

Alarm grows over North Korea famine

UN organizations and the German Red Cross are expressing increasing alarm over the worsening North Korean famine, in which 5-10 million people are known to be at immediate risk. On Sept. 13, UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Director-General Jacques Diouf said that there should be "very serious alarm" at the starvation. Unicef Deputy Director for Emergency Operations Peter McDermott said that thousands of children have already died, and many more are at risk from diarrhea and pneumonia.

In a joint statement, the FAO World Food Program and Unicef warned that the famine has now become a longer-term problem as well. "Guarded optimism expressed earlier for some recovery in food production this year, is now replaced by very serious alarm at food security prospects for the coming months and year ahead," the agencies said, pointing out that the 1997 fall crop has suffered heavy losses after the 1997 drought and the recent storm surges following Typhoon Winnie—all on top of two years' record floods in 1995-96, which covered 30% of the country's farmland with silt.

"These catastrophic events will undoubtedly have serious, long-reaching repercussions in the country's already grave food supply situation," the agencies said.

Diouf said on Sept. 18, after a three-day visit to North Korea, "We have estimated the deficit in grains at 1.9 million tons" over the next year. "The situation is very difficult. We expect that 700 [thousand tons] should be provided through commercial means, but there would still be a deficit of 1.2 million tons of grains, which would require international assistance," he said. "We have seen areas of the west coast which have been devastated by storm surges. There are fields of rice that have been completely destroyed by salty water. We have also visited other parts that have been affected by drought."

McDermott said that infectious diseases caused by malnutrition and poor sanitation resulting from general economic breakdown, have now appeared widely, and are being spread by the food relief efforts themselves. "There is enormous cause for concern. . . . Providing food to famine-hit areas has historically not been sufficient to treat the problem," he said. "There is a real danger that we might undermine the effectiveness of food aid by not providing the limited resources needed to improve health care and purify the water supply. . . . I have to be very frank. At the beginning we underestimated the problems with the health service. . . . Wherever food aid is distributed, staff must be able to stop communicable diseases."

'Famine worst since World War II'

"According to estimates by the Red Cross and other international aid organizations we are dealing with the world's worst hunger catastrophe since the end of the Second World War," the German Red Cross said in a statement on Sept. 16. Red Cross spokesman Susanne Anger, who had returned from two weeks in North Korea, said that some 10,000 children were dying of starvation every month.

"An entire people are starving as the result of several natural disasters and a precarious economic situation," Anger said. She said the alarming estimate by World Vision that at least half a million of North Korea's population of 22 million had starved to death in the famine, could not be ruled out. "The mortality rate for children under seven has risen to 40%," she said. "About 800,000 children are chronically undernourished and have severe developmental damage. Nine- or 10-year-olds look like three or four-year-olds."

Anger said 90% of North Korea's industry had ground to a halt because of a lack of fuel and electricity, roads were empty of cars, and people were working with their bare hands in the fields rather than using tractors.

On Sept. 16, World Vision, a UN non-governmental organization, said the death toll from famine may already be more than a half-million. "At least half a million people have died, probably closer to 1 to 2 million," World Vision Vice President Andrew Natsios told CNN. World Vision said it based its estimate on surveys taken in July on the Chinese side of the Korean border.

A North Korean official told *EIR* on the same day that the World Vision report was "misleading." "We do not know exactly the motive for this report," the official said, "but certainly" it would be "very damaging" to North Korea if such a thing were being covered up. "Please tell the American people that the famine crisis is very severe in our country, and hundreds of people have died, but there has been no such [mass death] . . . so far." The spokesman renewed North Korea's call for food aid, saying that without "large" assistance, there would be an enormous threat of famine deaths soon.

Meanwhile, the "talks about talks" between North and South Korea, the United States, and China broke down in New York on Sept. 19 over the refusal of the U.S. to meet North Korean requests for large-scale famine food aid. A briefing that was to be given to the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee by the North Korean delegation was cancelled when the delegation left the United States.

The official Pyongyang KCNA news agency quoted a North Korean Foreign Ministry spokesman as saying: "We intended that if the U.S. clearly promised food supply to the D.P.R.K., we would regard it as goodwill of the U.S. and show flexibility in the debate on the agenda of the 'four-way talks.'" The spokesman charged that by refusing to grant large-scale food aid, the U.S. was "using food as a weapon" in the talks. The United States has rejected directly linking assistance and negotiations.