

North Korea famine: an expression of the world's economic, moral crisis

by Rosa Tennenbaum

Right now, we see the exact scenario unfolding which Lyndon LaRouche had warned of already 20 years ago: If a comprehensive solution to the worldwide economic crisis and the world financial system did not occur in time, the world would be plunged into a New Dark Age, in which, in the worst case, the means of survival would be available for only several hundred million people.

Central Africa and North Korea are only the most prominent points in the current crisis. The situation in large parts of the world—for instance, throughout all of central and eastern Europe, and in Russia—is very similar, even if we, in the West, are not shown such astounding footage with every evening's television news.

In North Korea, we are faced with a unique situation. In that country, the whole population of 24 million people are suffering malnutrition. Usually, famines will announce themselves via early warning signs: In the poorer strata of society, you see more and more people with bloated stomachs and reddened hair, the typical signs of protein deficiency, while the upper classes hoard the dwindling stocks of foodstuffs for their own consumption.

It is different in North Korea. Here, a communist regime produced equal poverty. Here, people are going hungry “slowly and in common,” as Rolf Huss of the World Food Program (WFP) said. “You could term it a socialist famine; all available food is being distributed to the totality of the population. . . . If you start to notice the signs of serious malnutrition, it will be too late to do anything,” Huss said in May, after returning from a visit to North Korea.

The worst famine of our century

Even under normal conditions, North Korea cannot feed itself: Only 21% of the land area can be used for agriculture, and the climate allows only one harvest a year. The whole northern portion of the country is rocky: Nothing at all can be planted there. In large parts of the southern regions, where crops can be grown, the cropland has been devastated over the past two years, when hail, in 1995, and huge floods in 1995 and 1996, destroyed the crops just two months before the harvest. Last year alone, 30,000 hectares (75,000 acres) of farmland were washed away in flooding. Fields are covered with mud, and the irrigation canal system was destroyed. Before any planting can start again, the fields have to be restored and prepared—a costly and time-consuming undertaking.

Due to the destruction, grain harvests dropped to 2.5 million tons. But the country needs 4.8 million tons for human consumption and an additional 3 million tons for feed. Even before the natural disasters, the collapse of the Soviet Union brought about great difficulties for North Korean food supplies. Until the beginning of the 1990s, the socialist brother country delivered grain, on very favorable terms.

In the following years, China helped out, but only to a certain degree. Although China has to import grain itself, it nevertheless delivered around 500,000 tons of grain annually to its needy neighbor. But, last year, the grain delivery from China was down to 150,000 tons.

Two years ago, the government in Pyongyang asked the world community for help: In July 1995, the first call for aid went out, which has been regularly repeated since then—with little success. Individual food rations had to be cut regularly, and since the beginning of this year, they have been down to between 100 and 200 grams of food per person per day. You cannot live on that; the absolute minimum a human being needs, is 450 grams per day. In the United Nations refugee camps, the ration is 650 grams.

In five of the ten governmental districts, the food distribution centers had to close down during May, because there was no longer anything to distribute. Since June 20, all food stocks are gone. Hungry people are being told, that from now on, they have to “fend for themselves.”

They “fend for” themselves by stretching the few eatable things they can get. First, you take everything that can be cooked: roots, leaves, fruits of any kind. This has no nutritional content, but it gives you the feeling of having eaten. Then, you start to eat ground tree bark—and then you die, because humans cannot digest bark, which causes internal bleeding. The people in North Korea have already been driven to that recourse some time ago.

Visitors report that bakeries, for instance, stretch out the flour with very fine ground bark. Cattle can no longer be seen. In addition, the country suffers from a complete lack of fuel. Factories have stopped operating, and where work is still going on, often soldiers are on duty, because the workers have become too debilitated to work. The same is true for the state farms, many of which had to be taken over by the army.

We are already at the point where one speaks of the worst famine of our century. This means something, because our century has no lack of awful famines. But never before, has a



Workers in Pyongsan County, North Korea receive food in exchange for clearing fields damaged by floods. North Korean agriculture has been hit by disasters, including severe flooding. One-fifth of the country's 23 million people face immediate starvation or malnutrition.

whole people been threatened by starvation. International aid organizations cannot handle such catastrophies. They are prepared to assist clearly defined layers of the population, like the elderly, invalid, ill, and children, or to supply the population in a certain area for a certain time. They cannot help a population of a whole country with 24 million inhabitants. This surpasses their experience by far.

Nevertheless, aid organizations like the World Food Program are pressing hard for aid internationally. The WFP aims at getting together 200,000 tons of food, which they want to distribute mainly to kindergartens and schools. Other non-governmental organizations could come up with an additional 100,000 tons.

Government-to-government aid needed

In total, the country needs a minimum of 1.8 million tons of food from foreign sources this year, beginning now. If food rations are to be raised to the minimum level of 450 grams per day per person, the food deficit until autumn, when the next harvest will begin in September and October, is 1 million tons. The next harvest of paddy rice and corn will reach a maximum of 4 million tons, according to "most optimistic estimates," a joint press release from the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization and World Food Program stated on June 4. "This is far below the need of the coming months," they said.

Since June 20, the country has totally run out of food. Some 2.6 million children under the age of six are threatened with starvation this year. The WFP is demanding that at least 1 million tons of food be made available by foreign governments. The WFP and the FAO have made an urgent appeal to governments to provide aid directly. The United States, Canada, the European Union, Australia, and others should

Helga Zepp LaRouche appeals to Clinton, Group of Eight

On June 16, Helga Zepp LaRouche, founder of the Schiller Institute, gave two press conferences in Los Angeles—one in Koreatown, one in Chinatown—at which she issued an urgent appeal to President Clinton to take immediate action to prevent an imminent catastrophe from occurring in North Korea. Citing reports from relief experts, she warned that North Korea would run out of food by June 20, unless immediate action were taken. More than half the population, including 2.6 million children under six years old, face starvation in the weeks ahead. "To say that these children represent some kind of military threat is absurd," she said.

In her appeal, Mrs. LaRouche said that emergency food aid could be transported quickly to North Korea from Japan, Australia, and Thailand. Japan, with 2 million tons of rice in its strategic reserves, could be given an assurance from President Clinton and other heads of state at the June 20-22 G-8 summit in Denver, Colorado, that food reserves in Japan will be replenished from stocks from their nations. "Any delay would be criminal," she said. "The line that there is no significant famine, or that aiding North Korea will only help the military—this is morally unacceptable, it is criminal. It must arrive within days; if it takes weeks, that will be too late."

Mrs. LaRouche added that a necessary part of mobiliz-

deliver large amounts of food directly to the state distribution system. This network has 2,000 food distribution centers, and a system of food ration coupons, and, according to all accounts by aid visitors, it is functioning well and smoothly, and could do the job of reversing the debilitation, malnutrition, and death rate as rapidly as possible.

Politicizing famine

Up to now, international response has been limited. "It is very difficult to get aid for this country, because the crisis was turned into a political issue," said Käthi Zellweger, the director of the Catholic Church organization, Caritas. This is more than true. Political circles around former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and former U.S. President George Bush want to isolate North Korea and to exploit the crisis for their plans to destabilize China. A war in Asia would be very helpful for their intentions to contain China and destroy the European Land-Bridge project. The Thatcher-Bush crowd have managed to block any significant aid for many months, using the argument that food assistance would only help maintain the "Stone Age Communists" in Pyongyang in power.

The crisis in North Korea marks a moral crossroad: If the world community will not come up with sufficient food aid rapidly, the people of North Korea will perish. And with it, human civilization will go under. A human society that allows such unspeakable atrocities to happen while watching it on TV from their easy chairs, has lost its moral fitness to survive. In this case, the North Korean crisis will be just the prelude for a worldwide descent into the maelstrom, at the end of which only some hundreds of millions of people may remain.

Right now, the exact opposite of such a horrifying picture could easily become as true. If we mobilize our dormant resources in industry and agriculture to solve a breakdown crisis like that in North Korea, if we replace today's policies of looting, with economic reconstruction and expansion, we lay the foundations to nourish, clothe, and house a constantly growing world population—in short, to grant a human existence to every human being. The beginning of such a turn is already under way with the Eurasian Land-Bridge, the huge infrastructure program in which the great economic powers like the U.S.A. and the European Union, finally have to become a part.

ing food for North Korea, is getting rid of the World Trade Organization, whose policies are destroying food production on behalf of the commodities cartels. She briefed the reporters and local leaders present, on the Korea crisis in the context of the financial disintegration facing the entire world, stressing that it is essential for the United States to convoke a new New Bretton Woods conference, at which nation-building financial reorganization plans can be laid. She reported on the role of the Eurasian Land-Bridge in its fullest conception, as a crash program for global development.

Her briefing in Koreatown was moderated by Simon Lim of the Korea Study Group, and head of the Koreatown Schiller Institute. Many local business and Chamber of Commerce leaders pledged to work immediately on moving the United States to act on North Korea food relief. Lim stressed that the United States is the leader of the world, and that there will be no aid on the level necessary without the United States. Moreover, if the United States moves to provide aid, and to back the Eurasian Land-Bridge, it will be the basis for economic development and peace.

'Plan of Action' issued

The Schiller Institute released a "Plan of Action" on June 12, specifying how to move 1.8 million tons of food aid for delivery to North Korea; and how food emergencies must be met in Central Africa, eastern Europe, and all other points of need, with no "trade-offs":

"The World Trade Organization provisions that went into effect Jan. 1, 1995, should be declared null and void.

The WTO provisions oppose the sovereign rights of nation-states to protect and increase agricultural output, and to provide for their own national food security by developing their farm and economic output potential, and maintaining food reserves. (The WTO rationalization is that such practices 'distort free market trade,' and 'global outsourcing' for food.) In fact, the WTO system fosters scarcity of food and other vital commodities, and functions in service of the market-rigging practices of the commodities cartels.

"Mobilize for *increased* output in agricultural regions around the world. Among the factors necessary, are the following:

- End the export quotas on European Union commodities. . . .
- End the set-asides and restrictions on land area, and quotas and penalties that currently limit production in the United States, the European Union, and elsewhere.
- Dump the EU milk quotas.
- Dump the land lock-up in the United States, called the 'Conservation Reserve Program,' that has just put 16 million acres of farmland into 'non-food' use, on top of over 20 million acres in lock-up.
- Mandate commodity prices for farmers, based on the traditional 'American System' of parity prices, to stabilize farms and production.
- Mobilize credit and sources of essential inputs—fertilizers, farm chemicals, quality seedstocks, etc.
- Press anti-trust actions to break up the commodities cartels' food and agriculture control."