

North Koreans Starve while Washington Wavers



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You don't make political points in Washington helping an odious North Korean regime, even with badly needed food. Congress always frightens administrations when North Korean food aid is raised, the State Department does not want to offend a resistant South Korea and the White House, beset with its own political problems, shows little interest. So we hear that North Korea does not need food aid, or it will be siphoned off by the military, or we can't monitor it, or the regime has funds to take care of any food needs itself, or the problem is perennial because the North Korean agricultural system is awful or (most recently) that the problem is inflated—often all of these claims at once. To be sure, even if lots of kids get stunted and many more women produce defective babies, we will never hear much about it or see it on the tube. We can rest easy.

The U.S. government performance on this issue the past three months is noteworthy and deserves some recounting. In April a group of American NGO officials with long humanitarian experience in North Korea came back after investigating the food situation in a number of provinces. They concluded that the situation was dire and that its effects on the most vulnerable elements of the population could be disastrous. They did not assert famine, but did declare that food had to arrive in June to prevent severe deterioration. They all asserted that with their long experience in the country and

significant access they were confident that food aid would reach the intended recipients. Officials back in Washington heard all this and—whatever the internal debate—took no action. The concerns of American NGOs were echoed in the next few months by the World Food Program (WFP), who saw an even larger danger affecting six million people. This was mostly quietly discounted as the views of an ineffective or biased international agency. But other European NGOs, a few governments and, most recently, the EU have also expressed their concerns about the severity of the food situation and provided some funds to the WFP.

Despite the reported urgency, the administration decided they would see for themselves and two months later sent a team to make their own analysis of the situation. It was headed by our special human rights representative for North Korea. The press initially reported he came back sympathetic to food aid if the tough modalities of monitoring could be agreed upon. Monitoring was apparently discussed in Pyongyang, but nothing was decided. So far, Washington has not agreed to provide aid or dispatch a team to negotiate monitoring requirements, citing press reports that the food problem is inflated and can be managed by the North Korean regime. Even if the United States decided it wanted to provide food, it could not reach Pyongyang before late August at the earliest (unless it came from an unlikely source—South Korea). Other than a few in Congress like Senator Kerry and a few editorials urging food aid, there has been little public discussion. Not surprising given everything else going in Washington and North Korea's bad odor.

The South Korean government also has weighed in on the debate, strongly encouraging Washington not to provide aid. It wants an apology from Pyongyang for the South Korean vessel it sunk last year. It argues strongly that the North does not need food aid. Its funding recipients in Washington pointedly helped make the case against assistance. So far Seoul has been successful in preventing American help for their Northern brethren, supposedly further solidifying the US-South Korean relationship.

Also noticeable has been the silence of the NGOs themselves, who have retreated in the face of obvious resistance. Despite their contentions of the urgency, they have made no public lobbying effort, presumably fearful that it may affect their funding (most of which comes from the U.S. government). Moreover, it is the government that does the food

negotiations with the North. The human rights community also has not shown their usual intense advocacy. Only the churches have come out strongly for food aid.

There is no question that the North Korean food issue has been with us for a long time and is likely to remain. It is true that disastrous North Korean economic policy is the principal cause of food shortages and that no steps are currently being taken to correct it. It is also true that Pyongyang could divert monies intended to assuage the needs of its people to military and other purposes. China reportedly supplies rice to the North Korean military, but it has not helped feed others despite its abundant financial resources. The sad fact is that none of this is happening or likely to happen. Pyongyang does not care enough to provide its own foreign exchange to its beleaguered people, and Beijing—for whatever reasons—will not help.

So the question comes back to what the United States and other countries will do. There may now be political reasons for Washington to supply some food aid. But the essential reason to help this terrible country remains, of course, humanitarian—a clear need for assistance has been asserted by responsible, informed organizations, and it is not currently being supplied (nor is it likely to be supplied soon). Even if the need turns out to be less compelling than the NGOs assert—we may never know—prudence would dictate some immediate American response to the situation. Monitoring can be worked out or it can be used as an excuse not to provide aid. The government has dithered on this terrible issue long enough. It should provide aid. But at the least it should make a decision one way or the other so that others might stand up.