

EVENT SUMMARY

The North Korean Food Crisis

Marcus Noland, Peterson Institute
Kim Seung Min, Free North Korea Radio
Kang Su Jin, Coalition for North Korean Women's Rights
Kim Young-il, People for Successful Korean Reunification

April 30, 2008

North Korea Is on the Brink of Famine, Warn Marcus Noland and Colleagues

North Korea is once again heading toward widespread food shortages, hunger, and famine. These mounting pressures are only part of an ongoing food crisis that is now well into its second decade. During this time the country's difficulties have forced large numbers of North Koreans to emigrate to China and elsewhere.

At a meeting on April 20, 2008, the Peterson Institute released two papers by Senior Fellow Marcus Noland and colleagues based on a pathbreaking survey of more than 1,300 North Korean refugees in China. Three North Korean refugees, Kim Seung Min, Kang Su Jin, and Kim Young-il, spoke at the event. The purpose of this meeting was to garner insights into the plight of refugees as well as conditions within North Korea using relatively recent and far-reaching survey of North Korean refugees in China, emerging data, and personal accounts and perceptions of the three North Korean defectors.

The Refugee Survey

The refugee survey responses document a harrowing existence in North Korea and continuing vulnerability in China. This material is reported in the paper *Migration Experiences of North Korean Refugees* by Yoonok Chang, Stephan Haggard, and Marcus Noland. Those surveyed suffered unspeakable hardship within North Korea, coping with food shortages, the loss of family members to hunger, arrest and detention in prison camps, and feelings of abandonment at the perception of being excluded from international humanitarian assistance programs in part due to Kim Jong-il regime's monopoly over the flow of information within North Korea.

Yet China is no refuge. Most respondents expressed grave fears of arrest and repatriation. Many others expressed insecurities about housing and problems finding work. Their experiences in North Korea and continued vulnerabilities faced within China have led to these refugees suffering from symptoms similar to those commonly associated with post-traumatic stress disorder.

When asked about resettlement preferences, most refugees preferred South Korea. The United States was the second most popular destination, despite exposure to virulently

anti-American propaganda. However, many refugees stated that they would be happy to remain in China if their status were regularized.

A second paper by Chang, Haggard, and Noland, entitled *Exit Polls: Refugees' Assessments of North Korea's Transition*, documents the refugees' highly negative appraisals of the Kim Jong-il regime. There is some weak evidence, controlling for demographic and experiential variables, that those refugees who witnessed the 2002 economic reforms have somewhat less negative views of the regime. This observation could be picking up an improvement in conditions due to deliberate policy change, though some evidence suggests that it is instead a consequence of unintended system fraying that preceded the reforms.

Currently, a renewed humanitarian disaster appears to be unfolding in North Korea. This is a consequence of self-destructive internal policies, adverse global conditions in commodity markets, and the regime's extraordinarily reckless handling of aid relationships. Evidence of this unraveling can be found in three forms: quantities of available cereals coming dangerously close to minimum requirements; dramatic price increases of cereals in North Korean markets; and anecdotal evidence based on regime behavior and observations of increased hardship from the countryside to the streets of Pyongyang. The current crisis will not approach the magnitude of the mid-1990s famine due to greater internal and external sensitivities to shortages and greater economic flexibility, but the political dynamics are similar.

The policy conclusions of Noland and colleagues are straightforward: The North Korean leadership must temper its belligerent posturing and seek out international security cooperation, détente, and economic reform to revitalize industry and generate the foreign exchange necessary to import food in the long run. In the short run, China must reverse export controls in the case of North Korea and allow grain markets to function, while South Korea should restate its stance that humanitarian assistance is separate from security issues. The United States should plan with the World Food Program and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) engaged in humanitarian relief operations to respond rapidly once the political situation improves. Finally, the United States should show leadership with respect to North Korean refugees and improve its own asylum system, while China should uphold its obligations under the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

According to Noland, the ultimate policy objective should be a North Korea in which its citizens can live in freedom and dignity without recurrent risk of hunger and starvation. Kim Jong-il's extraordinary mismanagement of this situation is made possible by his total lack of accountability within the North Korean political system. There is no civil society capable of channeling mass discontent into constructive political action, and he courts assiduously the only institution capable of challenging his rule, the military. Sadly, he has enormous scope to inflict suffering on his own people. For the outside world, in the short run there is little choice but to spotlight the situation and to press for immediate and large-scale relief to avert calamity. "If our ultimate objectives can be accomplished only by a change in or of the regime, so be it," says Noland.

North Koreans Participating in the Event

Defector accounts highlighted the political economy of food aid, importance of external information flows into North Korea, trafficking of North Korean women in China, and internal changes in North Korea over the past decade. Three North Korean defectors—Kim Seung Min, Kang Su Jin, and Kim Young-il—participated in a panel discussion at the event.

According to Kim Seung Min, founder and director of Free North Korea Radio and former North Korean military officer, understanding the dynamics of food aid provision and importance of information flows into North Korea is critical to fostering the development of civil society within North Korea. Even within the military, the food situation is difficult. The common soldiery suffers to the same degree as the general population, and only the elites are looked after. While continued food aid is necessary to avert a calamity within North Korea, the international community should attempt to more closely monitor distribution. Perhaps more importantly, aid inflows should be accompanied by improvements in information inflows, making North Koreans aware of the true motives and origins of food aid and educating them about life outside North Korea.

Trafficking of North Korean women within China is a serious issue, which the Chinese government and the international community must address. Kang Su Jin, founder and representative of the Coalition for North Korean Women's Rights and former Pyongyang elite, discussed the hopeless situation in which many female North Korean refugees find themselves upon crossing the border into China. In the absence of a family expatriate network within China, these women often become victims of human trafficking, are sold as brides, or forced to work in karaoke bars and attend to male patrons. Slave-like conditions are imposed upon them by leveraging the threat of repatriation to North Korea. Ultimately, little can be done to improve the situation as long as Kim Jong-il is in power. A start would be for the United States to grant improved access to North Korean asylum seekers.

Although conditions within North Korea remain very difficult, several notable and positive improvements have been made over the past decade, according to Kim Young-il, president and founder of People for Successful Korean Unification. The North Korean economy is beginning to show signs of an emerging capitalist class, and markets are developing within the country in spite of the regime's efforts to block such developments. Geographical mobility is increasing amongst those with money, and despite their illegal status, South Korean cultural imports are on the rise. Perhaps most importantly, political discussion is becoming more commonplace, information flows more freely, and political dissent may be on the rise. The international community should apply pressure on the Kim Jong-il regime to facilitate these changes that are occurring within North Korea.

Q&A Session

The audience posed an array of questions regarding food aid, remittances, evidence of unrest, requirements for military recruitment, North Korean elements of cereal price increases, and potential reform paths for North Korea.

Evidence suggesting that food aid is frequently diverted to the military and political elites within North Korea presents an ethical conundrum. If food aid is serving

only to prop up the Kim Jong-il regime, even as they continue to inflict suffering upon the people of North Korea, shouldn't such efforts be scaled back? The answer is no. Scaling back food aid will only punish the innocent. A second-best solution, preferred over cutting food aid altogether, can be targeting deliveries to specific regions in North Korea that are most vulnerable to food shortages and altering cereal content. Such targeting will assure at least some leakage into internal markets and reach those in need. The provision of cereals other than rice, such as barley or sorghum, will have a greater impact because elites will have a much lower propensity to consume such staples.

Signs that the North Korean military and regime may be weakening are evident in both the elimination of height and weight requirements for service in the North Korean military since 2002, according to Kim Seung Min, and anecdotal evidence of increased political dissent and internal change, as discussed by Kim Young-il. Such observations necessitate a discussion of possible reform paths for North Korea. Due to the composition of the North Korean labor force and industrial activity, unstable macroeconomic conditions, and the political implications of being a "junior partner" on a divided peninsula, the China model of development is difficult to apply to North Korea. Structurally, it is more similar to certain Eastern European transition economies such as Romania and should perhaps look in that direction when considering an appropriate reform path. One positive institutional artifact of the Japanese colonial system in North Korea is a relatively good commercial legal code, which will facilitate private-sector development once reforms begin.