

North Korea: Is Aid the Answer?

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by Erich & Marilyn Weingartner

The Context

Tonight we shall introduce you to a country that relatively few outsiders have been allowed to visit. Even fewer have had the pleasure of taking up residence there for any appreciable length of time.

Let us begin by pointing out that the title for this evening's lecture would not be well received by North Korean authorities. Although it is frequently used to identify the country about which we are speaking tonight, the name "North Korea" causes some offense to its citizens. North Koreans do not believe in a divided Korea. Maps printed in North Korea do not even show a demilitarized zone.

The official English-language map used by most humanitarian aid workers bears a quotation in red lettering by the late "Great Leader," Kim Il Sung:

"Ours is a single nation with 5,000 years of history; it is a valorous, ambitious nation that has been vigorously fighting against foreign invaders and successive reactionary rulers from olden times; and it is a talented nation that has contributed greatly to mankind's development of science and culture."

We shall therefore begin by teaching you the acronym "DPRK", or "DPR Korea", which stands for the "Democratic People's Republic of Korea". (The southern equivalent, by the way, is "ROK", which stands for "Republic of Korea".)

North Koreans believe that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is the only legitimate political entity on the peninsula. It is their belief that the Republic of Korea in the southern part of the peninsula is merely a puppet state created by the United States of America to justify a continued military presence in the Asian region.

Historical Factors

Korea cannot be understood outside the context of Japanese occupation and annexation in the first half of this century. The DPRK cannot be understood outside the context of the Korean War of 1950 to 1953. We will not dwell upon the causes and conduct of this complex war except to say that North Koreans do not accept the version of history most of us have been taught in history classes.

What all of us can accept is that the north was devastated by carpet bombings that left cities like the capital Pyongyang a sea of rubble. The war caused millions of deaths and left the country and its people divided for a half century and counting. Ten million Korean families have remained separated by the most impenetrable border on earth.

The hot war was followed by a cold one more durable than that between the Soviet Union and the USA, the original authors of Korean division. Nowhere is the enduring Cold War so dramatically

in evidence as at the village of Panmunjom in the land-mine-studded demilitarized zone that still cuts across the Korean peninsula like an open sore.

Here the world's largest, most well equipped armies continue to confront each other, frequently testing each other's mettle with what are euphemistically termed "incidents". Until very recently, both Koreas proffered aggressive foreign policies based on extremes of distrust and confrontation.

In the eyes of North Koreans, the Korean War continues unabated to this day. The 1953 Armistice is legally only a cease-fire. A peace treaty was never signed. The threat of aggression by the North's chief enemies – the USA, Japan and South Korea – is underlined for them by annual military exercises in which these countries participate.

The DPRK therefore feels completely justified in developing its military might – including the production, use and export of missile technology.

External Face of the DPRK

Hardly a week passes without some reference in the press regarding North Korea's "aggressive irrationality". What are we told of what goes on inside this nation of some 23 million people? Since neither journalists nor their readers are permitted to enter the country, stories often contain as much factual material as an "urban legend"!

"Hermit Kingdom" is a phrase often used to describe the DPRK, "hermit" because of the country's self-imposed isolation from the outside world, and "kingdom" because of the first successful hereditary communist leadership succession.

Indeed, the DPRK is a closed society. Foreign media and short-wave radios are forbidden to ordinary citizens. Foreign radio and television broadcasts are regularly jammed. All news from the outside world is filtered through organs of propaganda. Even for United Nations humanitarian staff, visas are terribly difficult to obtain. Arrival and departure forms at the airport ask not for the purpose of your visit, but for the name of your delegation and hosting organization. Individual travel is apparently unthinkable.

How is one to understand this autistic behaviour?

Korea's history follows a direct line from feudalism to Japanese imperialism to fratricidal war to cold war confrontation to dictatorship (military in the south, proletariat in the north). Isolation is promoted not only from within, but also from without, for reasons related to the geopolitical interests of surrounding powers. Following the Second World War, the USA included the DPRK into its post-war "rollback and containment" strategy.

The Soviet Bloc and China were the DPRK's main allies. President Kim Il Sung was very clever in playing one against the other, thus reaping the benefit of the Sino-Soviet conflict. Russia and China still have the largest embassies in Pyongyang, complete with their own primary schools for embassy children.

The recent collapse of the Soviet Union was a major blow for the DPRK. So was China's flirtation with the Republic of Korea – a triumph of economic over ideological relations. The result is that the DPRK is now more isolated than ever.

Worship of the Leader

First-time visitors to the DPRK often describe the experience as akin to visiting an alien planet. Korean passengers on the Air Koryo flight from Beijing (a Soviet-made Tupolev or Ilyushin) carry not only their hand luggage, but also bouquets of flowers destined for the feet of the “Great Leader's” statue.

Devotion to the “Great Leader” and his son, the “Dear Leader” is not an option. It is a daily, relentless, ever-present reality, from the 5:30 a.m. wake-up songs – emanating from loudspeakers in the streets of every city and town in North Korea – to the music heard as the sun sets each day. Statues, banners, slogans, songs, artwork, theatre, television, cinema, even the two national circuses are dedicated to the leader's honour.

In so-called “education rooms” children in nurseries learn of the life of the “Great Leader”. The central showpiece is a model of Mangyongdae, Kim Il Sung's birthplace. Stories from his childhood and youth adorn the walls. Most children attend nurseries from the age of 6 months. The first word many of them learn to say is the Korean equivalent of “daddy” – except that they will point to the image of Kim Il Sung when they say it. As they get older, they are taught to recite the stories of the “Great Leader”, the eternal president and shining sun of the nation.

Since the death of Kim Il Sung, a second education room has joined the first. The layout is identical, although this one teaches the virtues of “Dear Leader” and “Respected General” Kim Jong Il, rising sun of the 21st Century.

Most recently, a third person has joined the pantheon of Korean sainthood. It is Kim Jong Suk, the “indomitable guerilla fighter against the Japanese imperialists” and “martyr of the revolution.” She also happens to be Kim Jong Il's mother.

Every breast bears a pin with the image of the “Great Leader”. The living room wall of every home is adorned by framed portraits of both Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il.

We should emphasize here that after watching North Koreans at close range for more than two years, we never had the impression that devotion to the leaders is something forced against people's wills. It is common to see women and even some men burst into tears when they view the carefully embalmed and preserved body of Kim Il Sung in the Memorial Palace. In several parts of the country, trees were reported to have spontaneously burst into blossom in late October 1997, when Kim Jong Il ascended to the post of General Secretary of the Korean Worker's Party.

Isolation as Guiding Ideology

Second only to adulation of the leader is faithful adherence in word and deed to the “Juche” idea – North Korea’s homegrown ideology of self-reliance. The phrases “with our own means,” or “by our own hands” are very popular – used reverently by the young interpreters employed by humanitarian agencies. When the long-range Taepodong 1 missile was fired over a mortified Japan last year, our local staff expressed genuine pride that the Korean people could put a satellite into orbit “without anybody’s help”.

The Juche ideology is the “guiding light of the people”, and is symbolized by a torch, such as that found on the summit of Pyongyang’s Juche Tower. The Juche idea worked well in the period of post-war reconstruction. The DPRK rose rapidly from the rubble left by the war into an industrial power to be reckoned with. Until the 1970’s North Korea was economically more advanced than South Korea, and the envy of Chinese neighbours.

Even today, during these times of severe hardship, collective triumphalism remains undiminished. During the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the DPRK in September 1998, the North Korean people showed to themselves and to the world what a determined people can accomplish, united behind their leader.

Current Conditions

Considering the current difficulties faced by the people of the DPRK, one may be pardoned for believing this self-professed self-reliance to be little more than self-deception.

Aside from the dramatic food shortages which have afflicted North Korea for a number of years, the country is also experiencing massive energy shortages, leading to the decline of industrial production. This exacerbates the already dreadful state of agriculture, and undermines the ability of political authorities to supply that which had earned them the people’s loyalty in the first place: health and welfare guarantees for most of population.

What this means for the DPRK leadership is that the current crisis is more than simply a matter of commodity shortages, such as can be remedied by the import of humanitarian aid. This crisis threatens to undermine the ideological foundations of the state.

What happened to bring the DPRK to the current difficulties?

The break-up of Soviet Union and the fall of communist governments in the Soviet Bloc states in and around 1990 was a major setback for the DPRK. It meant the loss of major trading and bartering partners in Eastern Europe. It also meant the cessation of favourable terms for Russian oil supplies. Russia began to demand hard currency, which the DPRK does not possess.

Then came the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994 – a psychological blow which left important organs of state and government in political limbo. During the three years of mourning, major posts were left vacant. Although the mandate of the Supreme People’s Assembly (SPA – the North Korean

parliament) expired, no elections were held until the summer of 1998. The Korean Worker's Party (KWP) central committee has not met since Kim Il Sung's death. There has not been a Party congress since 1980! There was no consideration of the national budget until early this year, even though the last 7-year plan ended in 1993, and a subsequent "adjustment period" lapsed in 1996.

As the final straw came the natural disasters: a series of hail storms in 1994, devastating floods in 1995 and 1996, drought in 1997. If one were to play devil's advocate, one could argue that these natural disasters were a godsend for the regime. They supplied an opportunity to deflect responsibility and an excuse to enlist international aid without the risk of internal political consequences.

The Arrival of Humanitarian Aid

How It All Began

To the surprise of all observers, the DPRK appealed to the international community for help after the devastating floods of 1995. The summer floods had wiped out a major portion of the year's harvest, damaged farm lands and rice paddies, broken through dikes and retaining walls, and destroyed many water reservoirs. The resulting food shortages left not only humans without food, but led to a large-scale slaughter of domestic animals and herds of cattle because of lack of fodder.

Following an assessment of the damage, the World Food Programme (WFP) opened an office in Pyongyang in the fall of 1995.

Initially it was difficult to raise donations. There was suspicion about the true motives of the DPRK Government in seeking aid and distrust about the statistics of flood damage. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) were first major donors of food aid, but the Government did not permit NGOs to take up residence in the country. Consequently, many NGOs channeled their donations through the WFP.

By the spring of 1996, an idea took shape to bring NGOs into the country through the back door. The plan was to create an office within the WFP structures financed and staffed by NGO representatives. The process of negotiations that finally led to the opening of this office would make a good topic for another lecture. Suffice it to say that the Food Aid Liaison Unit (FALU) became operational in May 1997 and Erich was chosen by an NGO coalition – including the Canadian Foodgrains Bank – to head the office.

Thus we arrived in Pyongyang, the first Canadians (and first NGO representatives) to live in North Korea since the war. We signed on for one year, but stayed for a total of 26 months from May 1997 to July 1999.

Like all expatriate humanitarian workers, we lived in the diplomatic compound, behind walls and guards meant to keep us a safe distance from ordinary Koreans. We could circulate freely within

Pyongyang and on a corridor to the beach at Nampo City, some 40 km away. Erich even passed a test to obtain a North Korean driver's license! But outside city limits, we needed a Korean driver and interpreter.

During our first year we were accompanied by our daughter Gabrielle, then aged 10, who attended the Korean School for Foreigners along with about 50 other embassy children. Classes were taught in English by a Korean faculty.

What We Did

Our work involved the usual gamut of tasks accomplished by aid agencies: needs assessment, communication with donors to maximize inputs, commodity tracking, monitoring and reporting.

Erich worked mostly in the food sector, with some agricultural inputs, whereas Marilyn worked in the health sector, first with UNICEF, then in the hospital unit of the WFP.

WFP has 35 Land Cruisers – one of them purchased by FALU donors – which we used on trips to all 12 provinces and municipalities. Our travel covered all points in the odyssey of humanitarian aid commodities – from arrival at ports, rail yards or airport, to county warehouses, to beneficiary institutions, to individuals in public distribution centres, nurseries, kindergartens, orphanages, hospitals, farms, factories and family homes.

Limitations of Humanitarian Work

That is not to say that everything proceeded according to expectations. Humanitarian work in the DPRK faces many challenges on a daily basis.

In keeping with the DPRK's isolation policies, residence visa approvals for expatriates with Korean language skills proved to be impossible. Not knowing the language makes local, Government-supplied interpreters indispensable.

Access has been a major headache from the start. When we arrived, the WFP had regular access to fewer than 50 counties in only five of nine provinces. Only when the WFP instituted a policy of denying aid to non-accessible areas did access gradually increase to the current level of 162 of 211 counties. In-depth access is also inadequate. Having permission to visit a particular county does not guarantee access to all desired institutions or beneficiaries within that county.

For the sake of security clearance, all visits are announced in advance. "Random access" is a dirty word in North Korea. It does happen, but on rare occasions.

Aside from the interpreter, local-level government officials also accompany site visits – even to private households. This effectively excludes confidentiality.

There is a lack of systematic impact assessment. The FAO and WFP undertake crop assessments twice a year, but a scientifically based nutritional survey was permitted only once last year. To date, the DPRK Government has not agreed to allow a repeat the survey this year.

There is limited availability of statistical data. Much of the data required by humanitarian agencies is non-existent, and cannot be collected by aid agencies. Government is also loath to share information that might cast a negative light on conditions in the DPRK. For example, it has been impossible to determine mortality rates with any degree of accuracy.

It may be appropriate at this point to make a comment about the photographs you are viewing tonight. North Koreans have a carefully cultivated paranoia about foreigners with cameras. We were warned never to take a picture without first seeking the permission of our interpreters, guides or local officials. What we ended up with were:

MANY pictures of monuments, government officials and beautiful scenery, etc.

only RARE pictures of ordinary people engaged in their daily tasks, severely malnourished children, sub-standard housing and latrines, etc.

and NO pictures at all of derelict vehicles being repaired at the side of the road, trucks overflowing with hitchhikers, passengers pushing buses, road repair crews, military units engaging in farm work, decaying factories, farmers' markets and street sellers, etc.

Witnessed Realities

Despite these limitations, there is much to see and learn! We have time this evening for only a brief glimpse inside this closed society. We will do this under a number of general themes:

Roads

The roads themselves are an important source of information. A major part of our two years in North Korea was spent traveling around the country.

There are two main highways:

a modern north-south superhighway – the so-called “Reunification Highway” – on the western side, running from Kaesong to Hyangsan, and

a concrete-covered east-west highway from the port of Nampo via Pyongyang to the port of Wonsan

In the remainder of country, road conditions are very poor. The main south-north highway on the East Coast is in such poor condition that a trip by Land Cruiser from Pyongyang to Chongjin (on the north-east coast) – a distance of just under 800 km – takes a minimum of three days hard driving.

What can one see on the roads?

Vehicles are in disrepair – many of them stopped on the side of the road. Most of the vehicles one sees are very old trucks kept running with homemade spare parts. Other trucks have been altered to run on methane gas produced by burning cornhusks or any other combustible material. Rusting and decaying buses and trains can be seen with windows either missing or patched up with plastic and tape, or pieces of glass held together by nuts and bolts.

People on the move – on foot, carrying heavy loads or pushing two-wheeled carts. Every functioning vehicle is loaded to the brim with people of all ages, often on top of a full load of cargo of every description from logs to lentils.

Bicycles have increased explosively – with a corresponding number of road accidents involving bicycles. This is a relatively recent phenomenon. Kim Il Sung had banned bicycles during his lifetime, since he did not wish Korean roads to become as cluttered as those in China.

There are an increasing number of *farmers' markets* and street vendors in evidence. Of course, foreigners are not allowed to visit them, buy from them or take pictures of them. We used to see them off the beaten path, under bridges or behind walls. Increasingly, they are visible out in the open, especially after the revision of the Constitution in September 1998. One can often see small stalls along the highway or on the main roads of cities, selling everything from fruit in season, to home-baked goods, to hand-made household supplies and even furniture.

Workers are abundant in fields and on road repair. Military, industrial and office workers are mobilized for rice transplanting in the spring and harvesting in the fall. Since most roads are made of dirt and gravel, repair crews are a constant presence, especially during the rainy season and in the winter snows. All roadwork is done by hand. On high mountain roads, workers camp overnight because there is not enough fuel to bring them home each night.

Women are a major labour force in all areas of work – agriculture, road repair, construction, guard duty and law enforcement, carrying and pushing heavy loads. Since water supply has suffered from energy shortages, one can see women washing the laundry in whatever water source is available: rivers, lakes, streams, ponds and even ditches.

The roads also reveal the depressed nature of industrial areas, the abandoned and partly dismantled factories, and other signs of reduced industrial activity. Industrial towns and neighbourhoods are depressingly drab. Workers' homes in self-constructed apartment buildings are in a state of disrepair, with inadequate sanitary facilities.

There is a lack of power generation, not to speak of antiquated and deteriorating electrical circuits and inefficient wiring. The UNDP estimates that of the coal-generated thermal, as well as hydroelectric, power generated by the DPRK, a full 30% is lost to the grid! To increase the production of energy for small communities, the Government has instituted a programme to build small-scale power generators, which can be seen on rivers and streams throughout the country.

Roads also reveal the ecological consequences of deforestation. The cold climate and inadequate energy resources mean that people resort to cutting down forests for heating and cooking fuel. In the border provinces with China, lumber has been a lucrative commodity for barter trade, wood in return for food. Denuded hillsides increase soil erosion, change weather patterns, and increase the negative effects of both drought and flooding.

Agriculture

It is not a secret that the DPRK has had chronically low yields in its agriculture, and can no longer meet the food needs of its population. There is a considerable debate among experts as to whether the DPRK was ever really food self-sufficient and if so, whether it can be so again. The problems are numerous:

It is a mountainous country, with only 20% arable land.

State policy has promoted unsustainable monoculture, with a concentration on rice production.

An over-reliance on chemical fertilizers in the past has exhausted the soil. Lack of raw materials has brought fertilizer factories almost to a standstill. Farmers now rely on composting – including human waste – and on fertilizer supplied by humanitarian agencies. These inputs bring the total supply to only a third of what is needed.

There is insufficient fungicide and pesticide to combat plant disease and infestation.

Farm machinery, which was available in former years, stands idle for lack of gasoline and spare parts. On one farm, we were told that out of 15 tractors only five were operational. Farming has again become highly labour-intensive, with draft animals used for ploughing and transport.

To compensate for low agricultural and industrial production, the Government has permitted farming on steep hillsides, an unsustainable practice that creates further environmental problems. These lands are often made available to industrial workers as a means of survival.

All farming in the DPRK is collective (Koreans prefer the word “cooperative”). As in other societies that instituted collective farming methods, individual motivation is often a problem. The Government seems to have recognized this. In addition to traditional motivational campaigns, the Government has recently increased the allotment of privately cultivated land, so-called “kitchen gardens”. These have proved to be a lifesaver for those who have access to such land. Experience has shown that these small-scale gardens – 60 square metres on average – usually out-produce yields generated by collective lands. They constitute the major part of food available in farmer’s markets.

Most nurseries, kindergartens and orphanages now grow their own food, and aid agencies (mostly NGOs) have helped them to extend the growing season by building greenhouses.

Other ways in which food production has been enhanced:

Rehabilitation of farm lands, reservoirs, embankments – sometimes with the help of food-for-work schemes supplied by agencies like the WFP;

A programme of double cropping promoted by the UNDP – primarily winter wheat, spring barley, and – most recently – potatoes;

Crop rotation and import of hybrid seeds;

Small animal husbandry – goats, rabbits, chickens, dogs, pigs;

The digging of ponds for aquaculture.

Despite these measures, it is clear that the DPRK has no food reserves and continues its precarious dependence on good weather and foreign aid. This is underlined by the results of twice-yearly crop assessments carried out by the FAO and WFP since 1995.

The currently due crop assessment has apparently been postponed. We can therefore give only the figures for the 1998-1999 crop year, which were revised in the June interim assessment as follows:

Total utilization:	4,823,000 mt
Total availability:	3,783,000 mt
Import requirement:	1,040,000 mt
Emergency food aid:	642,000 mt
Commercial import (est.):	300,000 mt
Uncovered deficit:	98,000 mt

It should be noted that except for localized weather damage, last year was as “normal” a crop year as one can expect on the Korean peninsula. These figures can therefore be taken as an indication that agricultural recovery will be an extended project. It is an indication that we are facing a long-term, chronic humanitarian crisis in North Korea.

Who are the people most at risk? In the order of urgency, they are children, the elderly, pregnant and nursing women, people in large families, and industrial workers.

Nurseries and Kindergartens

The DPRK has a system of day care that any nation could be proud of. All children have access to these institutions, and most attend them – provided there is food available. Before WFP targeted nurseries and kindergartens in 1997, attendance rates were around 30%. This climbed to almost full attendance as soon as food started to arrive.

Children's institutions have dedicated and caring staff. We heard stories of nurses taking orphaned infants into their homes at night, despite food shortages in their own families. Staff is often absent working in fields or gathering wild foods in forests for the children in their care.

Water and sanitation is a problem everywhere. Children's institutions complain about a lack of soap and access to clean water, contributing to recurring diarrhea. Skin rashes, a symptom of vitamin deficiencies, are a common sight. In crowded, under heated conditions, respiratory infections spread quickly among children of all ages.

Children seen by us were generally thin, with a low level of energy and activity. Caregivers explain that children used to be much livelier "before the floods". Children seemed healthier this year than the two previous years, but appearances can be deceptive in the absence of a nutritional survey.

Nutritional Survey

Marilyn took part in such a survey in September-October 1998. It was the first nation-wide survey of its kind, conducted with scientific rigour. Participating in the data collection were UNICEF, WFP, and the European Commission. On the Korean side, the Flood Damage Rehabilitation Committee (FDRC) had oversight and the Korean Institute of Child Nutrition took the measurements.

The survey covered children from 6 months to 7 years of age in eight provinces and three municipalities. In all, 1800 households were visited, chosen to be statistically representative of 70% of Korean families.

The main task was to measure the height & weight of the children. However, UNICEF conducted a concurrent Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), which also collected data on iron deficiency anemia, the diet of children, childbirth and breastfeeding practices, immunization histories, water and sanitation services and access to education.

The findings surprised even the Government, which took 6 months to come to its own revised conclusions. Acute malnutrition was found to be at 16%, chronic malnutrition as high as 62%. Although the latter statistic figured prominently in the media, the more significant statistic is actually the 16% acute malnutrition. This is the highest rate in East Asia, surpassed in all of Asia only by India and Bangladesh, at 18%.

What is the difference in the two measurements?

Chronic malnutrition – also known as “stunting” – is measured by comparing the height with the age of the child. Stunting is the result of long-term under- or malnourishment. 62% of Korean children were found shorter than expected for their age. Obviously, this measurement can vary for reasons other than nutrition. Nevertheless, the number does indicate that malnutrition has afflicted North Korean children for longer than the four years since the floods.

Acute malnutrition – also known as “wasting” – is measured by comparing weight with height. Whether stunted or not, a child with a certain height is expected to weigh enough to sustain the normal functioning of its body. If the weight is too low, it means the child is not currently getting enough to eat.

Although 16% malnutrition is grave enough, the breakdown of this figure is even more revealing. Between the ages of 12 and 24 months, a full 30% – that is, one out of three children – were malnourished. This is the age when crucial brain functions and motor skills develop and the immune system matures. Although otherwise healthy adults can survive short-term food shortages undamaged, malnutrition at this age can lead to permanent disabilities.

Furthermore, 18% of children less than 12 months were malnourished. This indicates nutritional problems during pregnancy and breastfeeding. The mothers of these children most likely suffered low weight gain during pregnancy and delivered low birth weight babies. Such children are unlikely to “catch up” to their peers’ development.

The drama of this survey becomes clear if one considers the burden placed upon North Korean society if a significant percentage of the next generation fails to develop their physical and mental potential.

Causes of Malnutrition

Considering the significant amounts of food aid which has gone into the DPRK over the past 4 years, most of it targeted to the children covered by this survey, why does malnutrition continue at these levels? This question haunts humanitarian workers because of suspicions surrounding the diversion of aid. It also embarrasses Government, making them nervous enough to postpone this year’s survey indefinitely.

To be fair, there are plenty of reasons other than the diversion of food aid to explain these findings. As UNICEF continues to insist, lack of food is not the only cause of malnutrition.

To begin with, as the Canadian food guide illustrates admirably, the body needs different kinds of food in appropriate quantities. The WFP food basket stipulates that at least three types of food must be supplied: cereals, pulses (beans) and oil. Most food deliveries to the DPRK have consisted of cereals like corn and wheat. Oil and pulses are more expensive, and therefore less popular with donors, who like to maximize the tonnage of their shipments.

Add to this the sub-standard water quality available to most children in the DPRK, leading to recurrent diarrhea. Diarrhea is also caused by the consumption of so-called “alternative food” such as grasses, leaves, acorns, tree bark and the like. Children with diarrhea cannot absorb the nutrients in food quickly enough before it leaves the body.

North Korea has cold winters like Canada, and – thanks to the fuel shortage – a lot less heat. Under-heated institutions and homes mean that children use the energy in food to keep their bodies warm,

rather than to build up their tissue. Weakened bodies fall victim to recurrent infections – respiratory ailments in winter, diarrhea in summer. Again, the body uses food to fight infection, thus prolonging malnutrition.

Since most families as such have not benefited from international food aid, the needs of pregnant and breastfeeding mothers have not been taken care of. The Nutritional Survey has focused attention to this target group, but donations have not kept pace with the needs. Even when these women do receive food, they have a tendency to share it with the rest of the family, thus diluting the effect.

Finally, it should be recognized that North Korean health care providers were unprepared for dealing with malnutrition. After the Korean War, malnutrition was eliminated in the DPRK. Few believed that such knowledge would again become necessary. Medical schools did not keep up with research into the treatment of malnutrition until it was too late. There is an urgent need to upgrade training and increase numbers of competent caregivers.

Hospitals

The DPRK has built a great number of hospitals in all parts of the country at city, county, district and ri levels. Unfortunately, many buildings are old and cold. The lack of heating keeps patients away in the winter; food shortages keep patients away any time of the year. When food is available, occupancy rates soar. It should be noted that mothers usually stay in hospital with their sick children. They too must be fed by the hospital.

There is a shortage of medical supplies, which has forced hospitals into increased reliance on traditional “Koryo” medicine. Hospitals usually have a Koryo-medicine-making unit with qualified pharmacists who grow their own herbs in hospital gardens. They report that some 70% of medicines currently used are homemade herbal remedies.

Hospital staff (doctors, nurses, midwives, pharmacists) are well-trained & dedicated, but facilities such as operating rooms, delivery rooms, instruments and laboratory equipment are in a sorry state of affairs. Outdated technology used is some 15 to 30 years behind the times. The absence of anesthetics and antibiotics makes every operation a painful, life-threatening event. Still, health care workers do what they can with preventive medicine, using teaching aids drawn by hand on hospital walls.

Because of lack of supplies, immunization programmes – which used to be some of the best in the world – have been neglected in recent years. WHO has warned of re-emerging diseases like tuberculosis, measles and even cholera. The DPRK is unprepared for the extent of the looming crisis. To remedy this situation, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) has launched disaster preparedness programmes. UNICEF and WHO are involved in countrywide immunization of children.

Has Anything Changed?

We are frequently asked the question whether anything has changed during the two years we worked in the DPRK. Is there any hope of a turn-around? It is a difficult question, because changes in the DPRK are usually invisible to foreign eyes. Small changes may harbour great significance. On sunny days when the air is clear, we may detect numerous positive signs:

There has been SOME agricultural recovery; some innovations and adjustments in agricultural policy; the success of double-cropping; an increase in small animal husbandry and greenhouses. There are more markets, more bicycles, more vehicles;

There has been SOME reforestation; some energy improvement. This spring there was a cosmetic clean-up and beautification campaign;

Children on the whole seem somewhat better, at least compared to the ones we saw when we started in 1997;

Government normalization has provided some stability; the working environment for humanitarian agencies has improved; there is better monitoring access, increased direct access to line ministries and research institutes. Government seems to have come to recognize the importance of NGO contributions (although the concept of NGO is still a mystery to them);

There has been mutual learning between government counterparts and humanitarian agencies; there is formal recognition by Government that this is a complex emergency requiring long-term solutions; Government has followed up the nutrition survey by emphasizing rehabilitation, prevention and skills upgrading;

Relations have also been strengthened at provincial and county levels; numerous workshops & round tables have been conducted by international agencies at provincial and local levels, attended by local officials and experts;

The international community has been allowed to create and rehabilitate production facilities – e.g., food production facilities like noodle and CSB factories, and pharmaceutical production from donated raw materials.

Despite these positive signs, the outlook is generally gloomy. Although humanitarian aid is urgently needed, most of the agencies operating in the DPRK now agree that it is not the solution. Food shortages are expected to continue despite massive input by the WFP and other agencies. Agricultural uncertainty will continue even if the UNDP succeeds in funding the roundtable process for Agricultural Rehabilitation and Environmental Protection. Medical crises will not only continue but increase despite the efforts of WHO, IFRC and UNICEF.

Economic recovery is vital, but industry is not recovering quickly enough. Apart from some South Korean industries, few foreign companies seek investment opportunities, despite the creation of special economic zones like the Rajin Sonbong area, and a multi-national Tumen River Development Project that promises to provide appropriate communication infrastructure in the nearby border region.

The DPRK has developed an unhealthy dependence on international aid at a time when donor fatigue has set in. It is increasingly difficult to raise the requisite funds to sustain the current level of aid.

Humanitarian aid cannot, finally, solve the intractable political problems in the region, which lie at the root of the difficulties. Unless there is real movement in the 4-power process, the north-south talks, and other fora of negotiation involving North Korea, humanitarian aid will continue to be held captive to political exigencies.

What Needs to Happen?

Humanitarian aid needs to be accompanied by greater effort at seeking solutions to underlying problems. In addition to humanitarian assistance, the DPRK needs massive economic assistance in order to recover from its current crisis. This presupposes an end to isolation and a building of confidence between the DPRK and potential trading partners. The recent partial lifting of US sanctions is commendable in this respect.

There is an urgent need to end military confrontation on the Korean peninsula and hasten reconciliation between North and South Korea. This, more than anything else, would open the gates to real assistance and recovery. This presupposes positive results in the ongoing peace process.

We must remember, however, that Korea is only one element in the geopolitical scenario affecting peace and justice in all of northeast Asia. The interests of the USA, China, Japan and Russia all have a direct impact on what happens on the Korean peninsula. Koreans have been a pawn of regional powers throughout history, and harbour deep suspicions of non-Korean motivations – even those of humanitarian agencies.

The North Korean authorities see the South Korean “sunshine policy” and USA’s “constructive engagement” strategy as a more gentle, but therefore even more dangerous intrusion intended to undermine the North Korean people’s resolve. They warn of “yellow winds”, which blow through their defenses and infect those who are not vigilant.

We already read you a quote by Kim Il Sung. Here is one by his son, Kim Jong Il:

“Through their ideological and cultural infiltration into other countries, the imperialists are working ceaselessly to infect people with ideological diseases, disintegrate those countries from within and then put them under their domination and control.”

Considering what we said at the beginning of this lecture – that the current crisis threatens to undermine the ideological foundations of the system – this perception is understandable. The USA is by far the largest donor of humanitarian aid and the ROK is by far the largest trading partner of the DPRK. If North Korean citizens continue to eat from bags of maize, wheat and corn-soya blend imprinted with the American flag, can they help but wonder why their government is trusting its worst enemy to feed them?

To maintain the status quo under such circumstances requires greater control mechanisms. The changes implemented under the revised Constitution last year seem to strengthen the military vis-à-vis the Korean Workers Party. Since the title “President” has now been awarded to deceased leader Kim Il Sung for eternity, the highest post in the land – appropriated by his son Kim Jong Il – is Chairman of the National Defense Committee, a committee in which the military has the most prominent profile.

But how does one maintain military control when economic control has been lost? The DPRK finds itself in a “Catch 22” situation: tighten control, increase belligerence, and lose the aid; OR: accept the aid, make friends, and lose control? One can well imagine the intense internal debates between the military hard-liners and the civilian technocrats. It is within tensions like these that creative solutions are sometimes forged and disaster is averted – OR all creativity is stifled and disaster becomes inevitable.

Which of the two it will be is anybody’s guess. But the way in which the outside world reacts to North Korean provocations and initiatives is bound to influence their internal policy decisions. For this reason, we are pleased with the conciliatory tone of the report of William Perry, US North Korea Policy Coordinator. The new policy has already reaped its first reward: the DPRK agreed not to test-fire its Taepodong II long-range missile this summer.

Canada – with our close relationship to both the USA and the ROK – is in an excellent position to play a much more proactive “honest broker” role than we have done in the past. South Korea has indicated that it would welcome Canadian involvement, and North Korea has informally expressed interest in senior-level conversations with Canada.

To Conclude

Aid is not the answer to North Korea’s problems. However, aid provides a window of opportunity. Aid gives us the access, which allows us to understand better, to identify the real issues.

Aid helps to open doors, to build relationships and thereby to build mutual confidence. We might call it “peace-building by example”.

Aid provides a breathing space, a time frame within which longer-range solutions can be devised and tested.

Aid prepares the runway for a “soft landing”.