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Food Aid to North Korea: Time Is Not Right

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North Korea has again appealed for food aid to alleviate the suffering of its people. Teams from the World Food Program and nongovernment organizations (NGOs) have chronicled the country's abysmal nutritional deficits, particularly for children and the elderly. Pyongyang told visiting inspection teams that it is now willing to accept strict monitoring requirements to prevent further diversion of food aid to its military, but doubts remain. However, North Korea's need for food is not unique amidst other pressing global needs. Most importantly, Pyongyang's refusal to implement economic reform and its belligerence against the very countries from which it seeks aid should preclude it from receiving large-scale aid.

The Need Is Real. There is no debate that conditions in North Korea are appalling. Indisputable reports and photos of the suffering, particularly of severely malnourished children, are heartrending. In March, the World Food Program estimated one-quarter of the population faced dire food conditions. It recommended the international community provide 434,000 tons of food assistance to support children and pregnant women.

As it has for years, Pyongyang claims its food shortages are caused by natural disasters. But North Korea's problems are systemic, brought on by its state-run economic system and resistance to reform. When conditions are most dire, the regime relaxes some controls and allows nascent private markets to flourish, though still under strict observation. When conditions improve, the state rescinds economic freedoms and cracks down on markets, fearing loss of control over the population. The result

is that North Korea has doomed itself to being a habitual beggar, unable to feed its own people.

Diversion to the Military Remains a Concern. Though difficult to quantify, international food aid has been diverted to the military. North Korea imposed restrictions on inspectors that hindered accurate monitoring. Even when inspectors observed proper distribution, credible reports indicate the military would recoup the food after monitors departed. During the liberal Roh Moo-hyun administration, Seoul repressed photos of international aid being delivered to front-line North Korean units.

Over the years, some NGOs departed North Korea after they could no longer ensure their supplies were not being diverted. The World Food Program reduced its distribution of aid by the percentage of counties it was prevented from monitoring. Pyongyang eventually evicted international aid groups after refusing to abide by monitoring agreements.

Strict Verification Is a Minimum Requirement. Recent NGO survey teams report low-level North Korean officials were more amenable to monitoring demands. While that is encouraging, the regime would need to affirm its commitment to previous monitoring accords. An absolute guarantee is, of

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course, impossible, and food aid is fungible, since international donations provided to the populace free up regime resources that can be provided to the military.

However, food aid specialists have remarked that an agreement reached during the Bush Administration would minimize the risk of aid diversion. The Obama Administration should review that document to ensure it has sufficiently rigorous standards as well as clearly identified steps that North Korea must undertake. Pyongyang's acceptance of an intrusive verification system should be an absolute prerequisite to any U.S. consideration of providing food aid.

Cannot Ignore Pyongyang's Actions. It is a common perception that humanitarian assistance is apolitical and free of policy considerations. The reality is that policy objectives and donor dynamics play a role in determining which potential recipients receive finite resources. Therefore, it is difficult to conceive advocating that the World Food Program and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)—both U.N. organizations—provide assistance to North Korea when the regime has repeatedly violated U.N. Security Council resolutions and continues to do so.

Pyongyang's 2009 missile and nuclear tests and the 2010 disclosure of a uranium enrichment facility were all violations of U.N. Resolutions 1718 and 1874. A U.N. working group recently concluded that North Korea has repeatedly defied the U.N. by continuing to export conventional arms. Pyongyang is actually seeking aid from South Korea despite having committed two unprovoked acts of war against Seoul last year, killing 50 people. During the past two years, North Korea also threatened war against the United States and Japan, sent agents to assassinate a senior North Korean defector residing in South Korea, and conducted massive cyberwarfare attacks against government agency Web sites.

After 15 years of North Korean requests, donor nations and organizations are increasingly reluctant to provide aid to a nation that refuses to take steps to ameliorate its food shortages. Other nations that have suffered more recent natural catastrophes and require only a one-time infusion of aid are considered more worthy recipients.

Coordinating U.S. Aid with South Korea. The United States should continue closely coordinating its policy toward North Korea with critical ally South Korea. Too often in the past, Pyongyang was able to capitalize on policy differences amongst allies to divide and conquer. North Korean provocations during the past two years facilitated common policy objectives amongst the allies. Seoul has shown itself to be a reliable military, political, and economic partner, and it is in Washington's best interest to ensure its aid decisions regarding North Korea are in line with those of South Korea.

As a result of North Korea's two attacks last year, there is a very strong South Korean public consensus against engagement with Pyongyang or even providing food aid. The liberal South Korean *Hankyoreh* newspaper, long a defender of Pyongyang, reported that its own poll showed 63 percent of its respondents strongly opposed to providing food aid. Polls from other South Korean media show even higher resistance to food aid.

North Korea Is Needy, but Not Yet Worthy. The North Korean regime has inflicted great hardships upon its citizens. Even as the populace endures horrendous conditions from its socialist economic system, Kim Jong-il continues to devote an estimated 25 percent of the country's budget to the military. The regime has isolated its people from the outside world out of fear that engagement brings the contagion of outside influences.

Until North Korea is willing to implement fundamental changes, there is little likelihood that providing international aid this year will reduce the likelihood of another similar request the following year—and the year after that. In the words of a Korean adage, "Pouring water into a cracked pot is worthless."

Nor do Pyongyang's belligerent actions and refusal to abide by U.N. resolutions create conditions conducive to the willingness of nations to provide aid. Until North Korea changes its behavior, international food aid is best distributed elsewhere. Unfortunately, it is the beleaguered people of North Korea who suffer the consequences.

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