

Countless countries in the world experience food scarcity on a daily basis. This is the undeniable reality. Globally, both citizens and governments are working toward solutions to hunger and malnutrition. This makes it all the more alarming that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), by reputable accounts, manufactures a government-induced food shortage. The 100 American tourists (whose movements are closely scrutinized and tightly restricted) annually permitted to enter North Korea's capital Pyongyang see only what the authoritarian regime wants them to see, to wit: a strict communist sanctuary whose citizens live healthy, fulfilling lives. The REAL North Korea, the side of their country the government is desperate to keep from outside eyes, however, begins outside the strictly controlled city.

“On September 9th the UN's World Food Programme released video images from a trip to the North Korean countryside showing listless orphans, their growth stunted by malnourishment. Some children in the North live ferally: they are known as *kotjebi*, or 'fluttering swallows', and roam in packs. When they cannot steal in the markets, they eat dead dogs and rotten food (reportedly chewing toothpaste in the belief that it prevents food poisoning)” (The Economist).

“The 2008 Census showed setbacks in health and nutrition since the early 1900s, largely due to a series of famines believed to have caused from 600,000 to 1 millions deaths from 1995 to 2000” (Population Reference Bureau).

This dire situation did not develop overnight. Post-World War II, control of the Korean Peninsula transferred from Japan to the United States and the Soviet Union. Because of their drastically different systems of government, they agreed to draw an arbitrary line across the middle of the territory: the north became The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (or North Korea), which adopted the Communist ideologies of the Soviets, while the southern section adopted an American-style democracy and became known as South Korea. Five years later, a war erupted in which North Korea, backed by the Soviet Union and China, and South Korea, backed by a United States-led coalition, invaded each other. Ultimately, the two countries signed an armistice to temporarily pause the fighting. That temporary armistice is still in effect today, but these hostile neighboring countries still act as if they are at war.

According to The Population Reference Bureau, "The two countries are technically still at war, having signed an armistice ending the Korean War in 1953 but not a peace treaty. One of South Korea's security concerns is the location of Seoul, the capital, which contains just over half the country's population. Central Seoul is located just 30 miles from the border of North Korea" (Population Reference Bureau).

South Korea's ongoing concern stemming from the proximity of its capital city to its border with North Korea is not unwarranted in the slightest. The Communist state spends about one-third of its income each year on its military, which is the fourth largest of its kind in the world (Reuters). This does not seem at all proportional considering its annual GDP per capita - \$1,800 - which ranks *197th* in the world. It's as if their military, and the fear it evokes from other countries, are their only valuable assets. “North Korea's military showmanship and threats of nuclear war usually come when the nation is desperate for food aid or other forms of economic assistance” (US News and World Report).

However, fear from the outside is not all the DPRK regime needs to thrive. As a Communist state, The DPRK's civilians rely solely on the government for their basic needs. This means that the government can control every aspect of a citizen's perspective. As a result of this propaganda that is mainly focused on the alleged dilapidated state of the rest of the world, especially the United States and South Korea, North Koreans are brainwashed into believing that their subsistence-level lives are actually ideal. The government prohibits movies, textbooks, and anything else that could compromise this belief. This same ideology leads civilians to believe that their great leader, Kim Jong-un, and his predecessors, are divine.

The propaganda campaign diverts their attention from their current state of starvation. The government keeps the focus on the Great Leader and how fortunate they are to live in the country that he rules. Meanwhile, its citizens are starving to death. "The state has used food as a means of control over the population. It has prioritized those whom the authorities believe to be crucial to maintaining the regime over those deemed expendable. The state has practiced discrimination with regard to access to and distribution of food based on the songbun system. In addition, it privileges certain parts of the country, such as Pyongyang, over others" (US News and World Report).

Having parents will not save a child from malnutrition. "Rations usually consist of barley, maize or rice, at best, while many children are growing up without eating any protein, Sauvage said. He said malnutrition over a generation could have a severe effect on physical growth, cognitive capacity and the ability to learn" (The Guardian).

Reports of stunted growth and malnourishment are not at all rare. In fact, some would go as far as to consider these conditions an epidemic. "A 2002 nutrition study found that 39 percent of North Koreans were stunted (low height for age), an indicator of chronic malnutrition; the situation had barely improved several years later" (Population Reference Bureau). According to a UNICEF report, "Many families have only two meals a day and their diet lacks the variety needed for good nutrition, with very little meat or fat. Stunting rates among young children are as high as 40 per cent in rural areas and 20 per cent in urban ones. Dietary diversity is a big problem. Most of the diets are based on starches and grains, very few vegetable resources and not many animal sourced foods (UNICEF).

The residents of Pyongyang may look healthy, but the farther one travels out of the city and into the countryside (something that a tourist would never be allowed to do), the food becomes increasingly scarce and the people become increasingly underweight. "With totalitarian obsession, [the government] groups North Koreans into 51 social categories, graded by loyalty to the regime. Of those groups, 29 are considered to make up an underclass that is hostile or at best ambivalent towards the regime. Most of these suspects live not in Pyongyang or even in lesser cities, but in the countryside (The Economist). In other words, the government decides how much food a family will receive based on its loyalty to Kim Jong-un; the people of Pyongyang are considered the most loyal.

This inhumane treatment of North Koreans is almost entirely unknown to the rest of the world due to the seclusion and secrecy of the Communist state. What is even less known is the infant mortality rates and average lifespan of The DPRK compared to South Korea or the United States. The DPRK regime persuades its citizens that they are prospering when, in reality they only think they are because, to put it simply, they do not know any different.

“The 2008 Census suggested that life expectancy at birth had declined since the early 1990s to 65.6 years for males and 72.7 years for females, both about 11 years less than in South Korea,” reports the Population Reference Bureau. “The infant mortality rate stood at 19.3 infant deaths per 1,000 live births and the maternal mortality ratio was 77.2 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. Both indicators have increased since the 1990s” (Population Reference Bureau).

The civilians in The DPRK rely on their government to provide food for them, but the land there is not sustainable for farming and much of the country is covered in mountainous area. This proves to be an even bigger problem when The DPRK refuses to accept outside help in fear of hurting their Utopian reputation.

“North Korea's policy of 'self-reliance' has contributed to its chronic food shortages; its rugged land and relatively harsh climate are not conducive to productive farming” (Population Reference Bureau).

“About 16 million North Koreans – two-thirds of the country – depend on twice-monthly government rations, the UN report said. There are no signs the government will undertake the long-term structural reforms needed to spur economic growth. The land in the mountainous north is largely unsuitable for farming, and deforestation and outmoded agricultural techniques – as well as limited fuel and electricity – mean farms are vulnerable to the natural disasters North Korea is prone to, including flooding, drought and harsh, cold winters, the UN report said” (The Guardian).

As The Guardian puts it quite frankly, “North Korea does not produce enough food to feed its 24 million people, and relies on limited purchases of food as well as outside donations to make up the shortfall” (The Guardian). “The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, along with bureaucratic mismanagement and natural disasters in North Korea, began a series of agricultural crises that lasted for much of the 1990s and continue today” (Population Reference Bureau).

“The standard of living has deteriorated to extreme levels of deprivation in which the right to food security, health and other minimum needs for human survival are denied’ according to a recent group by the Korea Institute for National Unification, a research group based in Seoul” (US News & World Report).

As a result of its reputation-obsessed dictatorship, North Korea has turned into a male-dominated society on the inside. It may not be what the Utopian government reports, but it *is* what the United Nations reports. “Witnesses have testified that violence against women is not limited to the home, and that it is common to see women being beaten and sexually assaulted in public. Officials are not only increasingly engaging in corruption in order to support their low or non-existent salaries, they are also exacting penalties and punishment in the form of sexual abuse and violence and there is no fear of punishment” (The Telegraph).

The solution to this food scarcity is painfully simple yet unfathomably difficult to carry out. If the DPRK would accept outside help and admit they are failing miserably at feeding their population, not only would they learn superior farming techniques and have access to modern equipment, they would create a reliable second source of food that is not grown by their own farmers. Unfortunately, they have proven time and time again that they are not willing to even consider accepting any help from sources outside of their country.

One cannot but wonder if this deep-rooted issue would diminish if the government of The DPRK would switch from its current Communist ideologies to a market economy. Both the Soviet Union and China, which each went through such a transition, were once in a similarly impoverished and hunger-stricken state as The DPRK. Their divergent paths to liberalizing each of their countries are what show the plethora of outcomes that are a result of a market economy. What one will find is that few of these outcomes have long-term consequences. The citizens of both Russia and China are, for the most part, healthy, fed, and safe, which is much more than they could say when they were Communist.

It remains to be seen whether The DPRK would ever pursue a course of action like Russia, which offers an example of ineffective liberalization leading to eventual collapse; China, which offers a counterexample of a regime that rigidly managed the liberalization of its country but was still able to preserve political stronghold; or simply continue in its current state of poverty and isolation. The ideal outcome for The DPRK would be full economic and political freedom, but a more realistic hope is that the Kim family can be induced to follow the example of the Chinese and at least deliver food stability to their people.

A coordinated international diplomatic effort, including both the U.S. and China, is essential to address the persistent crisis. However, given the many other issues that affect the policies of each country toward The DPRK, there is cause to despair. It seems all too likely that these powers will continue to prioritize other policy aims ahead of the food and nutrition needs and suffering of the people of North Korea. Even in the face of this adversity, the human rights and relief organizations must continue in their efforts to educate the world about the conditions in The DPRK and must never give up hope.

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