Outside Aid Has Failed. Only an ‘Intrusive Aid’ Approach Will Work
By Nicholas Eberstadt

THE DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE’S Republic of Korea launched its first frantic diplomatic appeals for international food aid in early 1994 — over half a year before the September 1994 flooding, it is worth noting, that was subsequently used as the official justification for the doctrinally awkward call for foreign aid by this ostensibly self-reliant juche state.

Pyongyang’s appeal for international food aid continues to this very day: this year, North Korea has reportedly lodged requests for emergency humanitarian relief to the United Nations World Food Program (WFP), the South Korean government, the US State Department and even a number of Third World countries. Thus North Korea’s “temporary” food emergency has entered its 18th consecutive year, notwithstanding billions of dollars and millions of tons of humanitarian relief from the international community in the interim. So far as can be told, North Korea has lost the capacity to feed itself — an astonishing historical first for an urbanized, literate and industrialized society.

Why should Pyongyang — a government that seems to manage such tasks as building and test- ing atomic weapons and launching long-range ballistic missiles — be so manifestly incapable today of the basic task of feeding its own population? We must address, and convincingly answer, this fundamental question before we can even hope to craft a successful international strategy for redressing hunger in North Korea.

Very broadly speaking, North Korea’s now-permanent food crisis must be understood as the consequence of four defining factors — all of them integral to the very nature of the North Korean state.

The first, of course, is North Korea’s distorted Soviet-style economy, which is more distorted than the Soviet Union’s economy ever was: much less productive, much more inefficient, permanently and desperately dependent upon flows of foreign aid just to keep on going in its sputtering manner.

The second is the regime’s completely wrong-headed food self-sufficiency policy: this Northeast Asian economy is densely populated, with limited amounts of arable land, and long periods of cold weather, and the notion that it should be trying to grow its own food rather than exporting labor-intensive products to buy inexpensive calories abroad is an open-ended invitation for trouble.

The third factor is the North Korean government’s unique and long-standing war against its own consumers. Apart perhaps from Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge, Pyongyang has more completely monetized its economy, and more successfully reduced its subjects to dependence upon direct provisioning of supplies from their rulers, than any modern government; when the supply pipeline dried up, many hundreds of thousands of those subjects were condemned to a rendezvous with death.

All of these are structural problems, and are plain enough to see. But there is also a fourth structural aspect to the North Korean hunger problem that is much less widely understood by outsiders: this relates to North Korea’s songbun ethic, which ranks people according to their behavior or badness of everyone’s songbun. The records are continually updated. It is easy for one’s songbun to be downgraded for lack of ideological fervor, laziness, incompetence, or for more serious reasons, such as marrying someone with bad songbun, committing a crime, or simply being related to someone who commits an offense.

It is very difficult to improve one’s songbun, however, particularly if the stigma derives from the pre-revolutionary class status or the behavior of one’s parents or relatives.

How Songbun Defines North Koreans — and Can Destroy Them
Former CIA economist and political analyst Helen Louise Hunter detailed the songbun ethic, which ranks people according to their political class, in her 1999 book *Kim Il-song’s North Korea*, written largely from debriefings of defectors. Here are two extracts:

**Who’s In, Who’s Out**
In North Korea, one’s songbun is either good or bad, and detailed records are kept by party cadre and security officials of the degree of goodness or badness of everyone’s songbun. The records are continually updated. It is easy for one’s songbun to be downgraded for lack of ideological fervor, laziness, incompetence, or for more serious reasons, such as marrying someone with bad songbun, committing a crime, or simply being related to someone who commits an offense.

**A 50-Step Hierarchy**
The highest distinction goes first to the anti-Japanese guerrillas who fought with Kim Il-song and second to the veterans of the Korean War; next come the descendants of the pre-revolutionary working people and the poor, small farmers. Together, these favored groups constitute from 25 to 30 percent of the population. Ranked below them in descending order are 47 distinct groups in what must be the most class-differentiated society in the world today.

Incidentally, the WFP’s own method for estimating food needs— the so-called “food balance sheet” approach—is all but useless: it is akin to trying to guess a country’s unemployment rate on the basis of its gross national product.

More than a decade and a half of humanitarian relief initiatives have been financed by well-meaning but essentially clueless bureaucracies in the international community oblivious to, or unwilling to face, the ugly realities that account for North Korea’s hunger problem. To no great surprise, these clueless programs of supposed humanitarian relief have been a resounding failure.

aid has brought the North Korean people: food insecurity without end. Isn’t it time to fashion an aid program as if the North Korean people really mattered?

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