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Roundtable on North Korean Food Crisis (U)

The Office of Special Programs of the School of Professional and Area Studies at the Foreign Service Institute, in cooperation with the Bureau of Intelligence and Research and the Office of Korean Affairs, held a Roundtable Discussion on June 25 focusing on the nature and scope of the North Korean food crisis, its implications for regime stability, and its potential impact on US policy. More than two dozen nongovernment experts and aid workers--many of them recent visitors to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)--joined State Department and other government specialists to discuss the situation. Among the conclusions of this diverse group were the following. (C)

The food crisis is real, although there was debate on its scope and whether it would develop into a full-blown famine. A significant percentage of the population is severely malnourished, and mortality rates have risen. Indicators of an acute humanitarian crisis observed by participants included people moving about in search of food, severe drops in ration levels, an absence of farm animals, resale of household goods in burgeoning urban markets, and unusually large numbers of soldiers working in the fields. Children and the elderly, the two most vulnerable segments of society, are showing visible effects of severe and prolonged malnourishment. The situation appears to be worst in mountainous areas in the interior, where there has been significant loss of life. (C)

Humanitarian efforts will not resolve the North's deeper structural problems in the agricultural sector. The food crisis is systemic rather than solely the result of floods and poor harvests; its solution will require the North to end destructive agricultural and economic practices. The government has begun allowing private and international relief agencies greater access. One participant noted that the food crisis is becoming the "first 21st-century-style famine"--with fewer overt signs of starvation, greater politicization of relief efforts, and a shift to Asian donors and leadership. The unprecedented nature of the crisis risks misperceptions and miscalculations that could have tragic consequences. (C)

No one argued that the regime faced imminent collapse--although, if present trends continue, most participants thought its long-term prospects were dim. Nonetheless, there is little evidence of widespread popular dissent. Participants did see some signs that the social fabric is beginning to fray as people grow more frustrated and desperate. The political and military elite, accepted as "special" by the population, continue to hold the keys to power--but even they are feeling the effects of shortages. There is no sign that those who have been hardest hit are capable of fomenting a "revolution from below." (C)

The breakdown of the public distribution system has led to some decentralization of power as local authorities gain more autonomy. Control of food confers influence and legitimacy. As foreign donors establish links with specific hospitals, orphanages, and local officials, this process will accelerate. One frequent visitor thought that if China became the donor of last resort, a collection of regional fiefdoms

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and city-states that were virtual economic colonies of Beijing might eventually emerge. (C)

There was general agreement that **support of humanitarian efforts in North Korea is consistent with other US policy goals** toward the peninsula, such as preventing the outbreak of war, creating a stable peace, promoting change in Pyongyang, and reducing the nuclear threat. The relief efforts of the UN and nongovernmental aid groups should be supported. Participants concurred that the US should remain fully engaged and take the lead in addressing the food crisis. (C)

More broadly, there was a consensus that **US diplomatic efforts have achieved significant results**. The Agreed Framework, the Korean Energy Development Organization (KEDO), and pending Four Party Talks are important vehicles to draw the DPRK into the international community. A multifaceted effort, including bilateral negotiations on issues such as MIAs and missile proliferation, should be emphasized. A few participants asserted that the North's response to Four Party Talks was a tactical gambit to obtain food and urged a more "results-oriented" US diplomacy. (C)

Policy coordination on the North Korean problem has created a community of interests among regional powers which could ultimately lead to a more formal multilateral forum for northeast Asian security and economic cooperation. (C)

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