

[North Korea web action WA 0304, tentatively launching 19 January 2004] ASA 24/001/2004

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[Note to translators – please do not translate the red comments in brackets, like this one. Thanks]

[Title]

North Korea: Suffering in silence

[Extract]

Hundreds of thousands are reported to have died in North Korea's "silent famine". Tell their government that the right to food is a basic human right.

[Photo caption]

North Korean mother and malnourished child, Nampo Hospital, North Korea

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[Summary]

The struggle against hunger and starvation is a struggle for human rights. For more than a decade, North Korea has suffered from a “silent famine” in which hundreds of thousands are reported to have died of starvation and related illness. One of the main reasons is that the North Korean government has imposed severe restrictions on independent monitors, food donors, international governmental organisations and NGOs. Tell the North Korean government that the right to food is a basic human right.

Humanitarian organisations recently withdrew from North Korea after complaining of lack of adequate access, as they were unable to determine the eventual use of their aid supplies. Several sources claim that the North Korean authorities have distributed international aid to those who are economically active and loyal to the state, while some of the most vulnerable groups – the elderly, women and children and those in rural areas – have been neglected.

Urge the North Korean government to honour its duty to protect and feed its population without discrimination. It must allow access to the country by international humanitarian organisations who can feed the starving population of North Korea. The government must also allow these organisations to control the distribution of food and relief aid. Join Amnesty International in insisting on rights for the hungry.

[Further information]

**Further information**

“Suffering in silence” slideshow

Find out more about North Korea’s “silent famine” – [click here](#) to view slideshow.

[Call to action]

**Take action!**

Write to the government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea urging that the right to food is not denied to the people of North Korea. You can base your letter on the following sample:

[Sample Letter]

Your Excellency,

I urge you to take measures to feed the starving people of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The right to food is a basic human right. Do not deny the people of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea this right. Food must not be used as a political weapon.

A World Food Programme Special Report issued in October 2003 warns that malnutrition rates remain “alarmingly high”, with 42 percent of children continuing to suffer from chronic malnutrition resulting in stunted growth. Humanitarian organisations and independent monitors must have unlimited access to the country in order to help stop this tragedy.

I ask you to end discriminatory practices in the distribution of food and aid. Food should be distributed according to need and not according to political background. I also ask you not to punish the poor and hungry when they travel without permission in search of food, or when they commit petty crimes in order to feed their starving children.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is a state party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). As a Party to this treaty the government has agreed to abide by the principles enshrined in it and to ensure the adequate access to food for the people of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

I urge you to fulfil your obligations and to end the silent suffering of the ordinary people of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Yours sincerely,

[Target contact details]

Chairman Kim Jong-il  
National Defence Commission  
Pyongyang  
Democratic People's Republic of Korea

[Slideshow captions]

[Picture 1]

Since the early 1990s, North Korea has suffered from a systemic famine. Hundreds of thousands are reported to have died of starvation and related illness.

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[Picture 2 ]

The food crisis has led to widespread malnutrition among the population and to the movement of hundreds of thousands of people in search of food - some across the border with China.

© Korea Press

[Picture 3]

Although the famine has somewhat abated, North Korea still suffers from an acute food crisis. A quarter of the population (around 6.5 million people) are dependent on international food aid.

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[Picture 4]

Many human rights abuses in North Korea, including the use of torture and the death penalty, arbitrary detention, inhumane prison conditions and the near-total suppression of fundamental freedoms, have been linked directly or indirectly to the food crisis.

© Korea Press

[Picture 5]

Because of government restrictions on access and information, it is impossible to estimate the scale of the disaster. While denying access to human rights monitors, North Korea's severe food shortages have forced it to allow limited access to international aid agencies.

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[Picture 6]

Food shortages and adult deaths have had a particularly severe impact on children. Unconfirmed reports suggest that hundreds of orphans have been placed in institutions or have become street children, lacking access to food aid and state protection.

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[Picture 7 ]

UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) reports that 55 North Korean infants out of every 1000 lose their lives. Nutrition for children has improved, but 42% of children continue to suffer from chronic malnutrition according to the World Food Programme (WFP).

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[Picture 8 ]

The acute food shortages have forced tens of thousands of North Koreans to cross the border illegally into China. Thousands are forcibly repatriated back to North Korea by Chinese authorities and detained in facilities where they are interrogated.

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[Picture 9 ]

North Korea cannot afford to import food to meet the substantial food deficiency. Since 1995, Korea has been the recipient of some 8 million tons of food aid, almost half of which has been distributed by the WFP.

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[Picture 10 ]

The international community should not use food aid as a bargaining tool to achieve political aims. Denial of food aid is a human rights violation in itself. Any embargo on food is a denial of the right to life.

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[Picture 11 ]

Take action! Urge the North Korean government to protect the rights of vulnerable groups such as women, prisoners and children, and to ensure that no group faces discrimination in the distribution of food and medical care.

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