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The U.S. Should Set Rigorous Standards for U.N. Aid to North Korea

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Although Iran's attempt to develop a nuclear weapon is garnering most of the world's attention, the U.S. should not lose sight of the fact that North Korea already successfully detonated two nuclear devices on October 9, 2006, and May 25, 2009. Indeed, the U.S. believes North Korea has enough plutonium for at least half a dozen nuclear weapons¹ and has been striving to develop an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of delivering these weapons by testing its long-range Taepodong-2 missiles twice in recent years.²

North Korea's actions have violated numerous United Nations Security Council resolutions. In response to the 2006 missile and nuclear tests, the Security Council passed resolutions 1695 and 1718, which directed that North Korea "suspend all [ballistic missile] activities [and] abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs." The Security Council unanimously condemned the 2009 nuclear test in resolution 1874 and strengthened existing sanctions³ to ban all weapons exports and imposed travel restrictions and froze the assets of government officials and businesses.⁴

To its credit, the Obama Administration has taken a firm line with North Korea. The White House has refused to indulge Pyongyang's trademark strategy: initiating provocative actions in order to secure concessions. The Administration has also rejected North Korea's demand that the U.S. enter into bilateral negotiations.⁵ Considering North Korea's clear opposition to disarming⁶ and

reports that North Korea is evading U.N. sanctions,⁷ America's tough stance is appropriate.

Yet given its otherwise firm stance toward Pyongyang, it is curious that the Obama Administration, as well as Congress, is not more wary of supporting development and humanitarian assistance to North Korea. For example, despite the poor prospects for fruitful negotiations and Pyongyang's history of misusing aid, the U.N. Development Program (UNDP) and other U.N. entities continue to provide assistance to that country. The U.S. should use its influence to curtail this assistance, which can be diverted and misused by the North Korean government, and ensure that it is subject to rigorous monitoring and verification standards.

The U.N. and North Korea. Despite condemning North Korea's violation of multiple Security Council resolutions, several U.N. organizations remain involved in North Korea, including the World Food Program (WFP),⁸ UNICEF,⁹ and UNDP. The linkage between humanitarian or development efforts and security concerns need not be explicit.¹⁰ However, the tight control the North Korean government imposes on its citizens and over the in-country activities of non-governmental orga-

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nizations and international organizations providing humanitarian and development assistance should raise concerns about the benefit of such assistance to the North Korean people.

Humanitarian Assistance. Many argue that the U.S. should continue to support the U.N.'s humanitarian work in North Korea regardless of Pyongyang's actions. For instance, U.N. Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Lynn Pascoe recently stated, "These are human beings that need the food. It's not the political system. This shouldn't be argued in a political way."¹¹

There is little doubt about the suffering of the North Korean people. However, it is the repressive policies of the North Korean government that have most directly contributed to the country's food shortage by constraining internal and external trade and inhibiting private production.¹² Moreover, although the U.N. is currently providing "nutritional supplements to as many as 1.3 million of North Korea's 24 million people,"¹³ the overall U.N. effort was dramatically scaled back last year after North Korea informed WFP and the U.S. to reduce and end, respectively, provision of food assistance

1. CNN, "North Korea Refuses to Abandon Nukes," February 22, 2010, at <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/02/19/north.korea.nuclear> (February 25, 2010).
2. For a history of provocative actions by North Korea, see Hannah Fischer, "North Korean Provocative Actions, 1950–2007," Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, updated April 20, 2007, at <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30004.pdf> (February 25, 2010).
3. Colum Lynch, "U.N. Security Council Sanctions 10 in N. Korea," *The Washington Post*, July 17, 2009, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/16/AR2009071602417.html>; Ewen MacAskill, "U.N. Approves 'Unprecedented' Sanctions Against North Korea over Nuclear Test," *The Guardian*, June 12, 2009, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jun/12/un-north-korea-nuclear-sanctions> (February 25, 2010).
4. United Nations, "Security Council, Acting Unanimously, Condemns in Strongest Terms Democratic People's Republic of Korea Nuclear Test, Toughens Sanctions," June 12, 2009, at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/sc9679.doc.htm> (February 25, 2010).
5. Hwang Doo-hyong, "U.S. Sees No Immediate Sign for 6-Way Talks Reopening: State Dept.," *Yonhap News*, February 12, 2010, at <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2010/02/13/26/0301000000AEN20100213000200315EHTML> (February 25, 2010).
6. In a recent statement by the Korean Central News Agency, North Korea blamed the U.S. for its weapons program and announced that it will not abandon its nuclear program "even if the earth is broken to pieces unless the hostile policy towards [North Korea] is rolled back and the nuclear threat to it removed." CNN, "North Korea Refuses to Abandon Nukes."
7. Patrick Worsnip, "North Korea Maneuvers to Evade U.N. Sanctions: Experts," *Reuters*, November 18, 2009, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE5AH5NQ20091118> (February 25, 2010).
8. According to WFP, "Due to the low levels of resources received for the emergency operation, WFP was requested by the DPRK [i.e., Democratic People's Republic of Korea] Government to reduce the humanitarian food programme and adjust the operating conditions agreed to in a Letter of Understanding concluded with the DPRK government in June 2008. Starting in June 2009, WFP is therefore refocusing its programme in 62 counties in six provinces instead of the 131 counties (eight provinces) originally targeted under the emergency operation. Depending on resources received, WFP will be able to feed up to 1.88 million North Koreans, mainly young children in institutions, pregnant and lactating women and the elderly. International staff numbers and monitoring is being proportionally reduced to 16 international staff (no Korean-speakers) and all but two (Chongjin and Wonsan) out of five field offices will be closed. Monitoring will now require advance notice of 7 days instead of 24 hours." World Food Program, "Korea, Democratic People's Republic (DPRK)," at <http://www.wfp.org/countries/korea-democratic-peoples-republic-dprk> (February 25, 2010).
9. UNICEF provides immunization, nutrition, vitamin supplements and textbooks for North Korean children. See UNICEF, "At a Glance: Korea, Democratic People's Republic of," at <http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/korea.html> (February 25, 2010).
10. Bruce Klingner, "America's North Korea Policy: Adding Lanes to the Road," *Heritage Foundation Backgrounder* No. 2252, March 20, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/bg2252.cfm>.
11. CNN, "North Korea Refuses to Abandon Nukes."
12. Choe Sang-Hun, "N. Korea Said to Apologize Over Currency Changes," *The New York Times*, February 11, 2010, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/12/world/asia/12korea.html> (February 25, 2010).

and ordered five non-governmental organizations involved in distributing the food aid to leave the country.¹⁴ Considering the situation, it is hard to separate the suffering of the North Korean people from the political decisions of the government.

An additional concern is tracking and accounting for international food assistance. Pascoe has argued that “our people believe they have a very clear idea of who’s using the food, where it’s going, and it’s really for the good of the people who need it most.”¹⁵ But a 2008 South Korea news story reported that “South Korean military authorities have known since 2003 ... that North Korea has transported rice supplied by the South for humanitarian purposes to frontline units of the North Korean Army.”¹⁶ The ability to track such assistance needs to be enhanced if donors are to be confident that humanitarian assistance benefits the people of North Korea—not the government.

Although politically difficult, it is eminently reasonable for the U.S. and other nations to deny additional food and humanitarian assistance to North Korea until the government agrees to rigorous, transparent monitoring standards and delivery verification. Such standards should, at a minimum:

- Allow donors to use international staff and Korean speakers throughout their North Korean operations;

- Grant complete and free access to projects, distribution centers and aid recipients to ensure that aid is not being diverted by the North Korean government; and
- Not impede non-governmental organizations helping to deliver aid and assess need.

UNDP. It is even more reasonable for the U.S. to demand that the UNDP executive board rescind its January 2009 decision to renew UNDP activities in North Korea. Information provided by whistleblowers to the U.S. Mission to the United Nations led the mission to investigate the UNDP program in North Korea. The information gleaned from these inquiries and subsequent media attention led the UNDP executive board to suspend its activities in North Korea in March 2007.

Subsequent reports by the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the U.S. Senate¹⁷ and an independent audit commissioned by UNDP¹⁸ confirmed that deficiencies in UNDP rules, procedures, and management permitted North Korea to dictate the composition of UNDP staff, access hard currency, and avoid standard monitoring procedures for projects and financial transactions.

After securing assurances from UNDP on a number of measures (ranging from ineffectual to potential improvements¹⁹) to prevent further mismanagement, the UNDP executive board voted in

13. CNN, “North Korea Refuses to Abandon Nukes.”

14. The U.S. government and the North Korean government reached an agreement in June 2008 wherein the U.S. would donate 500,000 metric tons of food to North Korea, of which 80 percent would be distributed by WFP and 20 percent by non-governmental organizations. BBC, “North Korea Refuses U.S. Food Aid,” March 18, 2009, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7949785.stm> (February 25, 2010).

15. CNN, “North Korea Refuses to Abandon Nukes.”

16. See The Chosun Ilbo, “S. Korea Knew Its Rice Feeds N. Korean Military,” updated February 14, 2008, at <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200802/200802140010.html> (February 25, 2010); The Chosun Ilbo, “Seoul May Resume Fertilizer Aid to N. Korea,” February 2, 2010, at http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2010/02/02/2010020200866.html (February 25, 2010).

17. “United Nations Development Program: A Case Study of North Korea,” Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate, January 24, 2008, at <http://www.undp.org/dprk/docs/UNDP-senate-report.pdf> (February 25, 2010).

18. Miklos Nemeth, Chander M. Vasudev, and Mary Ann Wyrsh, “Confidential Report on United Nations Development Programme Activities in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea 1999–2007,” United Nations Development Program, May 31, 2008, at http://www.undp.org/dprk/docs/EIIRP_Final_Report_31%20May.pdf (February 25, 2010).

19. Brett D. Schaefer, “Suspend UNDP Activities in North Korea, Again,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2387, April 8, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/InternationalOrganizations/wm2387.cfm>.

January 2009 to resume activities in North Korea.²⁰ UNDP returned to North Korea in September 2009,²¹ and in December 2009, UNDP Administrator Helen Clark announced that UNDP will start “with a small program—around \$2.5 million a year and a very small number of employees.”²² UNDP had three foreign staff and 13 North Korean staff in place as of December 2009, and the office will be fully operational in February 2010.

This decision should raise alarm bells among those concerned with pressuring Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear program. As confirmed in both the Senate and independent UNDP audits, the North Korean government was able to circumvent the U.N.’s anti-proliferation sanctions under the previous UNDP program and secure “dual-use” technology (including computers, software, satellite-receiving equipment, and spectrometers) that could be used for its nuclear and military programs. The nature of the North Korean regime makes abuse a near certainty.

Any U.S. Administration interested in ending North Korea’s nuclear program should demand a freeze on UNDP activities as long as North Korea remains in violation of Security Council resolutions. This is doubly the case since the seven UNDP projects,²³ unlike food aid, would not focus on relieving the suffering of those most affected by the

deprivations of the North Korean government: the people of North Korea.

Bringing Pressure to Bear. A recalcitrant and unrepentant North Korean regime should not be rewarded. Although under the right circumstances humanitarian assistance could alleviate the suffering in North Korea, the U.S. and other countries are justified in demanding assurances that their charity is not being misused. Suspending UNDP programs in North Korea should be even less controversial since these programs are not focused on immediate relief.

The U.S. is a major contributor to and sits on the executive boards of UNDP, WFP, and UNICEF. The Obama Administration, bolstered by financial incentives from Congress, should demand that these organizations curtail or suspend their North Korea programs until rigorous, transparent monitoring standards and delivery verification are implemented and, in the case of UNDP, suspend all activities until Pyongyang complies with Security Council resolutions and ends its nuclear program.

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20. Editorial, “Return to Pyongyang: A Reform Lesson at the U.N., of All Places,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 29, 2009, at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123318920435726765.html> (February 25, 2010); KBS World Radio, “UNDP to Resume NK Projects in March,” January 23, 2009, at http://english.kbs.co.kr/news/newsview_sub.php?menu=8&key=2009012313 (February 25, 2010).
21. Xiong Tong, “UNDP Re-Launches Mission in DPRK,” *China View*, September 30, 2009, at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-09/30/content_12136802.htm (February 25, 2010).
22. Yonhap News, “UNDP to Resume Operations in North Korea in February,” December 30, 2009, at <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2009/12/30/38/0401000000AEN20091230002600325EHTML> (February 25, 2010).
23. The seven projects are a sustainable rural energy development program, improved seed production for sustainable agriculture, strengthening of the food and agriculture information system, reduction of post-harvest losses for food security, small wind energy promotion, statistics for the Millennium Development Goals/quality of life report for the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, and support project for environment program. See United Nations Executive Board of the United Nations Development Program and of the United Nations Population Fund, “Proposed Measures for the Resumption of Programme Operations in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.”