

Many may perish in a looming famine in North Korea.

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It is reported that 1 kilogram of rice is currently traded at 1,700 North Korean Won in NK marketplaces. It is too steep an increase in price considering 1 kg of rice was about 1,000 NK Won even around the same time last year even when food prices in NK had soared dramatically as food aid from South Korea was delayed due to factors such as NK nuclear issue. This is because there is a large shortage of food supply in the market. Last year, provisions for the army were reportedly distributed to some regions in an attempt to stabilize the rice price, but this year, there appears to be no such movement. This is probably because of a shortage of food reserve in NK, but, at the same time, it could also be due to the possibility of NK being unable to release reserve food due to uncertainties of North-South relations and NK nuclear issue. Soaring rice price is not the only problem. Across many regions in NK people are reporting a shortage of food supplies. It is like a quiet night before the storm, reminiscent of the mid-1990s when many North Koreans starved to death.

Food supply in NK is hit by the triple whammy. Firstly, costs of importing food have increased because of a sharp rise in international grain prices, so-called agflation. Costs of importing food from China have also risen as China began to put tariff on food exports to NK. This has a large impact on the NK market because a significant proportion of the food supplied to NK marketplaces is imported privately from China. This means that food imports from China have

become effectively impossible. Secondly, a large-scale crackdown by the NK government on irregularities and corruption is influencing the market. The NK public, in a struggle for survival, has developed its own market structure for food trade since the severe food crises in the mid-1990s. They had to run the market with limited food supply, within the framework of planned economy and this inevitably nurtured irregularities and corruption. The massive crackdown by the government caused a bottleneck effect on the food trade structure which has existed for more than a decade. Thirdly, aid from the international community including South Korea is uncertain. In general, NK is self-sufficient in food supply during the second-half of the farming year and is reliant on international aid from March/April till the harvest.

Food production in NK decreased by 10% due to large floods in 2006 and 2007. Last year's decreased total production means an overall food shortage this year. South Korea provided an aid of 40,000-50,000 tonnes of food to NK every year for the last 8 years, and prior to this, the United States had provided several hundred thousand tonnes of food since mid-1990s. There is no doubt NK's level of food dependence on international aid is very high. Uncertainties about international aid directly lead to suspension of food rationing.

Given the above circumstances, it is crystal clear what NK's food situation will be like in the future. If the NK government is sensible, it should face up to reality and make an appeal to the international community for assistance. The NK government, however, is unfortunately not sensible. It only asks for assistance reluctantly when the worst situations have happened and all the hardship is endured by the North Korean public. It is as if the NK government holds the NK people as hostage to negotiate with the outside world. If this speculation is true, the NK government is a very bad regime. Yet, it is a difficult matter to decide whether to volunteer assistance when it is not requested. How much longer should we tolerate the NK government's imprudent resistance? Meanwhile, the

hardship suffered by the NK people will continue. We must seek a fundamental solution to NK food crises, but in reality it is difficult to find one.

One-month old Lee Myung-Bak's government should find a solution to this problem. It is not enough to say it will respond after watching how NK behaves. NK people are starving right now. NK, of course, is fully responsible for the problem. However, turning a blind eye to their suffering would be irresponsible.

Here is a suggestion. The time of the year when fertilizer and food are needed is approaching. First of all, NK government should submit a formal request to South Korea for supply of food and fertilizer. NK is definitely not anarchy. Everyone recognizes that NK needs to ask for help given the circumstances. This is not about hurting the national pride. Furthermore, is keeping the ego that important when people are suffering? South Korea should also change the way it provides assistance to NK. South Korea provided fertilizers for free and food in the form of loans. It is somewhat awkward. Fertilizers can be provided in the form of loans through negotiations. Although supply of fertilizers is meaningless if it does not take place in time for topdressing, it is not as urgent as food supply because it influences food production in the second half of this year. In other words, if NK requests fertilizer supply, provide them in the form of loans and demand something from NK in return. On the other hand, food should be supplied in the form of grant aid. It is a humanitarian matter and attaching conditions to food aid is against the very meaning of humanitarian assistance. However, South Korea can demand more thorough monitoring. NK refused an international organization's aid last year for the reason that it did too much monitoring for the amount of aid. If NK refuses food aid because of monitoring, South Korea should not provide assistance. For both fertilizers and food, assistance is only possible when NK requests for them.

Furthermore, we should form a mutual-assistance system with the international community. South Korea can take the initiative and discuss with the US, Japan and China about forming an alliance of providing humanitarian aid in preparation for future food crises in NK. The form of aid should follow the international rules. We should also prepare to strengthen assistance through international organizations such as World Food Program (WFP). It requires thorough preparation to ensure this matter is not used politically in which case many may perish with famine. We should never compromise if NK government attempts to use this issue politically. This would be genuine humanitarian assistance. Finding practical ways to help the North Korean people going through hardships is what the new President who emphasizes pragmatism should do. It is also what South Korea as an advanced democratic country should do to fulfill the duty as a member of the international community. Saving lives is the most important thing in the world.