</sup>

Food in North Korea was distributed through the public distribution system. Farmers received their rations after their crops were harvested. The non-farming population received *yanggwon* (coupons) every fifteen days that could be redeemed at a state store. These were primarily for grain, although sometimes coupons for cooking oil, vegetables, and, on rare occasions—principally major holidays such as Kim Il Sung’s and later Kim Jong Il’s birthday—meat was also distributed. The amount of grain allowed depended on occupation and status. Soldiers, miners, and workers in heavy industry were allotted 900 grams, party members 700, and non-party office workers somewhat less. Women over fifty-five and men over sixty-one received 400 grams, children 200 to 300 grams. Status also determined what percentage of this was rice. Only officials

and military officers received mostly rice. Ordinary North Koreans received mostly mixed grains, with the percentage of rice in their rations declining over time. By the 1980s and early 1990s, the majority of the people were receiving only 10 to 30 percent of their grain rations in rice; the rest was usually corn.<sup>11</sup> The rations for most people, at best, barely covered basic nutritional needs and, when possible, were supplemented by purchases in the very limited and restricted markets for meat and vegetables.

The problem for most North Koreans became not the quality of food but obtaining enough. Starting in the 1970s, rations were periodically cut. In the late 1980s, further cuts in rice rations were labeled as “patriotic rice,” donations to the military. Evidence suggests that by this time, malnutrition was becoming widespread, and many children were underweight and short for their ages. The situation worsened when Soviet aid was cut off since North Korean agriculture had been built around the assumption of access to cheap imported oil. It was further aggravated when China, angered at Pyongyang’s behavior in the 1994 nuclear crisis, demanded unavailable cash payments for imported corn. Those external factors, along with increased environmental degradation, greatly aggravated an already dire situation. By the early 1990s, the country may have only produced enough to cover 60 percent of its food needs.<sup>12</sup> The idea of getting by with less reached a grim point in 1991 with the slogan, “Let’s eat two meals a day.”<sup>13</sup>

To deal with the deteriorating economic and food situation, a few modest reforms were taken. The state increased the permissible scale of private gardens from eighty to 120 square meters, still tiny and still privately tended, not owned. It also extended the frequency and scope of farmer’s markets and temporarily allowed the sale of grain.<sup>14</sup> But these very modest measures were accompanied by more emphasis on double cropping and high-yield grains. Continuous use of land led to further soil degradation.<sup>15</sup> There was no attempt to carry out agricultural reform, as took place in China after 1978 and Việt Nam after 1986.

Thus, the famine was the culmination of a long and growing food crisis caused by misguided policies and pushed to a critical point, first by the loss of Soviet aid and then by the floods. The flooding itself was partly the result of poor management, and it may in fact have served as a face-saving way to seek aid, blaming an unaccountable natural disaster for what was the product of the failed *juche*-based economy.

The North Korean government had an unusual response to the famine caused by the long and growing food crisis. The government made some

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gestures in the direction of seeking food assistance even before the famine. A UN World Food Program assessment team was invited in 1991 but was presented with no evidence of food shortages. In 1994, North Korea approached Japan on food aid yet did so without any display of urgency. Then, in 1995, it publicly reported the floods and openly sought help from foreign governments and international relief organizations. However, unlike other states, who have called upon the international community for massive assistance, the regime imposed unprecedented restrictions over the relief efforts. A number of foreign relief agencies came in, such as the UN-related World Food Program, the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the World Health Organization. Some European countries also offered aid. By 2000, these international agencies were providing 40 percent of North Korea's food needs.

International aid workers, however, confronted a historically unprecedented situation with the restrictions over the relief efforts imposed by the regime. There was massive starvation, but unlike the usual chaotic conditions that accompany famine, they found a tightly controlled police state determined to limit interactions between relief workers and the people they were helping. Concerned with keeping their citizens ignorant of the outside world, North Korean officials insisted on managing the distribution of food. Aid workers complained about lack of access to victims and were frustrated over their inability to determine just where the food was going. Rumors circulated among donors, often proved correct, that food aid was being diverted to the military whose needs were the highest priority for the regime. This led to a controversy over whether food aid was being used to feed the army and party at the expense of others in more dire need, especially children, but the extent to which this was true could not be verified. There were also some disturbing reports that rice being supplied by Japan and South Korea was being resold abroad to earn foreign exchange.

Whole regions of the country were closed to international relief workers, including the northeast province of Hamgyŏng Pukto, which was believed to be the most severely famine stricken. The ability of international aid groups to understand the situation and assess needs was hindered by the North Korean government's efforts to limit the number of Korean speakers they could employ. Meanwhile, many aid organizations, exasperated by the restrictions Pyongyang placed on their activities, its insistence that they use only non-Korean-speaking personnel, and the lack of information over where food was being distributed, began to pull out. Other groups, by accepting these limitations and carefully steering away from politics, remained in the country.

Perhaps the most unusual aspect of North Korea's famine was that it occurred in a modern, industrial, largely urbanized state and struck the urban population especially hard. Major modern famines have taken place in predominantly rural societies and have impacted the countryside more than cities. The famines in Ethiopia occurred in a nation that was more than 80 percent rural and agricultural with only 10 percent living in cities. In China, at the time of the Great Leap Forward, nearly 75 percent of the population was agrarian; less than a quarter of the population was urban. Similarly, Cambodia and the Ukraine were predominantly rural societies at the time of the great periods of mass starvation. In all these cases, it was the non-urban populations that suffered the most. In contrast, by the 1970s, 70 percent of North Koreans lived in cities, the highest in Asia after Japan and much higher than in China today. Farmers made up less than 30 percent of the population. That percentage was probably still similar in the 1990s. While farmers certainly suffered, it was the urban population dependent on the public distribution system that felt the food shortage most severely when the distribution system broke down. Relief experts reported that besides those on collective farms in the flooded areas, it was factory workers, miners, and transport workers and their families that were in most dire need of food.<sup>16</sup> Workers abandoned factories to forage for food in the countryside, and schools emptied because students and teachers were too weak to attend class or were also scavenging for food.

The most acute hunger was found in the industrial cities of the northeast. Reports by refugees describe people abandoning work and school to search for food. Factory and office workers headed for the hillsides and collected whatever they could. Many crossed over the border illegally to China to sell anything they had for food to bring back to their families. Dogs and livestock of various kinds disappeared. People made what were called substitute or alternative foods, such as "green porridge," made from ground-up leaves and other vegetable matter mixed with a little grain.<sup>17</sup> Alternative foods were made from tree bark, leaves, grasses, and twigs ground and mixed with whatever else was available. The result was not only of little nutritional value but resulted in diarrhea, dysentery, and internal bleeding. Abandoned children, known as *kotchebi*, whose parents were too incapacitated to help them, off in search of food, or dead, wandered city streets and occupied abandoned factories and rail stations.<sup>18</sup> Especially hard hit was the industrial city of Chongjin that became a virtual ghost town as people left in search of food or were too weak to leave their homes.<sup>19</sup> Only in Pyongyang, the relatively privileged capital, was food generally available, but starvation took place even there.<sup>20</sup>

Because rations had been severely reduced, people in major industrial cities had already been suffering from severe food shortage, malnutrition, and chronic hunger in the early 1990s. When the food rations faltered and stopped in 1995, they had few resources left to fall back on. Thus, the destruction of much of the rice harvest in the summer of 1995 severely impacted a population that was already debilitated by malnutrition. By the end of that year, many thousands of people, mostly the elderly, the ill, and young children, died of starvation. The situation only worsened in 1996. Already-damaged farmland

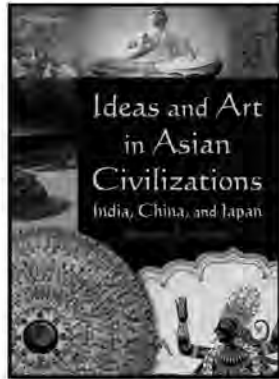
### **Workers abandoned factories to forage for food in the countryside, and schools emptied because students and teachers were too weak to attend class or were also scavenging for food.**

experienced more flooding during that summer. While the flooding was not as severe as the previous year, the accumulated effects of food shortages exacted a higher death toll. More perished in 1997 and 1998, although the food shortage was becoming less severe.

Children were especially hard hit. The 1998 joint European Union-UNICEF-WFP survey estimated that 62 percent of children were stunted (low height for age), and 61 percent were underweight.<sup>21</sup> Children exhibited signs of long-term undernourishment, including lassitude, susceptibility to minor illness and infection, increased mortality, and impaired cognitive functions. Foreign aid workers commented that children often appeared several years younger than their real ages. After 1998, conditions improved, and starvation was rarer, but chronic undernourishment remained a problem, especially for children. The limited foreign access to some of the most severely affected areas make the continued impact of the famine a matter of guesswork. In 2004, the United Nation's Fifth Report on World Nutrition found a sharp reduction in the number of underweight and stunted children, although the figure was still high.<sup>22</sup>

#### **Conclusion**

Gradually, conditions improved, and by 2004, the North Korean government began to close the offices of many foreign aid agencies. However, there were no fundamental changes in its agricultural policies. Some economic reforms were carried out in 2002, including the permitting of private markets, but starting in 2005, the state reimposed restrictions on private enterprise and retreated back to many of its old economic policies. Food shortages continued. The regime relies on food aid from its largest donors: the United States and South Korea. But

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frustrated by their inability to monitor food distribution and angered by military provocations, Washington and Seoul frequently cut off or reduced food shipments. Meanwhile, hunger and malnutrition continue, and, as of 2011, the return of mass famine remained a real possibility.

North Korea's famine was a singular event. Unlike most major modern famines, it was not the product of political upheaval and less the result of natural disaster than of long-term, failed economic policies. It was also unusual in that it was the urban population in industrial cities that was hit hardest. The government's response to the famine—an unguarded appeal to international help coupled with severe restrictions placed on foreign donors—was atypical as well. Most tragically, it was unusual in that it led to no major changes in policies or its *juche* ideology, resulting in repeated hunger, starvation, and threats of mass famine in the years that followed. North Korea was an urban, literate, industrialized state capable of maintaining tight political control over its population and limiting foreign access but unable or unwilling to make the necessary changes that could provide its people the most basic human need—enough to eat. ■

## NOTES

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