

# NORTH KOREA TODAY

*144th Edition June 2008*

“Research Institute for North Korean Society of Good Friends, in order to bring news of the food crisis in North Korea more accurately and quickly, will increase its e-newsletter frequency to more than one issue per week. As such, the release dates might shift. Thank you for your understanding and attention to this looming crisis. We at Good Friends hope to be a bridge between the North Korean people and the world.”

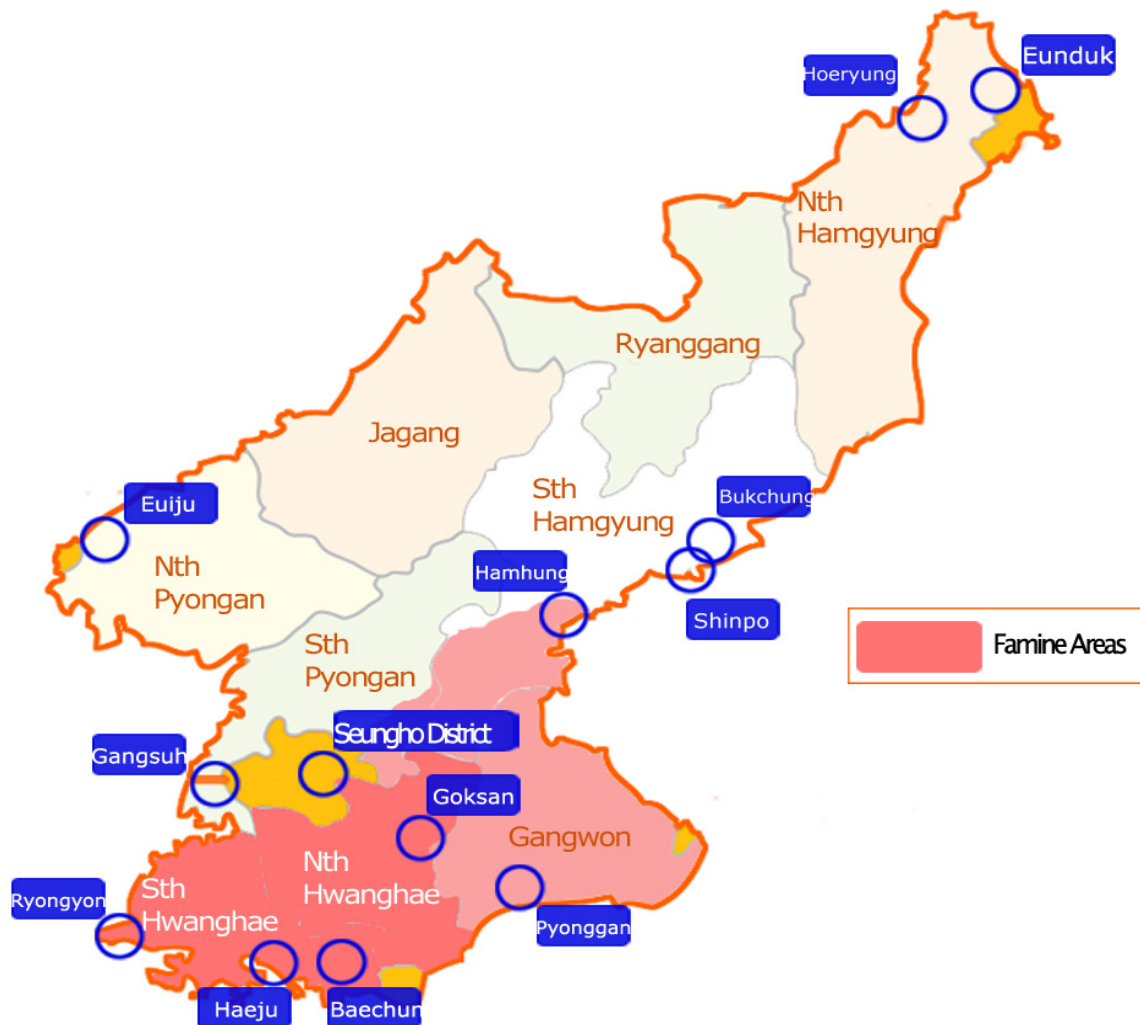


Fig1. Map of the Famine Alerting Areas and the Regions Featured in NKT No.144

### **People Waiting to Starve to Death in Ryongyon county, South Hwanghae Province**

A survey of residents in Ryongyon town 룡연읍, Ryongyon county 룡연군, South Hwanghae Province has shown that the food situation of the majority of the population is such that they do not even have 1kg of rice. With deaths from grass poisoning continuing to emerge and rations having run out three to four months ago, it appears that these residents are waiting to starve to death. Those people who have not become too weakened by the current situation are digging up unripe potatoes to eat and are stealing grain from other peoples' homes in order to survive day by day.

On June 1<sup>st</sup>, two fourth-year students of Ryongyon town Primary school were caught by a guard while attempting to steal potatoes from a cooperative farm and were beaten severely. If the students had been healthy, they would have been able to survive the beating, but because the students were in such a weakened state, they died the next day. The guard was arrested by the authorities. Upon hearing the news, Lim Chunok(43) said, with an upset voice, "Even during the Arduous March, there were many instances where people tried to steal food from others and then died from the beatings they received. What wrong have these children committed when they were born into these conditions? I worry whether or not my own child will try to steal something and suffer like these children." Jung Sungsan(43) echoed these sentiments and hinted at how extreme the situation is by saying, "People who aren't able to eat are truly desperate right now. There are even people who say that they would be better off dead. These people are just waiting to die."

### **Baechun County, Considerable Increase in People Dying of Starvation**

The number of people who are dying of starvation in Baechun county 배천군, South Hwanghae Province is on the rise. With the number of people dying of starvation rising to the point where the situation is clearly visible, the county party officials rushed to organize a lecture meeting and visited the homes of people who are on the verge of starving to death, or the homes of people who had a member of their family starve to death, in order to comfort and aid them. To these individuals, the county party officials issued ration voucher for 5kg of maize per household, and said, "We will have food rations coming soon. It won't be long until we are able to live well again, so be strong for a little bit longer." It appears that because people expect around 300 tons of maize to enter North and South Hwanghae Province around the middle of June, the authorities are giving out 5kg of maize to the households that are on the verge of starvation and need it the most. At present in Baechun, there are many households of four people who grind 1kg of maize and live on it for three days.

### **Widespread Food Shortage Halts Construction in Mirubul Plain, Goksan County**

Construction of the Mirubul Plain 미루벌 in Goksan County 곡산군, North Hwanghae Province is constantly being delayed because of the food shortage, and the project is facing many difficulties. Without any other construction equipment, the project has to rely on human labor to be completed but the laborers are not able to work hard with the

current lack of food. The workers on the project are given on average 20 kernels of maize a day for their rations. They would then have to take off 5 kernels for the residents in Goksan county. The laborers are saying that the conditions are too difficult and that they feel like they're going to die because they are responsible for providing aid to the citizens, even though they do not have enough food for themselves. Because the order to provide aid was levied by the management, the laborers have to follow it, but the complaints are increasing. Because their work uniforms and their underwear have all worn out, the laborers wear just enough to cover themselves while working. There are many people who suffer accidents or contract diseases while working on the construction project, but because there are no medicines available, these individuals suffer greatly. Cases of people suffering from grass poisoning are common because many people are eating grass, as are cases of food poisoning. People are dying every day because they have weakened immune systems and because there is a lack of food and medicine, but at present, there is not much that can be done. With clean drinking water difficult to come by, there has been a rise in the number of waterborne diseases. The increase in diseases, grass poisoning, and swelling caused by the food shortage is affecting not only the laborers at Mirubul Plain, but also the populace at large. Children are surviving by going to the mountains to dig up grass and by grinding up and mixing the grass into the porridge they eat.

### **Students Mobilized for Farming at Kangwon Province Fainted from Hunger**

Middle school students of Wonsan who were mobilized for farming at Pyongkang County of Kangwon Province are suffering from food shortages. Over half of one class, consisting of 40 students, were unable to prepare a handful of food. Without any readily available food, they are living in a state of extreme hunger. Their homeroom teacher tried many ways to obtain food but ended up with more discouraging news. The majority of the farming families there have long been managing to survive on grass porridge, but these residents now stay in bed, too hungry to work in the fields. More and more students are fainting from extreme hunger. The teacher is desperately worried that this situation might end up with more serious incidents, such as the death of students.

### **65% of the Residents in Seungho District of Pyongyang Survive on Porridge**

It has been revealed that residents in the neighborhoods of Pyongyang City are going through more serious hardships than was expected. By one account, 65% of Hwachun 1-dong's residents in Seungho District manage to survive on porridge and among these are many people who cannot even manage to have porridge once a day. 62-year-old Kim Myong-soo, who had lived on a senior pension finally, died of hunger on June 3 after managing to have porridge once a day for a month. Ryum Suk-ho, 47-years-old, delivered a message of serious food shortages to the neighborhoods of Pyongyang, "As far as I know, not only the majority of the residents of Hwachun 1-dong but also those of Hwachun 2-dong and Seungho 1-dong and 2-dong, namely most of the residents at Seungho District, are struggling to survive on thin porridge. Now one or two are dying of hunger. Unless food is soon distributed, more deaths will only be a matter of time. The fact that Pyongyang's neighborhoods are witnessing deaths from hunger signifies that Pyongyang is no longer an area protected from starvation."

### **Dukhyun Mine in Uiju County of North Pyongan Province Lost in Despair**

With food distribution suspended, so many workers of Dukhyun Mine (덕현광산) are absent without notice that they are not even called upon to go to work. This seems understandable since observing them clearly explains the serious situation; all are lying in bed utterly exhausted from hunger. It has been a long time since the machine parts from the factory were stolen, it is unreasonable to expect the mine to now be able to operate properly. All of 42-year-old Park Chang-ho's four family members were suffering from the poisoning of grass porridge. One of Park's relatives living in Jungju County of North Pyongan Province reports in tears that upon Park's request for help, he hurried to come and see his family, but he just found them all dead.

### **Grass Porridge Poisoning Makes it Unable to Recognise Faces of the Deceased**

It has been over a month since people began to survive on grass porridge in Bukchung County 북청군 of South Hamgyong Province. These residents live in despair and misery, managing to survive merely on grass porridge since supplies of grain ran out a long time ago. People find themselves dumbstruck, unable to identify one another as they are all suffering from the facial swelling caused by the poisoning of grass porridge. Increasing numbers of people cannot go to work or school, they seem to be left waiting for death without getting any aid.

### **Two People Found Dead under Ohbong Bridge in Hoeryong City**

On June 6 at 7 AM police officials in Hoeryong city of North Hamgyong Province found two people dead under Ohbong Bridge 오봉다리. The autopsy revealed that they died from starvation. Without any identification cards found around them, it is impossible to identify who they are and where they come from, but it has been reported that they are not from Hoeryong City. The police report that there are growing numbers of people who are heading to the national border with the intention of going to China to escape extreme food shortages. The police also suspect that the two dead people must have been on their way to China after suffering from hunger in Hwanghae or Pyongan Province.

### **Eunduk County: "Grass Porridge Made Us Nearly Starved To Death"**

Workers in the munitions factories in Eunduk County of North Hamgyong Province have been surviving on grass porridge. The current food shortage affects 10 households out of every Neighborhood Unit; in other words, around one third of the county's whole population lives only on grass porridge. 61-year-old Kang Seung-in says, "Those who have grass porridge now are almost starving to death. It won't be long until we witness people dying of hunger here and there." He also adds in despair, "The rumor is going around that many died of hunger at the front; if that's the case, our county will not be an exception."

### **Yanghwa-ri Farm, Shinpo Urgently Released 3 MT of Corn to Mobilize Farmers**

Because many farmers did not go to work or fulfill their duties at Yanghwa-ri Collective Farm, Shinpo County, South Hamgyong Province, the farm urgently released food. The farm provided farmers with 3 MT of corn, which had been reserved as emergency food last year. Those households in which family members were at the point of starvation and lacked any food were given 6 kg of food by the collective farm. A staff member of the

farm said, “We distributed the food for 5 days because we need to do the most difficult and tough work during this period of time.”

## **2.8 Vinalon United Enterprise Urgently Released Rice**

Workers of 2.8 Vinalon<sup>1)</sup> United Enterprise (2.8 비날론련합기업소) at Hamheung, South Hamgyong Province have not received food for a long time. Therefore, the numbers of absences without leave have increased as workers are concerned with searching for food. On June 2, the support bureau of Enterprise released 5 MT of food reserves for emergency distribution to the workers. 6 kg of rice was distributed to each household that has not even had thin gruel.

## **UN Affiliated Food Organization Inspected North Pyongan Province**

On June 5, the United Nations affiliated Food Organization went to several districts of Sinuiju, North Pyongan Province to inspect the food supplies available to residents. There was an urgent meeting at Sinuiju just one day before the inspectors arrived. The authority issued an order concerning how some residents should respond to UN inspectors' questions and ordered that the other residents must not go out for 3 days.

## **In Pyongyang, Some People Trade in the Alleyways**

Pyongyang does not distribute food regularly, so residents of some districts do not go to work. Although the food distribution in Pyongyang has not been sufficient, most people went to work and the number of people trading in markets was relatively small. But starting at the beginning of the year, food distribution has gone poorly, so small markets and trading booths have appeared in the alleyways of apartments in the congested residential areas. In Dangsang 1-dong and 2-dong of Mangyongdae District, the district inspectors try to control the public order by seizing goods and sending market-goers back home, but it is ineffective. When the inspectors come, the traders disappear; when the controllers leave, people soon return to the market. The Central Government repeatedly issued orders that they must secure food distribution for Pyongyang City by any means.

## **In Kangsuh County, Many Students Are Sleeping in their Classes**

The critical food situation of Kangsuh County, South Pyongan Province has affected teaching and learning in school. Elementary school students are starving, limiting their ability to focus even if they come to class. It is impossible to expect these starving young children to go to school when many hungry adults do not go to work. In many cases, less than 10 students attend a class, so teachers send the students home. Some people can afford to consider their children's education and keep them in school, but others do not even think of education. Hungry students cannot concentrate in their classes, worried as they are about finding food to eat. Teachers do not have much strength and their voice is feeble and soft, so they let their students study by themselves. Students sleep at their desks during class and even their teachers fall asleep in class. Currently, 40% of Kangsuh County residents have only one or two meals a day, consisting of gruel.

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<sup>1)</sup> Vinalon(비날론): A Synthetic fiber invented by North Korean scientist called Lee Seung-ki, two years after the invention of nylon. This fiber is close to cotton that Kim Il-Sung awarded Vinalon as the Juche Fiber(주체섬유).

## **[Opinion]**

### **Urgent Call for Responses on the Famine in North Korea**

What we were afraid of is beginning to come true. Farming areas in Hwanghae Province are seeing a marked increase in the number of people starving to death. We are also hearing news of people starving to death throughout North Korea. A team from the United States inspecting the food shortage situation is said to be planning to set up offices in Pyongyang, Sinuiju, and a city yet to be determined in Jagang Province. The U.S. team should inspect the situation in Hwanghae and Kangwon Provinces first because the rural areas of these two provinces are reported to be in the worst state. Every farm collective in these regions are seeing people dying of starvation every day. Many are surviving on grass porridge but many more are just waiting passively to die. Left alone, hundreds of thousands will starve to death.

But the North Korean authorities are covering up this reality. Why is that? Is it because the "Great People's Republic" is not allowed to have its own people starve to death? Then it should prepare a solution to the problem. If it can't come up with a solution on its own, then it should reveal its crisis to the international community and ask for help with the urgency that it deserves. You just can't sit back and expect others to automatically realize what's going on and help on their own accord. It's tough enough to get help even if you ask for it. You can't expect to save your pride while at the same time saving your people.

We have to save the people in any way that we can. We can't trivialize their deaths as an inevitable sacrifice to maintain the regime or overcome national challenges. All the national slogans about justice, peace, people's pride, and unification become empty when faced with people starving to death. Will the South Korean government just watch as people starve to death, or dismiss the crisis by saying that it doesn't exist? Are you going to comfort yourself by saying that, "since they are not asking for any aid, they must still be able to get by." Well, the North Korean government might be "get by" but not the people. When President Lee Myung-bak said that he loved the North Korean people, did he mean to love them by watching them die?

As some argue against aid for North Korea because news of famine is not real, that it's really not that serious, that the army takes it all anyway and it's only propping up the Kim Jong-Il regime, the elderly and young in North Korea are starving to death. Did you know that in the 1990's, out of the three million dead in the Arduous March, up to 73% of the victims were composed of the elderly above 60 and the young below 20? What crimes did they commit? Did they ever shoot a gun in anger? Did they shoot off the missiles? Right now in South Korea, hundreds of thousands are protesting on the streets because we are worried about our health.

But hundreds of thousands of people are starving to death just across the border in North Korea. We need candlelight vigils for them.

A few so-called experts have visited Pyongyang and looked at the new roads and construction, then declared that news of famine is just overblown propaganda. Is it possible to know less about North Korea? Don't they know that North Korea is called the Republic of Pyongyang for a reason?

If they don't see the famine, they should just say, "I didn't see it." If they don't believe that a famine is happening, they should say, "I don't believe it." If they don't know, they should say, "I don't know." But they shouldn't make judgments such as, "The reports are exaggerated," or "Aids organizations are overstating the case to exaggerate their own importance." Such statements are absolutely irresponsible. They should be held accountable for the North Korean people who have starved to death because of them.

We once again call upon the North and South Korea government and the international aid community to act urgently to prevent further deaths of the North Korean people from starvation.



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