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North Korea, Malnutrition

Malnutrition in North Korea

As the world population grows each day, the availability of food becomes more and more uncertain. The loss of arable land has yet to affect most people in first-world countries but many people in developing and third-world countries have already felt the effects of this loss. I am an able-bodied, eighteen-year-old, cis-gendered, lower-class, African American woman and I am a senior at Pathways High School in Milwaukee, WI where I grew up and currently live. Personally, I am no stranger to food insecurity but I certainly have not experienced it to the level that many other people in developing countries, like North Korea, have had to. I have two friends who are South Korean but I myself am not Korean and do not have any Korean ancestry nor have I ever been to Korea. I believe that the Korean experience in North Korea is very different than my experience as an African-American. With that being said, I do not believe there are many commonalities between my positionality and that of a North Korean. I have read books and articles about the treatment and struggles of Koreans during Japanese and American colonialism. I've also read autobiographies from North Korean defectors so I am notably more well-read on the subjects of malnutrition and human rights violations in North Korea. As for the media, North American media views North Korea as a dangerous, oppressive country ruled by a dictator that reflects those qualities. I'd say a lot of Americans view North Korean citizens as unfortunate and pitiful. Knowing this, I'm not sure how it will affect my work but I'll try my hardest to remain impartial and do more research to get a better understanding of who and what I'm researching.

The Korean peninsula has a rough and extensive history of war, colonialism and environmental disasters. North Korea was founded in 1945 after being liberated from Japan by the Soviet Union. It didn't last long though when the Soviet Union fell in 1991 and could no longer provide aid for North Korea it faced a struggle unlike any it's ever seen before. Beginning in 1995, North Korea experienced exceptional climatic changes, including violent hailstorms, followed by the worst floods in 100 years during the summer months, massive flooding again the following summer, and then 60 days of drought in the summer of 1998, followed by a tidal wave. The past winter was a mixed blessing: less cold and much less snow than usual, no doubt aiding the survival of the physically weakened population who were ruffling to replenish sorely diminished water reserves created by last summer's drought (Liem, 1999). In 1995, the summer floods were unprecedented in Korea's modern history. A half million people were made homeless by the torrential rains, 40% of the country's farmlands were ruined (less than 20% of North Korea's land is arable), and the agricultural infrastructure was destroyed--roads, dams, embankments, irrigation networks, terraces, and storage facilities. (Liem, 1999) Their volatile climate, along with the fall of the Soviet Union led to a deadly widespread famine also known as "The Arduous March". In the mid-to late 1990s, North Korea suffered from an extreme famine that was caused in part by rigid government policies and that resulted in the deaths of between one and two million people (Hathcock, 2020). The North Korean government refused to acknowledge that they were failing to provide and protect their people. To dispel rumors about their lessening rations and stretch what they had, the government introduced a new campaign slogan; "Let's eat only two meals a day". Even that wasn't enough to help their starving population. "The elderly are not eating--to keep their grandchildren alive." (*A Window on North Korea's Famine*, 98). As you can see, the situation was dire.

North Korea has a population of 25,831,360 million people (CIA World Factbook, 21). Much of North Korea's population lives in the rural plains and lowlands, only elites and families with high "*songbun*" (the class system based on how loyal ones' ancestors were to North Korea in the Korean War) are allowed to live, work, and go to school in the capital city Pyongyang (ProQuest, 2021). North Korea's government is a dictatorship and runs on the ideology of "Juche" or "national self-reliance" (CIA World Factbook, 21). North Korea is prone to natural disasters, hence the floods and droughts that brought the nation into the deadly famine in the 1990s. Though only about 20% of North Korea's land is arable, they continue to clear land for agricultural production and that deforestation makes their frequent floods even more severe (ProQuest, 2021). Their winters are long and frigid and often lead to population loss as the country struggles to provide adequate electricity for the more rural areas. Due to low electricity in North Korea and frequent power outages, trains move very slowly, and traveling from Hyesan (a rural town in the North that borders China) to Pyongyang (capital city in the west) could take days. Many rural inhabitants live in agricultural cooperatives. By 1958, all farms in North Korea were incorporated into more than three thousand cooperatives, each comprising about three hundred families on about 1,000 acres. Rural homes are generally built using local natural materials, such as thatch used for roofing (ProQuest, 2021). Today, the average farm size in North Korea is 466 ha (1,151 acres). Each farm is operated by 80 - 300 farm families. Cooperative farms account for 90% of cultivated land and agricultural production, and state farms for 10%. State farms are model farms run as industrial enterprises (Kim). The major North Korean crops include rice, maize, apples, potatoes, cabbages, sweet potatoes, beans, and soybeans (CIA World Factbook, 21).

Though it's mostly illegal for citizens to have their own businesses, the famine created a need for trade and capitalist practices. Many people opened up stalls selling things like wood salvaged from picture frames that families could use as kindling during the bitter winter months. They also sold other things like small bags of rice and bowls of naengmyeon (noodles served in an icy broth) but even these things were hard to come by. Families sold whatever they could to have another meal, whatever it may have been (Kim, 2015). Only families that lived along the North Korea/China border and had already established good relationships with border patrol and Chinese brokers were able to live semi-comfortably during the famine. Those families were able to import Chinese and South Korean goods like cell phones, South Korean dramas, and knock off designer purses and sell them to elites in Pyongyang (Lee, 2015). With those profits, they were able to buy and exchange items for food for their families.

The famine taught many North Koreans that it was necessary to be selfish for their own survival. Not being selfish meant that you struggled even more or died at the hands of hunger. Boasting about what you had and even helping your starving neighbors with a meal or two attracted the wrong attention. Crime heightened during the famine. People were willing to do anything to find food and feed themselves. Break-ins and robberies were common and there were even a number of cases reported of people stealing and eating pets (Lee, 2015). With older populations wasting away, orphans were becoming more and more common and most people ignored and wanted nothing to do with them. With no one to provide for them, orphaned children had to provide for themselves. These children were referred to as *kotjebi* and would roam the streets in search of food and shelter, they would form make-shift families with other *kotjebi*, while the younger children distracted market owners into a chase the older *kotjebi* would fill their pockets and shirts with as much as they could and run away. The *kotjebi* were a vulnerable population and there were even rumors of people stealing and eating *kotjebi* (Kim, 2015). Here in America, most people couldn't fathom eating grass or insects but during the famine, people were desperate and would eat blades of grass, insects, field mice, and seeds found in small personal gardens. It was very different from what their usual diet was before the famine. Meals usually consist of soup, fish, *kimchi* (spicy fermented vegetables, such as cabbage), and a number of spicy vegetables. *Kimchi* and rice are the traditional mainstays of the diet around which most other dishes revolve. Nearly the entire urban population is

mobilized for about two weeks twice a year to assist in transplanting and harvesting rice (ProQuest, 2021).

Due to the extreme malnutrition Koreans had to suffer during the famine, much of the population that grew up during that time was unable to completely heal many have been physically and mentally stunted permanently (Human Rights Watch, 2006). I don't think the North Korean population will ever recover from the millions of lives that were lost due to the famine. North Korea has an average fertility rate of 1.91 children born/woman (CIA World Factbook, 21). The average North Korean has only one sibling. The government provides incentives for couples to have large families. For example, medals or discounted trips to a seaside resort are awarded to families that have more than three children. The public distribution system provides more food to families with more children, but the family's class and social status also influence the amount of food received. Still, the birthrate has fallen dramatically since the mid-1990s.

Today, the average North Korean family has two children (ProQuest, 2021). Food insecurity still remains an issue though. The United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organization said 41.6 percent of people were not getting enough nutrition in 2014-16, up from 35.5 percent in 2005-07. The number of undernourished people in North Korea has increased and 18 million North Koreans are susceptible to food shortages (Shim, 2016). It is estimated that more than 30% of North Korean children have stunted development (Canadian Press, n.d.). Tomas Ojea Quintana told the General Assembly's human rights committee that 140,000 children are estimated to be suffering from undernutrition, including 30,000 who "face an increased risk of death." Quintana said that due to the governments failing economic and agricultural policies they are infringing human rights obligations. The climate, infertile land, natural disasters, and negative impact of sanctions have further contributed to food insecurity. "The country's economic resources are being diverted away from the essential needs of the people," he said. North Korea's *songbun* social class system has also led to discrimination in the food rationing system. "At the same time, the government has failed to put in place conditions where people can securely engage in trade and exchange in marketplaces without facing criminalization, extortion and other forms of abuse," he said. Nonetheless, he added, the vast majority of North Koreans "are now engaged in such market activity for their survival." (Lederer, n.d.).

In response to optimistic harvest predictions, in September of 2005, North Korea requested international aid groups to stop sending aid by the end of the year. Despite the optimistic harvest forecast, "a large proportion of the population will remain food insecure," the UN Food and Agriculture Organization said in a report (Canadian Press, 2005). A new food rationing system, which reportedly began in urban areas the organization said, allots about one kilogram of food per day for those doing heavy labor, but only a third of that for family members who stay at home. "This policy is likely to have critical implications for people not in the workplace," such as children, the elderly, and the unemployed, the report said (Canadian Press, 2005). Though aid seems like the most obvious choice for a country like North Korea that has the know-how but lacks the funds and supplies needed, I don't think it's a good solution because of the following reasons. The North Korean government is guilty of multiple human rights violations (Shweid, 2005). The biography *Escape From Camp 14* by Blaine Harden recounts Shin Donghyuk's story of living and escaping one of North Korea's gruesome political prison camps. There are an estimated 200,000 people being kept in these camps and guards are known to have beaten, starved, and even tortured prisoners, many being young children (Harden, 2012). International aid rarely reaches the starving and impoverished Korean families in rural areas who need it the most. The North Korean government has a history of being corrupt and using aid for the wrong things (Lee, 2015).

I don't think it's good to incentivize a leader that has abused aid and citizens, by giving him more aid. I don't think the North Korean people suffering at the hands of the regime should be punished more either. I think it's a very difficult situation because, on one hand, the people need help and on the other there are some serious issues with the way that the North Korean government is behaving. I think it would be wrong to address the issue of malnutrition and food insecurity within the country and not also address the human rights violations to which the government is subjecting its citizens. We cannot let stories like that of Shin Donghyun's fall onto unhearing ears. There are millions of children and adults still at risk of malnutrition and food insecurity and thousands suffering in terrible conditions in labor camps. The best solution is one that caters to both groups, not just one.

I propose a joint humanitarian movement in North Korea between Oxfam and Amnesty International. Amnesty International is an international organization devoted to ending human rights violations. They are currently working on detention and imprisonment, freedom of expression, international justice, and torture issues in North Korea (Amnesty International, 2018). This organization has been around for more than fifty years. The Amnesty International Report 2017/18 documents the state of the world's human rights in 159 countries and territories during 2017 (Amnesty International, 2018). Amnesty International investigates and exposes the facts, whenever and wherever abuses happen. They lobby governments and other powerful groups such as companies, making sure they keep their promises and respect international law. By telling the powerful stories of the people they work with, they mobilize millions of supporters around the world to campaign for change and to stand in defiance with activists on the frontline. They also support people to claim their rights through education and training (Amnesty International, 2021). They get facts and real evidence of issues and human rights violations. They then take it to the necessary authorities to press and influence them into doing the right thing whether that be changing laws or implementing new laws and practices. They do this through campaigning, petitions, letters, and protests. I think this is the perfect organization to help put a stop to the humanitarian injustices happening in North Korea. The North Korean government tries to keep up a good image, they don't like the rest of the world or their people seeing how bad they handle things. Therefore, I think awareness is a great way to bring light to their harmful actions and encourage them to change for the better. If more people knew about how terrible the North Korean government treats citizens and the government faced a lot of scrutiny from more countries I think they'd be pressured and do better. I don't think it will be easy. It will take a lot of action and accountability, but I do believe North Korea bettering the lives of all citizens is possible.

Oxfam, on the other hand, is committed to ending poverty, a problem of which they view as something solvable and rooted in injustice. Oxfam is a global organization working to end the injustice of poverty. They help people build better futures for themselves, hold the powerful accountable, and save lives in disasters. Oxfam provides grants and technical support to local organizations around the world. Together with these partners, they support long-term solutions that help poor communities grow nutritious food, access land, and clean water, and obtain decent work and fair wages. Oxfam works with local people to lead humanitarian responses that provide immediate relief during conflicts and disasters, and to build resilience against future threats. With more than 70 years of experience, working in more than 90 countries, Oxfam has a massive reach. "Each year we reach tens of millions of people directly." (Oxfam, 2021). As of Sept 2018, Oxfam works in North Korea, helping end poverty and provide access to clean water and nutritious food. I think their work is essential because a substantial part of food insecurity is poverty. They tackle the causes of poverty like food insecurity and inequality. They petition and advocate for change within the community and they also provide emergency aid when disaster strikes. I believe that if you can effectively address poverty within the community you can also effectively prevent hunger.

I believe these two organizations should work together to legalize the market and trading systems North Koreans were forced to turn to during the famine. Thus, providing a legal, sustainable, and long-term way for North Koreans to better provide and support for themselves and their families. I think these two organizations can help tackle the human rights and food insecurity issues facing North Korean citizens. I also believe that the world should better hold North Korea accountable for their multiple human rights offenses. The organizations could work to fund hydroponic growing for residential and commercial use as well. If the two organizations can also work together to help people farm their own food and create a more sturdy way for people to buy and trade their own wares it could lead to substantial improvement on North Korean lives and economy as well as offering a solution for food insecurity. Families would be able to support and feed themselves without completely relying on the classist government. Many Americans don't know about the famine that hit North Korea in the mid-1990s or about the human rights violations subjected to North Korean citizens. It's really unfortunate. I wish the situation was different and governments weren't so corrupt but this isn't an ideal world. With a little more awareness and a lot more accountability, North Koreans could enjoy their lives and not have to worry about another famine or the oppressive Kim dynasty. Maybe one day North and South Korea can reunify and reunite family members that haven't been seen in years, get over their differences and go back to before colonialism and imperialism ruined their beloved country, Joseon.

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