

The Deadly Secrets of North Korea

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Le *Centre de réflexion sur l'action et les savoirs humanitaires* (CRASH) a été créé par Médecins sans frontières en 1999. Sa vocation : stimuler la réflexion critique sur les pratiques de l'association afin d'en améliorer l'action.

Le Crash réalise des études et analyses portant sur l'action de MSF dans son environnement immédiat. Elaborées à partir des cadres et de l'expérience de l'association, ces textes ne représentent pas la « ligne du parti » MSF, pas plus qu'ils ne cherchent à défendre une conception du « vrai humanitaire ». Leur ambition est au contraire de contribuer au débat sur les enjeux, contraintes, limites – et par conséquent dilemmes – de l'action humanitaire. Les critiques, remarques et suggestions sont plus que bienvenues, elles sont attendues.

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The Crash carries out in-depth studies and analyses of MSF's activities. This work is based on the framework and experience of the association. In no way, however, do these texts lay down the 'MSF party line', nor do they seek to defend the idea of 'true humanitarianism'. On the contrary, the objective is to contribute to debate on the challenges, constraints and limits –as well as the subsequent dilemmas- of humanitarian action. Any criticisms, remarks or suggestions are most welcome.

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I began to feel the food shortages in 1992 but severe starvation came after Kim Il Sung's death [1994]... I went to a warehouse to catch rats. I caught two rats but they were so thin with very little meat. One of the things that surprises me in China is that the rats are fat and big.

North Korean refugee in China

Staring across the frozen Tumen River into North Korea, I wonder how long it will be before we know the extent of the horror inflicted on the North Korean people by the Kim dynasty. Not a trace of smoke rises from the chimneys of the ghost town on the opposite bank despite the -25°C temperature. The only movement visible is a border guard patrolling the river bank; it is eerily silent. Etched in the snow are footprints leading down one riverbank and up the other, the mute testimony of a man's attempt to escape hunger and cold by crossing into China. Like thousands of his compatriots, he prefers to risk capture by North Korean and Chinese authorities than to watch his family starve, even though capture means imprisonment for himself and his family in North Korea's gulag. The recent launch of the 'strike hard' campaign by Chinese authorities has drastically reduced his chances of avoiding arrest and expulsion, and increased the penalties imposed on those who might be able to offer him shelter and food. Why, I wonder, do we express revulsion when reading of Stalin's gulag in the 1930s-60s; Mao's secret famine in the 1960s; or the killing fields of Pol Pot in the 1970s, yet show indifference at the plight of North Koreans today. We regret that our predecessors did not listen to the pleas of those who escaped the gulag, famine and killing fields; we chastise them for not believing that such horror could occur. But who is listening to the North Korean refugees in China now, in 2001?

North Korea, the last bastion of Stalinism on the planet, is in the grip of an economic crisis that has provoked famine in many parts of the country. Since the end of Soviet aid a decade ago, North Korea has faced a severe energy shortage and lack of hard currency that has ground industry and mechanised farming to a halt. Yet the regime maintains the budget for its 1.1 million-strong defence force and continues to develop missile technology and to sell missiles abroad. While grandiose monuments to the grotesque personality cult of the two Kims are floodlit throughout the night, apartment blocks in the showcase capital, Pyongyang, are without electricity, and rural areas have abandoned tractors and reverted to ploughing by hand or with livestock. Mercedes Benz of the ruling elite ply the streets of the capital, while ordinary citizens dig for roots and edible plants in the grass strips lining the five-lane boulevards. Factory workers have no work and receive no salary, but must still attend the daily political education sessions before going to the hills to gather 'alternative' foods. The public distribution system on which three-quarters of the population depend for food, only provides rations on important dates, like the birthdays of Kim Il Sung or Kim Jong-il, leaving people to fend for themselves. Extrapolations from testimonies of refugees in China collected by local organisations suggest that up to three and a half million people might have died from starvation and related illnesses between 1995-1998 alone. Reports of deaths continue to permeate the border, although with less frequency now: the refugees say that the weakest have already died – the elderly, the young, and the sick – leaving less mouths to feed from the meagre food available. Imagine the shock we will feel if we one day discover that there are not 23 million North Koreans as the government claims, but 15 million as some former government officials hiding in China suggest.

And all this occurs while North Korea receives one of the largest allocations of food aid in the world today – almost one million tonnes annually. This food, mostly channelled through the UN

World Food Programme, supposedly targets 8 million of the most vulnerable North Koreans: school children, pregnant and lactating women, the elderly and sick. Yet refugees in China say they have never received this food, despite being from the hard-hit northern provinces where WFP concentrates its aid. Some have heard of it, and others have seen it for sale on the black market, but none have ever tasted it, even children. What is happening to the food aid? No-one knows, not even the organisations in charge of distributing it, because the North Korean regime does not allow aid agencies to have the type of access necessary to ensure that aid is reaching those for whom it is intended. All aid is channelled through the government-run public distribution system, effectively strengthening one of the main instruments of control at the government's disposal. Aid agencies are permitted to 'monitor' the aid, but must announce monitoring visits one week in advance; no random visits to households, kindergartens or schools are allowed. Aid workers have little contact with ordinary North Koreans as a government translator accompanies them wherever they go, and questions or statements deemed 'controversial' are simply left untranslated.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) endeavoured to overcome these restrictions and create the minimum conditions necessary to work decently in North Korea between 1995 and 1998, but was unsuccessful. The teams realised that the government fabricated whatever they wanted aid workers to see: malnourished children in nurseries when more food aid was desired, and well-fed children when donors needed reassurance that food aid was doing good. Refugee testimonies corroborate this concern: some report having carried food from military storage facilities to nurseries before a UN visit, and others speak of being mobilised to dig up areas to exacerbate flood damage in preparation for a UN inspection. When driving through some towns MSF personnel saw filthy, malnourished children dressed in rags, scavenging for grains along the railway track. But when asked about these children and the possibility of assisting them, the authorities denied that they even existed. MSF began to understand that the North Korean government categorises its population according to perceived loyalty and usefulness to the regime, and those deemed 'hostile' or useless were expendable. In fact, in 1996, Kim Jong-il publicly declared that only 30% of the population needed to survive to reconstruct a victorious society. With no possibility of directing humanitarian assistance to those most in need, MSF withdrew from North Korea.

Although labelling their aid 'humanitarian', donor governments and aid organisations keep North Korea on life support for political, economic and diplomatic reasons. The US, Japan and South Korea are pursuing a 'soft-landing' policy aimed at avoiding an implosion of the regime which could trigger military action or refugee flows into China and South Korea. Food aid is aimed at opening dialogue and trust to pave the way for controlled reunification. Other governments, such as Australia hope to improve ties with the regime for future trade benefits, and most members of the European Union have re-established full diplomatic relations with the regime, thereby bestowing legitimacy on Kim Jong-il and his clique. While political and diplomatic engagement provides the only real means to try to influence the regime, using food aid to do so in a country beset by famine is reprehensible. The purpose of humanitarian aid is to save lives, but by channelling it through the regime responsible for perpetuating the suffering, it has become part of the system of oppression.