

A Bowl of Vegetable Porridge

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
Monday, 19 March 2012 17:53

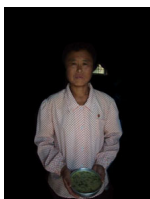


Jang Young Suk, 38, stood in her kitchen surrounded by a small crowd of strangers: me and the other Tzu Chi volunteers, along with a translator and North Korean government officials. She was waiting for me to photograph her, holding in her hands a bowl of corn and vegetable porridge that she had prepared as a lunch for her husband, a laborer. As she faced us, we asked through the translator if she had had her lunch. She looked uncomfortable as she brushed the question away with a vague response.

A North Korean government official that was accompanying us attributed Jang's hesitant, halting response to the fact that she had never before met a foreigner. But the dejected look in her eyes and the corners of her mouth, fissured from apparent severe vitamin deficiencies, told another story. It wasn't too difficult for me to surmise whether she had had lunch.

Sadly, Jang's situation is not an isolated case. What she and her family are going through is happening in other families in her neighborhood and throughout the entire region. Food shortages have been severe and widespread.

North Korea



The Korean Peninsula extends thumb-like out of northeastern China, southward into the Pacific Ocean toward Japan. In satellite photos taken at night, the southern half of the peninsula is brightly lit. The northern half, in stark contrast, is shrouded in darkness; no electric lights betray the cities or the people living there. This demarcation on the peninsula is a very visual way to tell apart the two nations that share this area: North Korea and South Korea.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or North Korea for short, is short on energy, necessitating the rationing of electricity. This results in the shroud of darkness in night-time satellite photos.

North Korea occupies 120,500 square kilometers, or about 54 percent, of the peninsula. It is one of the few remaining socialist nations in the world. In North Korea, all other concerns take a backseat to national interest and pride. Therefore, despite prolonged food shortages, the nation does not easily publicize its difficulties or ask for help from the outside world. But recently, North Korea invited Tzu Chi to visit.

Agricultural challenges

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Almost all farming in North Korea is done on collective farms. All harvests go to the government for centralized distribution. According to some data, harvests in North Korea even at the best of times can only meet 60 or 70 percent of domestic needs.

However, the country has not seen the best of times. Even ideal planting conditions have been disrupted by one natural disaster after another. Abnormal weather patterns have caused extreme cold, extreme flooding, extreme droughts, and typhoons. Each weather disaster seems to come at the heels of the one before it, making adequate food production next to impossible. In fact, the amount of arable land under production has dwindled from 24 percent to 15, making the nation even more reliant on food from abroad. All this has been happening despite the nation's earnest efforts to become self-sufficient.

The amount of food that the nation's laborers receive each day is a dramatic indication of the food shortage in North Korea. This year, between February and mid-April, the government rationed 400 grams of food per day to each laborer. That was only nine tenths of a pound. That number went down to 350 grams in late April, 190 in May, and 150 in June, not even half of the initial amount. The food situation in the country is dire indeed.



In North Korea, barley and wheat grow in fall and winter. Wheat grows best in low temperatures. In addition, wintertime snow protects wheat roots from freezing and provides the plants with needed moisture when the snow melts.

Although the winter of 2010-2011 was bitterly cold, it received little snow to shield the crops from the chill. The severe temperatures froze the top 80 centimeters (32 in) of soil, killing much of the spring crops.

Corn and rice, the main summer crops, didn't fare much better. Frequent rains in June and July, coupled with lower-than-normal temperatures and insufficient sunlight, stunted the crops. As if that was not bad enough, Typhoon Muifa brought serious flooding in early August. All of this led to a miserable harvest this September.

Two poor harvests in a row were like a one-two punch to a nation already struggling to feed its people. The unfavorable weather patterns hammered the nation deep into a production deficit.

North Korea had planned to import 325,000 metric tons of food to meet domestic demands for this year, but widespread export restrictions and price spikes (barley up 60-70 percent, corn 40 percent) on the international markets lowered the amount North Korea could import to a mere 200,000 tons.

From January to May 2011, North Korea managed to buy just 120,000 metric tons, not nearly enough to get the nation through the time when domestic barley and wheat in the field would be ripening. As a result, in June North Korea's Committee for the Promotion of International Trade

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made an urgent appeal to Tzu Chi for assistance.

A history of helping

This wasn't the first time that Tzu Chi had helped the suffering in North Korea. After a series of natural disasters that started in late 1994, the foundation delivered aid to the nation nine times between 1997 and 2009.

Tzu Chi began by donating winter clothing and daily necessities in December 1997. Between March and July 1999, the foundation donated batches of chemical fertilizer, each donation timed to fit the growth stage of the crops at the time. Harvests consequently spiked in the area. Following this, the foundation provided rice for more than 40,000 families for two months.

In all that time, all international aid organizations, including Tzu Chi, were only able to hold simple ceremonies at North Korean seaports to turn over aid shipments to the government. In response to the sincerity and respect that the foundation had previously displayed, the government made an exception and finally allowed its volunteers to personally distribute supplies to aid recipients in November 1999.

The struggle for survival



This year, the North Korean government's request was very specific. They asked Tzu Chi to provide 15 kilograms (33 lb) of food per month for each of 440,000 people who were under 16, over 60, or pregnant, and living in Koksan and Rinsan Counties in North Hwanghae Province and Pyongwon and Taedong Counties in South Pyongan Province. Furthermore, the agency asked for a two-month supply.

In response to the latest request, Tzu Chi dispatched a team of volunteers to North Korea to assess the situation. Accompanied by government officials, the team, of which I was a part, visited those four counties from August 22 to 26, 2011.

At the village of Pyongam in Koksan County, we saw lustrously golden fields of nodding rice plants swaying back and forth in the wind, a picture of calm, abundance, and prosperity. But alas, it was not all what it seemed.

When the volunteers stepped into a rice paddy to get a closer look, they saw that most of the panicles were gloriously golden on the outside but sadly hollow on the inside. A local official explained that rice blast, a fungal disease, had wreaked havoc on the crops and that Typhoon Muifa in early August had made matters even worse. Twice hexed, the crops were expected to yield between 50 to 70 percent less than they had last year.

An earlier typhoon dropped so much rain that the 130 hectares (321 acres) of the Chong-song

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Cooperative Farm in Koksan was submerged for two months after a landslide dammed the outflow of water from the land. The fields were not drained “because there had been no heavy machinery” available to do the job, according to one government official. Official estimates put it at another month before the fields would dry out.

People tried to salvage what they could from the flooded fields. Jung Tae Ei, 46, rowed a little boat out into the fields and harvested corn from under the water. The corn was not quite ripe and would not have been harvested under normal circumstances, but these were not normal circumstances.

He spread the corn kernels he had collected out on a plastic sheet to dry, intending to save them for food. Though sun-dried, the once-soaked corn kernels emitted a sour smell. “Is this still edible?” someone asked. “Yes,” the local official responded firmly and without any hesitation.

Such reduced harvests bode badly for the recipients of government food rations, and such uncooperative weather just made the journey back to a more normal food supply that much more daunting and disheartening. For example, it was in Koksan that we met 67-year-old Song Chun Bo and his family. The three of them together ate one bowl of mixed grains.

Malnourished children



At a kindergarten we visited, a caretaker held a child as she talked to us. She said that the school used to provide free lunches every day to its students as a matter of national policy. However, as a result of food shortages, the free meals had been discontinued long before. On this day, three students brought their own home-made lunches to school while the other 14 were picked up by their parents and taken home for the midday meal.

If the meals in the homes of Jang Young Suk and Song Chun Bok were any indication, the meals these kindergarteners were receiving would be pretty meager. It is no surprise, therefore, that childhood malnutrition is prevalent in the country. In fact, the child that the caretaker was holding had a head that was disproportionately large on the top of a skinny body—a sign of malnutrition.

Undernourished children suffer from more than just abnormal appearance. We saw some of those children in the pediatric wards of two local hospitals. They had been hospitalized for illnesses triggered by malnutrition. Without adequate nutrients or calories, their bodies were too weak to mount a defense against disease. For example, an immune system weakened by malnutrition makes a child prone to diarrhea, skin disorders, or hair loss. A simple cold, easy for a well-nourished child to fight, can deteriorate and lead to pneumonia. Some children even die.

Doctors at the hospitals pointed out that they couldn't do much for the children because of the lack of medicines, nutritional supplements, and dairy products. The only tool at their disposal

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was a 20 percent IV glucose solution.

The same everywhere

In three days, we traversed four counties in two provinces and visited 22 families. The situation was almost always identical from one family to the next. Though each family worked very hard, they still suffered poor harvests, food shortages, and malnutrition, which severely lowered their quality of life and took a toll on their health.

In Rinsan County, we visited Han Myeong Geum, 29, a kindergarten teacher on maternity leave. Han and her husband, Song Gang Nam, had just welcomed a baby girl into their lives, and the first-time mother was full of joy. Song's mother also lived with them. The four of them were content to subsist on a total of 400 grams (less than a pound) of food rations each day, supplemented by a small quantity of corn and potatoes from their garden.

Their home was small, bare, a bit old, but clean and neat. Two portraits, one of Kim Il-sung, the Eternal President of the nation, and the other of Kim Jong-il, the current leader, were securely and conspicuously hung on the most prominent wall of the house, looking down on Han's baby.

The sun shone brightly through the window, warmed the room, and made the Chinese characters on a wall-mounted tablet easy to discern: "A harmonious home makes all endeavors successful."

Han was content with her lot and her home, even if they were slightly short on material goods. A content family member helps cultivate harmony in the home. We at Tzu Chi wish her family all success in their endeavors, and we will do whatever we can to help shore up the harmony in her home and in many other homes.

We shall return, and soon, to do what we can for the needy people here.

Text and photos by Hsiao Yiu-hwa
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