



In Focus

Drought in North Korea

North Korea is suffering from a severe drought, according to recent [press reports](#). This has raised [concerns](#) over potential food shortages in an already [malnourished](#) and [food insecure](#) country. Its state news agency—the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA)—has [said](#) that the country is experiencing its “worst drought in 100 years”, with 136,200 hectares of rice paddies out of 441,560 “parching up”. The United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation [contends](#) that the prolonged dry spell from April 2015 to early June could potentially affect crop yields, and that more rain is needed to prevent a “significant decrease” in 2015 cereal production. North Korea has a history of [food shortages and famine](#); for example, in the mid-1990s, around a million people died of starvation because of famine. Since then, the country has relied on [food aid](#) due to continuing [food shortages](#) and, [according to the Financial Times](#), its “agriculture remains in a fragile state, heavily influenced by weather conditions and worsened by the regime’s poor economic management”.

Background

North Korea’s agricultural difficulties come amid continuing tensions with South Korea, the United States and other Western powers over its [nuclear weapons and missile programmes](#). The country conducted [nuclear tests](#) in 2006, 2009 and 2013, and in April 2015 it was [reported](#) that North Korea restarted its reactor in the uranium enrichment facility at Yonbyon. This has led to the United Nations implementing a number of sanctions against the country, including [blocking financial transactions](#) that may support its nuclear and missile programmes. Robert E. McCoy, a retired US Air Force North Korea analyst, suggests that in the past North Korea has [deliberately sought to increase tensions](#) when it wants or needs something, such as food. He reasons that the country then makes promises to stop its nuclear weapons and missile programmes in return for aid, and then reneges on these promises.

The drought also comes at a time when there are reports of considerable tensions within the North Korean regime, and at a time when President Kim Jong-un is [seeking to establish his authority](#). In April 2015, Defence Minister Hyon Yong Chol was reportedly [executed](#) with an anti-aircraft gun for [allegedly](#) disobeying orders, and this followed allegations that Kim Jong-un’s uncle and top adviser, Jang Song Thaek, was executed in December 2013 for plotting a coup. The *Financial Times* [states](#) that, within two years of taking office, Kim Jong-un has [replaced](#) half of the country’s 218 top officials, and that 41 officials were allegedly executed in 2014. The paper reasons that “the apparent bloodshed suggests to some observers that Mr Kim is struggling to maintain the loyalty of key lieutenants”. However, Andrei Lankov, professor of Korean Studies at Kookmin University, [argues](#) that the purges are not necessarily a reflection of instability, rather that Kim Jong-un could be attempting to consolidate his position.

Famine and Food Insecurity

In the mid-1990s, North Korea suffered a [major famine](#), resulting in the country [requesting](#) emergency assistance from Japan and South Korea. According to a [report](#) by NGO the US Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, an estimated one million people were killed in the famine, about five percent of the population. While the North Korean Government blamed the famine on natural disasters—[such as the summer 1995 floods](#)—the NGO contends that the “decline in food production and the deterioration of the public distribution system (PDS) were visible years before the floods of 1995”. They [suggest](#) the North Korean Government could have [avoided](#) the famine, but instead proceeded to deny humanitarian aid to the most affected regions and curtailed commercial imports of food. More recently, Andrei Lankov [wrote](#) that, in 2012, agriculture was partially switched to a [household-based model](#), where households were encouraged to register as small production teams, with the group receiving 30 percent ([likely rising to 60 percent in 2015](#)) of their produce, rather than a fixed daily grain ration. Lankov contends that these reforms have been successful, resulting in bumper harvests in 2013 and 2014, although the effectiveness of these reforms have been [contested](#) by other commentators.

According to the United Nations report, [DPR Korea 2015: Needs and Priorities](#), out of a population of 24.62 million, 18 million people in North Korea are food insecure and do not have an adequately diverse diet. Around 1.8 million children, pregnant and lactating women, and elderly people are in need of specialised nutritious foods to combat malnutrition. Moreover, 27.9 percent of children under five are ‘chronically’ malnourished, while four percent of under-fives are ‘acutely’ malnourished. The [DPR Korea 2015 report](#) also notes that 70 percent of the population rely on the state-run PDS for food. The report states that the PDS is “vulnerable to fluctuations in production”, and that in both 2014 and 2013 the Government’s target ration of 573 grams per person per day was not met. It also states that food production is further hampered by a lack of agricultural inputs such as seeds and fertilisers. Since 1995, the World Food Programme has been providing [food aid](#) to North Korea, and in April 2015 the UN [called](#) for \$111 million to fund humanitarian operations in the country.

A New Famine?

According to [Stephen Evans](#), the BBC’s Korea correspondent, it is significant that state media has reported North Korea’s food difficulties openly, as it “indicates the situation is serious, and it may well indicate that North Korea wants outside help”. However, despite [fears of a new famine](#), some commentators have urged caution. Marcus Noland [argues](#) that even in the event of insufficient rain, a poor harvest and price rises, North Korea will not experience a famine on the scale of the 1990s. This is because the “economy is simply more flexible now than it was during the famine period”. He [notes](#) that farmers are now allowed to trade grain, which should result in less hoarding. He also [suggests](#) that the internal market is now better at distributing supplies, and that there is a “greater capacity for imports”. Finally, Noland [observes](#) that it is while risks to population remain, “it would take mismanagement of biblical proportions to turn the current situation into a famine”.

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