

Luke Austing
Roseville Area High School
Roseville, MN
Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), Factor 18

An Iron Fist over a Starving Nation

The Declaration of Independence and September 11 were just two defining moments that in the course of human events forced the world to re-examine itself and its ideals. Globalization has not only redefined trade and economic structures, but politics and diplomacy as well. As a result, when one group is threatened by a problem, it is an affront to every human being. The industrialized and developed world cannot continue under the false pretense that they are immune to such things as famine, drought and disease. Especially when living in the age of a faltering world economy and ever struggling leadership. North Korea is a prime example of how misguided leadership and policies have pushed its citizens to the brink of destruction. For the past 60 years, the Kim dynasty has ruled the Democratic People's Republic of Korea with an iron fist. Both the cause and result of this was Kim Il-Sung (the founder of North Korea), employing his own form of communism called Juche (as Mao created his own interpretation), in order to "free the Korean people of imperialism." The core concept of Juche, "the ability to act independently without regard to outside interference," ("Juche") has caused North Korea to develop into one of the most isolated societies in the world. Therefore, it is very difficult to approach North Korea with potential solutions or advice regarding their many and various problems. This has turned into a very troublesome paradox because they need so much aid, and yet they fundamentally don't want aid; or they will not trust countries like the United States, or even South Korea, who provide large amounts of humanitarian aid. Ultimately, North Korea has suffered greatly from facing many dangerous structural problems, such as having little to no roads in remote regions of the country. But many North Koreans lack even the basic necessities such as adequate food rations; problems like this are only aggravated by the lack of infrastructure in the country. Indeed these injustices can be undone without any further loss of life. The fastest and most effective solution to North Korea's agricultural, infrastructure and policy disputes is to immediately participate in diplomatic relations and initiatives between North Korea and other world powers such as the United States.

Under the fundamental ideas of communism, Kim Il-Sung drastically changed the lives of the North Korean people. A typical farm family is very different from what you would see in the western world, mainly because instead of owning private land (as in a capitalist country), they work on cooperative state-owned farms (many families will work a large area of land). In return they receive free housing in addition to their standard pay. Because none of their pay must be allocated for housing (i.e. rent, house payments, etc.), agricultural workers tend to have more luxuries due to the fact that they have more money available. Family size is usually between 4-5 people and typically only 2 generations unlike the traditional 3 generation family houses ("Family Life"). Taking a utilitarian perspective, the more people that work in the agricultural industry (increasing production power), the better off the country will be, so it is in the government's best interest to make sure that a minimal amount of urbanization occurs. Not only that, but farm families have an advantage in society and do especially well, because they tend to receive their full ration of rice unlike like other types of workers who often only receive "inferior grains" such as millet and corn (maize) in higher proportions. This upsets many Koreans because they prefer the more traditional rice staple, due to the fact that it contains more protein and niacin. These people know what they want, and they are very smart in preferring rice, because a corn dominated diet with little meat can cause pellagra, a serious disease with symptoms such as skin changes, severe nerve dysfunction and diarrhea (Martin 103). But by no means were people well-nourished with figures from the 1980s suggesting that each worker would receive 700 grams of grain a day for their daily ration.

Being that the government regulates food rations for the public, they control where, when and how much of the food goes out. As an example, the government will normally distribute 700 grams of grain a day but they withhold 20 grams in case of war, and in 1984 they withheld another 20 grams for aid to South Korea during massive flooding there (Martin 392). Consequently, North Korea's people go through hardships caused by the government making decisions that are not at the best interest of its citizens. The fact that the government does not give its citizens as much as it should is not the only problem, but they prioritize the military over 'normal' people by giving them an extra 100 grams of grain a day. A former supply Colonel in the Korean People's Army (also known as the KPA or the North Korean Army), Yoo Song-Il commented in an interview that "In the military I never had to worry about food or clothing. When I got out, rations were scarce. We were supposed to get them every fifteen days but it didn't always happen, so we had to worry about food. Officials always took what they needed but most people relied on their rations" (Martin 534). This practice is extremely helpful to military men, but it does little to help the millions of ordinary citizens struggling to make ends meet.

When civilians cannot receive enough food, they are forced to try to buy food in the private sector, often times this means the black market. Much of the grain that has appeared on the black market since the 1980s was in fact just held back from collective farm harvests. This corruption pales in comparison to an incident in the 1990s when Kim Jong-Il sent an "army" to the Hwanghae Steel Mill because "thieves" had taken equipment and sold it to some Chinese merchants for scrap metal. The reason these people got away with it for so long was that the mill was not running due to Kim Il-Sung's death. But further insight into this event forces you to question the actions of the North Korean government. Was this corruption and robbery as the government claimed; or was it people trying to fulfill their most basic need and desire, the ability to feed themselves and their families? In the middle of all of this, North Korea was going through arguably one of the worst famines of the twentieth-century resulting in a mind-numbing death toll of between one to three million people according to estimates ("North Korea Bracing").

The famine that occurred during the 1990s was perhaps a sort of 'perfect storm' that occurred during a time when the political arena was changing and violent weather rocked North Korea. The 1990s was a time when the world was focusing on the breakup of the Soviet Union; as a result the North Koreans did not see much food aid from their long time Soviet ally (Macartney). It was not long before severe flooding in 1995 destroyed the government's ability to distribute food. In fact, much of this could be seen as a long term trend that started back in the early 1970s "when Kim Il-Sung made his declaration about national farming. It was nonsense. He did it because there wasn't enough coal, so people had to go to the mountains and cut trees for firewood. So the mountains are bare. Kim Il-Sung said since there are no trees on the mountains we'll use them for farmland. Okay, you guys cut the trees—we'll farm there. 'Reclaim more land' was the motto, but you can't fight nature. After a couple of years the mountains started eroding from the rain, and the runoff clogged the rivers. The water supply couldn't get to other farm areas" Kim Nam-joon, a former 2nd Lieutenant in the North Korean Army recalled the situation before he defected in 1989 (Martin 393). These problems that plague North Korea over the years have done nothing but put further strain on an already fragile agricultural system.

Even as recently as 2002, the government allowed small private farming to take place and permitted selling of goods at 'farmers markets' in order to try to provide for the nearly one-third of the population being malnourished ("North Korea"). After all, the government was eager to look for options to assist its population after the 1990s famine. Sadly, the government was eager to reverse these policies and reclaim the control they had over the people. So in October, 2005 they reinstated the "Public Distribution System," the failure of which was only corrected by massive amounts of international aid and the opening of these public markets. Even when the World Food Program had access to the country, they were not allowed into 39 remote counties. Which begs the question, why would they not allow entrance to these regions? The most likely answer is that they were trying to protect their image. In fact, news reports 6

months after the reimplementation of the Public Distribution System showed that people in many parts of North Korea were not receiving any of their rations (“North Korea: Policy Changes”). So perhaps part of the solution (temporary as it maybe), must fall upon typical farm and urban families to adhere to China’s model and institute a “One Child Policy” type of system or something similar. This would go to great lengths to make sure that the current population stabilizes in size and the government is able to tackle the issue of food shortages. Above all, it is quite obvious that North Korea needs aid and the government needs guidance, the only question is: how do we get them to realize that.

A good first step to making sure that everyone has an adequate food supply would be to eliminate the corruption at every level of government. For their part, North Korea did attempt to correct what they saw as a problem but the totalitarian regime took a very drastic approach to this by executing its agricultural minister, So Kwan-hui, in 1997. They claimed that he had worked towards the destruction of the state by ensuring that “low-quality” seeds and “non-existent fertilizers” were given out for harvests. This may be entirely true, but one man cannot be responsible for an agricultural system failing years before his arrival and years after his passing. Nonetheless, this gave Kim Jong-Il a more than adequate excuse for asking for international aid even when Kim Jong-Il was being treated like a king while eating the shark’s fin soup several times a week (a delicacy) and apparently keeping a 10,000 bottle wine cellar (Martin 577). International action against North Korea has been totally impotent with respect to getting them to realize that it is structural problem and not a “natural disaster.”

While North Korea’s leaders are enjoying fine dining and expensive luxuries that most people in the western world don’t have, typical farm families or factory workers starve from a lack of food. In reference to my statement on the previous page: the policies of the North Korean government, such as cutting trees on mountains to make more room for more arable land, has damaged or destroyed a large portion of the very precious farmland. What’s worse is that the staunch and unwavering Juche ideology has at times prevented it from accepting the necessary aid to feed its people. In 2008 for example, the government failed to request its customary shipment of hundreds of thousands tons of rice from South Korea (an arrangement that had been fairly successful in the past). The World Food Program even estimated that farm crops would fall short approximately 1.8 million metric tons for 2009, so any aid that is available, is necessary. Maintaining diplomatic relations to ensure the delivery of the food aid is so very important, not just for the government of North Korea but for every nation.

Right now, diplomatic relations between North Korea and countries like the U.S., are the worst they have been in many years. This is largely due to underground nuclear testing done in both 2006 and most recently in 2009. Actions from the international community were swift, resulting in sanctions imposed upon the North by the United Nations Security Council. Nuclear proliferation is of great concern to many countries because it threatens worldwide peace and security. While this may seem completely unrelated to agricultural downfalls and shortages of food, there is in fact a direct correlation between the building of nuclear weapons and the willingness of world powers to cooperate with North Korea.

Yet it seems that just as a small neglected child would throw a tantrum for not receiving attention from its parents; North Korea too is trying to get attention from its Cold War parents, namely the Soviet Union (now Russia), China, and the United States. Between the recent sinking of the ROKS Cheonan (allegedly from a North Korean torpedo attack) to its proliferation of nuclear weapons, North Korea is sending signals (misguided as they maybe) that they are not satisfied with the status quo. With tensions high, in fact almost reaching the point of armed conflict, due to the recent actions of the North Korean government, the international community has been very cautious in recent six-party talks. More than anything else, North Korea needs to be part of the international arena in order to begin to normalize relations.

The role of such organizations as the United Nations should not be to condemn countries like North Korea, but rather a forum in which countries may come and work out their problems in a peaceful manner. Once the tensions are worked out between North Korea and the rest of the world, there is a very real chance of it becoming an economic powerhouse like its southern neighbor. In fact back in 2005, North Korea hinted that it was willing to relinquish its ability to make nuclear weapons in exchange for a non-aggression pact between the United States and North Korea (Martin 671). Had such a treaty been ratified, the communist state would not have been in such a difficult economic situation. Once relations begin to normalize between the North and countries like the United States, trade, investment, and modernization will catapult the 'backward' country into the 21st century. Once money begins to flow into the country, the North Koreans will begin to see an increase in jobs and higher wages for workers. A better economic situation will subsequently result in people being able to afford basic necessities and possibly even some luxuries that people in the west take for granted. This is a very similar situation to what happened with China after the cooling of tensions in the 1970s, and now China is the second largest economy in the world.

Going forward, there are many possibilities with regards to diplomatic efforts or changes to thereof. The first and least desirable, would be some sort of military or action including brute force. The most immediate foreseeable result from this course of action would be death on a massive scale and done with frightening efficiency. Any action requiring North Korea to put attention toward a war effort would be a catastrophe in terms of the effect it would have on the agricultural industry (damage to farmland, farmers fighting instead of tending to fields, etc.). Even if a small amount of damage was incurred by agricultural system due to such drastic action, it would be far more than anything North Korea could handle. A subsection of this option would be to assist members of the North Korean army to stage a coup d'état against the regime. While this may seem like a viable option in destroying this dangerous regime, there is a possibility that doing this could result in the rise to power of a worse and more dangerous dictator. Thus it is more beneficial for everyone if we work together with the current government on potential reforms of their tattered system. The second possible course of action (and again not very desirable) would be to halt or reduce humanitarian aid and diplomatic talks until North Korea agrees to a policy of "transparency". With another country under different conditions, this policy may work but as previously stated, communist party members and elite members of the government are at a strict advantage due to them getting priority of government aid/rations. China would have the best luck with this approach, because they are North Korea's "one friend" in the world and closest ally, and without China's backing North Korea would feel immense pressure to cave into international demands/recommendations. Furthermore, a drop or cut in humanitarian aid could result in a yet another famine and an immeasurable loss of life. The final and most favorable option for countries such as the United States to take would be to begin formal diplomatic and economic relations (building of embassies, trade/exchange of goods). Doing this will plant the "seeds of trust and understanding." Once North Korea establishes relations, it will feel free to begin to allow foreigners and aid workers back into the country. Various representatives, including agriculture experts, would quickly be able to enter into North Korea, providing much needed assistance and thus doing things such as improving the yield of its agricultural industry or creating a more efficient and effective distribution system. This would also fit the role of various non-governmental organizations or companies, because they too can act as "ambassadors for peace," by donating aid, equipment and/or the resources needed to improve infrastructure and agricultural yield. As for the corruption of officials, it may be possible to get North Korea to agree to have oversight from people outside the system, in order to protect those most at risk of unfair treatment.

Overall, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is a country that has suffered greatly during the totalitarian rule of Kim Il-Sung and his son Kim Jong-II. Unfortunately, we cannot address the suffering, starvation, and hardships that North Korean people have faced in the past. We have to move forward into a new era of peace, understanding, and cooperation between all peoples. This maybe a cliché statement,

but that does not make it any less true. North Korea is in desperate need of assistance, whether or not they will directly admit to it. The policies that the country has maintained have been very destructive not only to their own society and agricultural system, but also to North Korea's relationships with other countries like the United States, South Korea and China. From allowing the degradation of farmland (soil, lack of irrigation, etc.) to blowing up underground nuclear warheads, the North Korean government and Kim Jong-Il are doing little to make sure that enough food reaches its citizens, whether it is in the form of humanitarian aid or the limiting rations. Which brings up the point that families (such as the typical farm family defined earlier), are at a disadvantage compared to more "elite" members of society like military men or government officials. This is heartbreaking to know, that the people that work so hard on cooperative farms, receive such a small portion of the food. The corruption that occurs is truly shocking. North Korea's heavy reliance on foreign assistance makes them particularly vulnerable to such things as famine, drought, and low crop yields. For this reason, it is crucial that the international community make a great effort to ensure the normalization of relations. It may seem surreal that millions of people could have died from starvation as recently as 15 years ago, but it is not a problem that is out of or grasp. Even today, many people suffer from malnutrition and are on the verge of starvation in North Korea, the only thing keeping many of them sustained is the humanitarian aid that flows in from around the globe. It is no longer an option for the United States, South Korea and other international leaders, to "play hardball" with this regime, the corruption runs too deep and the continuing crises are too dangerous and severe to be placed on the sidelines. Only through working with the North Korean government to reform the food distribution system and improving the agricultural ability of farmers will it be possible to eliminate the humanitarian catastrophe.

Work Cited

- "Family Life." *North Korea*. Ed. Andrea M. Savada. N.p., June 1993. Web. 4 Aug. 2010. <<http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-9533.html>>.
- "Juche." *GlobalSecurity.org*. Ed. John Pike. N.p., 27 Apr. 2005. Web. 3 Aug. 2010. <<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/dprk/juche.htm>>.
- Macartney, Jane. "North Koreans Fear the Country is on the Verge of a New Famine." *The Times*. Times Newspapers Ltd, 20 Mar. 2010. Web. 4 Aug. 2010. <<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article7069225.ece>>.
- Martin, Bradley K. *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader*. New York City: St. Martin's Press, 2004. Print.
- "North Korea." *The World Factbook*. Central Intelligence Agency, 19 Aug. 2010. Web. 19 Aug. 2010. <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kn.html>>.
- "North Korea Bracing for Chronic Food Shortage." *Welt Online*. Axel Springer, 18 Dec. 2008. Web. 4 Aug. 2010. <<http://www.welt.de/english-news/article2896328/North-Korea-bracing-for-chronic-food-shortage.html>>.
- "North Korea: Policy Changes May Foster New Hunger." *Human Rights Watch*. N.p., 4 May 2006. Web. 6 Aug. 2010. <<http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2006/05/03/north-korea-policy-changes-may-foster-new-hunger>>.