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The North Korean Food Crisis and the Lee Myung-Bak Administration

North Korea is currently facing a looming food crisis. Problem of food shortage in the country is nothing new, but the situation has been aggravating since last year. The Korea Rural Economic Institute released the “2007 North Korea’s Grain Production Evaluation” report on December 13 last year, where it estimated North Korea’s total grain production to have decreased from 4.48 million to 4.01 million tons, an 11% decrease from the previous year. These rates account for only 62% of the total average of grain harvest production of 6.50 million tons, and the decline hardest hit in the categories of rice and corn. Flood damages across the country last summer and autumn have been worse than past occasions. Sighting the words from a North Korean agriculture expert at the institute: “400 thousand tons can feed the whole North Korean population for one month. Food shortage issues have long persisted in the country, but with 400 thousand tons loss in production, the spring austerity season is sure to strike earlier next year (2008). Generally, North Korea’s spring shortage season is around April to May, but next year striking in March, people will have to worry earlier about how to fill their stomachs.” He was right.

North Korea’s Looming Food Crisis

North Korean Human Rights Organization “Good Friends” in Seoul find last year’s food production in North Korea to be even lower than the estimates issued by the Rural Economic Institute. In the 119th edition (April 2008) of “North Korea Today,” the organization’s newsletter, it states that according to North Korean sources, last year’s production did not exceed 2.50 million tons. If these words are credible, North Korea is sure to face a nation wide food crisis more serious than that of the “Arduous March¹” years. It further explains that the

¹ After the death of Kim Il-Sung in 1994, millions of people faced starvation and others escaped the country. The North Korean government used this metaphor to denote Kim Il-Sung’s struggle to fight against Japanese imperialism, in an effort to divert such an

granaries of North and South Hwang-Hae province, known for its rich grain harvest was hardest hit by the flooding last year, contributing to the depression of the whole production. The region's production constituted for 55 to 60 percent of the whole country's running stock, which has currently dropped to 30%. As the situation goes, North Korea announced it would force suspension of rations in Pyongyang beginning April. "Good Friends" add that the distribution of food in all sectors of Pyongyang will come to a halt for about six months. Some Pyongyang executives say even during the "Arduous March" years the government did not stop distributing food to its people. The organization expressed its concern by saying that the current situation is showing similar conditions to that of the "Passion March" period ten years ago, where an estimated 3 million people lost their lives and the same could happen now unless drastic measures are taken.

Looking into past food shortage problems in North Korea is necessary in making clear assessments of the current crisis. Dr. Young-Hoon Lee, a researcher at the Institute for Monetary and Economic Research of Korea Bank, analyzed North Korea's total supply of food for 2007, with numbers coming from the Rural Development Administration and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The results showed that the food-stricken nation is showing similar production rates as during the period of mass death by starvation in the late 1990s. Lee finds the reasons for last year's total food supplement decrease and the rise in grain prices to be in the overall fall of production and import amount. The leading cause of food shortage in 2007 lies on the massive floods that hit the nation on August that year, cutting back the total production rate. Continuous "Darak-Bat"² farming and the need to secure fuel have left most of the mountains bald and vulnerable to natural catastrophes. Consequently, incessant natural disasters followed by food shortage have struck the nation. Unless efforts of a forestation along with fundamental efforts to reform the agricultural production structure is undergone, North Korea's food supplement and distribution will stay highly dependant on weather conditions and foreign aid and relations.

The South Korean Government's Indifference to Humanitarian Aid

The fundamental rights and rights to food of the North Korean people are devastatingly infringed by the chronic and structural problems that lie beneath the conditions of food shortage in the communist country. Such circumstances require international cooperation, a

atmosphere.

² Scarcity of flat plain land has left North Korea to use the waist of mountains as farm land, in which they call Darak-Bat.

combination of humanitarian efforts along with systemic economical reform, to help increase agricultural productivity and solve the problems of food shortage. Unfortunately, the international community's apparent aid fatigue and the North Korean nuclear problem have left the issue of food shortage in the back shelf. Amidst of all this, with the new hard-line South Korean government in place, humanitarian issues are being connected with other strategic problems, a contradictory move from where the United States is heading towards. The US policy toward the North has changed from pressuring to holding dialogue with North Korea.

The Lee administration is putting its entire stake in solving the North Korean nuclear issue first and linking all other policies toward the North into it. Such moves not only counter the 9. 19 mutual agreement at the six-party talks to solve issues not pertaining directly to the nuclear problems simultaneously, but also brick a wall between the two Koreas and leave out space for dialogue. Contrary to the new government's statement that it would continue its humanitarian aid toward North Korea, no such actions have yet been preceded. Neither is it collaborative to North Korean civil support programs. Currently civil organizations registered in the Ministry of Unification for financial support in carrying out their aid programs have reached 63 cases, but none have been granted.

Experts and organizations who have long tracked and supported the work of humanitarian aid to the North find the existing food crisis to be ravaging. It is shameful to see its closest neighboring country, South Korea, who has taken and can still take a major role in alleviating the situation, eventually staying indifferent to the problem, persisting on the pre denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. What will South Korea do if the partial support from the international community is all that North Korea gets and as a result massive deaths by starvation arise? It is vital to understand that humanitarian support toward the North can ironically be a strategic approach to bring about regional stability and improvement of relations between the two Koreas.

Quoting the words of Ven-Bomnyun, South Korea's leading advocate of North Korean civil support programs, "Opening up all overland and sea route is the most efficient and effective way of carrying out North Korean aid programs." His word for the new government taking a unilateral stance was that "It should not wait until the number of deaths arises to give out support, or else that would bring about real 'impragmatic' to the situation." President Lee has made a round of official visits for the first time after his inauguration on April 15. During his visit to the United States and Japan, he said South Korea will collaborate together to solve the North Korean nuclear issue and ratify the Free Trade Agreement with the US, but along the lines

of a “pragmatic” foreign policy. President Lee’s open and confident attitude toward the North should not translate into being indifferent to the realities of the North Korean situation and the future of people in the Korean peninsula. The South Korean government should work along with the international community in the areas of humanitarian aid and economic cooperation to overcome the food crisis and solve the North Korean nuclear issue simultaneously. Humanitarian support to the North will eventually not only help breakthrough the food crisis, but also break down the walls that have accumulated after the formation of the new South Korean government.