

North Korea's chronic food shortages exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic

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The North Korean regime has faced a severely deteriorated economic situation due to international sanctions, floods, and the Covid-19 pandemic. In January 2020, the country blocked cross-border trade and expelled humanitarian workers and foreign diplomats facing the danger of the Covid-19 pandemic. The closure of the country delayed the arrival of the pandemic. However, as early as March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that a Covid-19 epidemic was developing in North Korea [1] Its strategy of sealing its external borders in January 2020 prevented essential supplies from entering the country, leading to food shortages and a faltering economy.

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North Korea has always publicly committed itself to the fight against Covid-19. But their options are very limited due to lack of vaccines, poor health care, and limited access to basic necessities. Since the WHO announced declared an end to Covid-19 as a public health emergency on May 5 of this year, North Korean media coverage of corona-related issues has declined dramatically. At present, the country is in the process of transition to 'normal life with coronavirus'. A prominent feature of recent North Korean news has been reporting on agricultural policy. In addition, this year's abnormal weather conditions have further exacerbated the situation of food shortages in the country.

North Korea's conventional agricultural policy

In Korea, major industries were nationalized after independence movement against Japanese imperialism during the Second World War. But farmland was not nationalized. Farmland was distributed to small farmers and others, and individual ownership was allowed. Then, after the Korean War, a policy of cooperative farming was proposed. The agricultural cooperative was renamed the cooperative farm system in 1962.

Most of farming in North Korea was collectivized with cooperative farms. Later, the 'socialistic' collective farming system of the country led to the collapse of the rationing system. The Arduous March, a period of mass starvation together with a general economic crisis from 1994 to 1998, is a typical example. In response to the collapse of the rationing system, North Koreans have been buying grains in the market to make up for deficiency. In North Korea, the rationing system of

'socialism' and selling food at markets have coexisted for many years. So even when the rationing system did not work, the markets were there to provide food to the population.

Kim Jong-un implemented an incentive-added policy shortly after taking office as 'supreme leader' in 2013. Under the incentive-added policy, farmers were allowed to keep the a 30% surplus for themselves on their own if they met their quotas. This policy motivated farmers to work harder, and for a time, production increased. In recent years, however, the results of this incentive-added policy have not been reported.

Severe food shortages

Originally, the food supply in North Korea was barely controlled by coexistence of the food supply stations that delivered rations and the markets. The Covid-19 crisis, which began in 2020, has exacerbated food shortages. Since 2020, North Korea's trade with China, which accounts for more than 90% of its trade, has plummeted due to the Covid-19 crisis. Economic sanctions and flooding also exacerbated the Covid-19 crisis situation.

Data from the Bank of Korea (the central bank of South Korea) estimated that North Korea's economic growth after the Covid-19 crisis would be -4.5% in 2020 and -0.1% in 2021. The economic growth rate for 2019 was plus 0.4%. This indicates the magnitude of the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on North Korea's economy after 2020 [1].

North Korea held the Eighth Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) and launched the five-year national economic development plan (2021-2025) in January 2021. However, about six months later, Kim Jong-un said at the 3th Plenary Meeting of the 8th WPK Central Committee that the food supply situation was strained due to typhoon damage. In September 2021, grain sales stations were set up on a large scale in addition to the existing food supply stations to supply food to the people. At the 7th Session of the 14th Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) of September 2022, Kim Jong-un announced that an average annual economic growth rate of 7% was set in the five-year national economic development plan starting in 2021. And about a month later, the North Korean government banned buying and selling of grain on the open market. By transferring the functions of the traditional market to grain sales stations, the government sought to bring entire food supply under state control.

Unworkable plan from the beginning

However, the grain sales stations did not work as the North Korean government intended. The North Korean government initially set the price of rice at grain sales stations below the market price to induce people to buy it. And the purchase price of rice from farms was kept low. As a result, the farms were reluctant to contribute their products. The farms began to send poor quality products to grain sales stations and good quality products to the market. And the quality of rice sold at grain sales stations declined. Consumers stopped buying at the grain sales stations and started buying on the open markets again.

The 8th Congress of WPK was held in 2021 amid this turmoil of the domestic food supply system. And plenary meetings of the WPK Central Committee were held an unprecedented four times during the year. The 4th plenary meeting of the 8th WPK Central Committee which was held on December 27, 2021 presented 'a rural revolution in the new era' [2]. Despite this situation, grain sales stations continued to exist.

According to North Korean media reports, Premier Kim Tok-hun subsequently visited grain sales stations in various parts of the country at least four times in 2022 and three times in 2023. These reports indicate that grain sales stations are still in operation. However, reports indicating a change in conventional agricultural policy had been seen since 2022. Strange changes have been observed in North Korea's official media since August 2022. The term 'cooperative farm,' one of North Korea's agricultural forms, no longer appears. And when the term was used in the article, it was expressed as 'xx cooperative farm (at that time)'. The basic unit of the agricultural sector in North Korea had been the cooperative farm. There has been no official explanation from Pyongyang, but it is possible that state control over farms has been tightened.

Revived 'rural thought revolution'

The Session of Permanent Commission of SPA Standing Committee was held about four months after this change in North Korean media reports. The Session officially amended and supplemented the law on farms and the law on food administration. The law on farms defined farm as socialist agricultural enterprise according to a report in Rodong Sinmun, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the WPK on December 8, 2022. The term socialist agricultural enterprise was originally used in the course of the 'rural thought revolution'. This would mean closer government control from harvest to distribution.

These draconian measures further tightened the distribution of food in North Korea. It seemed almost impossible to achieve the 7% average annual growth target that Kim Jong-un had mentioned in September 2022. As if to demonstrate Kim Jong-un's frustration, a series of meetings followed. Amid the difficulties in achieving the targets of the five-year national economic development plan, the 6th Enlarged Plenary Meeting of the 8th WPK Central Committee, held at the end of the 2022 meeting, set numerical targets for each of the 12 industry sectors [3]. the 12 industry sectors to be achieved were as follows: (1) Grain (2) Electricity (3) Coal (4) Rolled steel (5) Colored metals (6) Nitrogen fertilizer (7) Cement (8) Timber (9) Textile (10) Marine products (11) Housing (12) Railway freight.

As of January 2023, grain production was the nation's top priority and food and energy issues were serious challenges. The 7th Plenary Meeting of the 8th WPK Central Committee was held on February 26 of the same year. The meeting called for reaffirming and thoroughly implementing the 'rural revolution in the new era' that had been put forward at the 4th Plenary Session of the 8th WPK Central Committee at the end of 2021. The plenary meeting was held two months after the previous plenary meeting, which was unprecedented. That is how serious the economic situation in North Korea was at the end of last year and the beginning of this year. The economic plan for the first half of this year was reported as "overachieved", but production figures are not clear [4].

'Supreme leader' continues to evade responsibility

Amid the seriousness of the North Korean economy, there have been changes in the reported activities of Kim Jong-un. In North Korea, where media coverage is extremely limited, the reported activities of the 'supreme leader' are a crucial element in analyzing the situation of the hyper-repressive and dictatorial regime. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the scope of Kim Jong-un's activities has narrowed and the number of field inspections has decreased. In recent years, 'field inspections' by Kim Jong-un have been replaced by inspections by Premier and other senior administrative officials. Kim Jong-un's field inspections were mainly conducted in the vicinity of the capital, with rare trips to the countryside.

On the other hand, inspections by senior administrative officials include visits to a wide range of farms, factories, and laboratories throughout the country. In the midst of difficult economic conditions, this is probably a desperate measure to pass the buck to someone else in the sectors related to improving of people's lives.

In recent years, there has also been a change in Kim Jong-un's behavior in important meetings. For the past decade, political bureau meetings have played a central role in North Korean politics. In recent years, however, Kim Jong-un has shown a tendency to stay away from the meetings, leaving the chairmanship of the meetings to the secretariat in charge of organizing the meetings.

If the economic situation does not improve in the future after the Covid-19 crisis, the responsibility will fall not on Kim Jong-un but on senior administrative officials and the secretariat of the Political Bureau. Needless to say, it is responsible for the crisis that has plunged the lives of the population in North Korea since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Ian Parker, in his book [5], described the state of the North Korean society before Covid-19 as 'Transition to Juche Capitalism [6]'. However, the present situation is quite different from that a few years ago when the book was published. The Covid-19 pandemic made a full-blown transition to capitalism of the country difficult to execute. Most of the country's people have limited access to vaccines with inadequate basic health care. They are restricted from information from the outside world. In August of this year, Pyongyang reported several times on abnormal weather [7]. The Korean peninsula has been hit by a heat wave in recent weeks, causing further damage to the North Korean economy. The current situation in North Korea in 2023 could be even more critical, as even the basic livelihood of the people is not guaranteed [8]. The threat of a humanitarian crisis still looms in the country.

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Footnotes

[1] Bank of Korea data cited in the Business Report issued by JETRO (Japan External Trade Organization) on August 3, 2022.

[2] 'Rural revolution in the new era' seems to be an evolution of Kim Il-sung's rural thesis of 1964. Kim Il-sung argued three revolution movements on agriculture in his 1964 work 'Theses on the Socialist Rural Question in Our Country'. The three revolutions mean ideological, cultural and technological advancements in the agricultural field.

[3] At the 6th Enlarged Plenary Meeting of 8th WPK Central Committee, the 12 industrial sectors to be achieved were unclear. However, on January 5, 2023, the details were revealed at a rally held in the city of Pyongyang. North Korean media reported on the 12 industrial sectors unveiled at the rally.

[4] 로동신문 (Rodong Sinmun), 4 July 2023, '조선민주주의인민공화국 경제 부문에서 첫 반년 계획 초과 달성 (KCNA reports key sectors of people's economy exceeded first-half plan)'. The only significant achievement in terms of percentage of target was non-ferrous metal production (146%).

[5] Ian Parker, Resistance Books, 20 July 2020, 'Socialisms: Revisiting revolutions betrayed,

mislaid and unmade' <https://resistancebooks.org/product/socialisms/>.

[6] Juche is the official ideology of the WPK. According to the official WPK description, Juche has a connotation of 'self-reliance', 'autonomy', and 'independence'.

[7] KCTV (Korean Central Television) reported on August 2 that Pyongyang recorded 37.8 degrees Celsius on August 1. KCTV also warned that 'the economy is taking a hit.' Rodong Sinmun, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the WPK, has reported on 'disastrous abnormal weather' about 30 times since January of this year. For example: Rodong Sinmun, 1 August 2023, 'Work to Cope with Disastrous Abnormal Weather Intensified'.

[8] At the time of writing, the strict immigration controls into North Korea that began at the end of January 2020, continue. On August 6, North Korean taekwondo athletes were passed through Beijing. It was the country's first delegation to travel abroad since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the 80 athletes sent still all wore masks as they crossed the border. Pyongyang has not fully lifted its quarantine measures. Foreign visitors are still not allowed to enter the country for the time being. It remains difficult to understand the current situation in North Korea from the outside.