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**Research Report**

## International humanitarian aid to North Korea: Progress, results, and controversy

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# Dialogue on the North Korean Economy

December 2023



International Humanitarian Aid to North Korea:  
Progress, Results, and Controversy

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Hazel Smith

## *Dialogue on the North Korean Economy*

### **International Humanitarian Aid to North Korea: Progress, Results, and Controversy**

Since the first provision of international food assistance in the mid-1990s, humanitarian aid to North Korea has been a constant source of scrutiny and debate. It was not only a major contributing factor to ending the devastating famine in the mid-to-late 1990s, but it has continuously helped with improving both the food situation and public welfare. Above all, humanitarian aid has become a vital channel that connects North Korea with the global community, and the increased contact that providing humanitarian aid has enabled has led many to believe that cooperating with the once hostile and isolated society may not be entirely impossible.

Despite the advantages, however, there has been never-ending controversy surrounding the humanitarian aid to North Korea aid. Some of the main issues include whether the aid is being misappropriated to those in power and the military, whether the aid has had an actual impact on vulnerable groups, why the regime accepts help but continues to provoke, and whether, under the circumstances, humanitarian aid even needs to continue. Of course, we do not have a definite answer to any of these questions as of yet. But, it has been over 20 years since North Korea received humanitarian aid and it has yielded vast amounts of information and data. Accordingly, we would like to examine this from diverse aspects with one of the world's leading scholars in the field, Professor Hazel Smith.

#### Dialogue on the North Korea Economy

##### Interviewer

Lee, Suk  
(Senior Fellow at KDI)

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##### Interviewee

Hazel Smith  
(Advisory Fellow at KDI)

KDI's *Dialogue on the North Korean Economy* is a monthly series that features interviews with the foremost experts on North Korea. The first publication was released in March 2021 in connection with the *KDI Review of the North Korean Economy*. Each edition tackles a different facet of the North Korean economy, and offers valuable insight into prominent issues and aspects.

The views and opinions expressed by the contributors are their own, and do not reflect the official views and position of KDI.

- KDI Review of the North Korean Economy Board of Editors

## 1. Overview

Lee, Suk Q.

How and when did the international humanitarian aid to North Korea begin? Who led the initiative and why?

Hazel Smith

I think probably, before we get into the detail of what happened, when and why, we need to first specify what we mean by humanitarian assistance. An important distinction, for example, needs to be made between what constitutes humanitarian assistance and what constitutes development assistance.

Humanitarian assistance and development assistance are very different from each other and it's important to understand the difference otherwise we can have quite unrealistic expectations about what either of these types of assistance can be expected to achieve.

Humanitarian assistance, which we will be talking about today, is emergency aid, designed to save lives. It is only designed to provide short term help. It is not designed to provide support for economic development and/or



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designed to rectify the faults that brought about the need for humanitarian or emergency aid in the first place.

Development assistance by contrast is comprised of medium to long term economic assistance, designed to support economic growth and improve the social welfare of a given society.

Humanitarian aid, because it is designed to save lives in emergencies, is unconditional. Development assistance is different in that it is conditional, economically and/or politically, in that recipient governments must adhere to donor conditions, normally negotiated between donor and recipient government.

Humanitarian assistance is given when governments fail, in that they cannot guarantee basic human survival without outside help. This can happen in natural disasters, in war and conflict and where there is severe economic distress. Development assistance by contrast is allocated to functioning, effective governments with which donors work in partnership, on the basis of medium to long term shared economic aims and objectives.

#### So what does all this mean for understanding humanitarian assistance to the DPRK?

Almost all international assistance to the DPRK has been humanitarian assistance. North Korea has never received substantive development assistance unlike other underdeveloped, countries including the much wealthier India and China. China even today, although both a Communist country and an important global economic player, continues to receive international development assistance.

It is true that some individual farms received technical assistance from the IFAD – that is the International Fund for Agricultural Development – and bilateral agencies like the SDC and from some NGOs, but the country has never received development assistance designed to support national reconstruction of the agricultural sector, or any other strategic, medium or long-term development aid. Most donors tried to incorporate elements of ongoing technical assistance into the larger humanitarian programmes – for example in offering training and technical advice and this is normal practice everywhere in the world where a humanitarian emergency becomes protracted, for example in Afghanistan, but these efforts to provide technical support were ancillary to the main humanitarian programmes that mostly delivered commodities of one sort or another – mostly food but also various inputs like medicines, agricultural equipment, children's winter clothing.

International aid to North Korea, being humanitarian in nature, was designed to save lives and alleviate suffering in the short term. It was never designed to bring economic growth, either across the economy more broadly, or even in the food sector, which has been the recipient of most humanitarian assistance.

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What this means is that, in terms of assessing efficacy of assistance to the DPRK, the appropriate and relevant judgment then is not whether or how much international assistance improved the medium- and long-term well-being of the population, because humanitarian assistance is not designed to do that. The appropriate question is instead – did international humanitarian assistance to the DPRK save lives in the short term?

We can discuss the detail, but in summary, we have a lot of evidence that international humanitarian assistance to the DPRK indeed saved many lives, especially in the late 1990s and early 2000s when the country was emerging from famine and when international humanitarian assistance was large enough to make a difference.

There is a big contrast between those days and more recent years. Since 2021 international humanitarian aid to the DPRK has been negligible – even as our current knowledge of the DPRK indicates the existence of a severe national food emergency and we have credible, unrefuted reports of families starving to death, this year, in 2023.

To go back to the question then of when, how and why international humanitarian aid to North Korea began, the first part of the question is the easiest to answer. The DPRK started to receive large-scale international humanitarian assistance in the second half of the 1990s. To understand why it received such assistance, we have to go back in history a little bit.

After the end of the Korean War in 1953, the DPRK had pursued a policy of industrialization, but it also redeveloped domestic agriculture, with the aim of being self-sufficient in food production.

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on hidden subsidies from abroad – mainly in the form of cheap imports and technology transfers. Until the end of the Cold War in Europe in 1989/1990, North Korea received aid from allies within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence, including Eastern Europe, as well as from the Soviet Union itself. Some of this we might classify today as development assistance – that is economic assistance to the government, although the government never acknowledged how dependent it was on help from abroad. Even with outside help though, the North Korean government did not achieve a stable food supply, to the extent that famine conditions emerged in the 1950s and again in the 1970s.

In the 1970s, well before it joined the United Nations as a full member in 1991, the DPRK started to engage with UN development agencies; it joined the UN World Health Organisation in 1973, the FAO in 1977 and the UNDP in 1979. UNDP even established a residential presence in the DPRK in 1980 – although its international officers did not become

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*In the 1980s and early 1990s, the DPRK very much saw itself as a global provider of international humanitarian assistance.*

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resident in North Korea until the 1990s

In this period, UNDP gave some technical advice on trade and UNICEF conducted a nutrition survey in Kangwon, in 1988, led by an Australian nutritionist, but none of these contacts resulted in agreements to provide long term development assistance. Nor did the DPRK ask for humanitarian assistance from the UN agencies at this stage.

In fact, in the 1980s and early 1990s, the DPRK very much saw itself as a global provider of international humanitarian assistance; and it had some good reasons for this self-perception. During the Cold War era, the DPRK provided military and development assistance abroad, the latter in the form of technical support for agriculture and in the construction sector in a number of African countries. Between 1959 and 1961, during the Chinese famine, there is some evidence that Chinese citizens came over the border to access food from North Korea. The DPRK also trained doctors from abroad for instance from Mongolia, in Pyongyang. The DPRK government was extremely proud of its activities abroad which it saw as evidence that North Korea should be understood as an important global player.

What changed of course was the end of the Cold War when the Soviet Union and East and Central European states abandoned Communism – and China, although it remained politically Communist, was transforming itself economically into a market-oriented state.



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*With no significant alternative trade and aid partners, North Korea's economy, including its food economy, deteriorated rapidly in the early 1990s.*

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Quite abruptly, from 1990, the DPRK's trading partners, including China, started to demand global market prices for their exports to North Korea, refused to pay inflated prices for North Korea's exports and no longer were prepared to give free or highly concessional capital and technology to North Korea. With no significant alternative trade and aid partners, North Korea's economy, including its food economy, deteriorated rapidly in the early 1990s. It is no exaggeration to say that, in this period, the economy collapsed. Food production fell as the DPRK could no longer import essential agro-industrial inputs, especially oil, which it does not produce itself.

By about 1994, there was evidence seeping out of the country, often via South Korean NGOs, that starvation was widespread in North Korea. The North Korean government did not then and have never since admitted that their economic policy of self-reliance had failed but instead blamed its problems on 'natural disasters'. It did though start to approach the UN agencies with which it had already developed some contacts to ask for help.

We should probably pause a little bit and examine

the issue of 'natural disasters' which the government has continued to blame for its inability to achieve grain production targets. For the DPRK government, the term 'natural disasters' is a synonym for bad weather conditions – not, for example, extreme events like earthquakes or volcanic eruptions. And North Korea has been subject to bad weather, even extreme weather conditions. But so of course has the agricultural sector in every country on the planet. What makes the difference between an efficient and productive agricultural sector and one that is not, like North Korea's, is not primarily the weather however – but the capacity of an agricultural sector to be resilient to extreme weather events.

Hugely diverse agricultural economies, from China to the USA, South Korea to Ukraine, all suffer extreme weather events and in the case of Ukraine of course their farmers also face bombs and missiles, but these countries continue to be agriculturally productive. One difference is that these countries have efficient organisation in their agricultural sectors, appropriate technology, and sufficient agro-industrial inputs which they obtain from abroad or produce themselves. At its core, North Korea's agricultural fragility reflects a fragile, unproductive national economy. One consequence is that when domestic food production fails there is no other sector of the economy, like say a flourishing

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The food crisis of the mid 1990s then was not primarily a product of natural disasters but at root a product of chronic economic problems, made acute by the rapid end of subsidized trade from former Communist allies. Similarly, today, domestic economic mismanagement is compounded by trade cutoffs, this time because of the UN sanctions of 2016 and 2017, which, as well as export bans, prohibit North Korea from importing almost all essential inputs for the food economy. Similarly, also to the 1990s, today the government not only refuses to admit any responsibility for economic failure but hardly acknowledges that there is in fact an economic crisis. And this is not a minor economic disturbance and nor does it look likely to be short-lived. Once again, now in 2023, we see North Korean children facing starvation.

international trade or services sector that can provide export earnings to pay for food imports to fill food gaps. This is especially so since the UN sanctions of 2017 banned over 90 percent of North Korea's exports

As to the beginnings of international humanitarian assistance to North Korea, we can trace its immediate origins to 1995 and an appeal by the North Korean government for help to the United Nations – on the grounds of unprecedented natural disasters in the form of widespread severe flooding – and



a first visit by a UN Disaster Assessment and Coordination – or UNDAC – team to the DPRK. The UNDAC team included representatives of the WFP, WHO, UNICEF, and the FAO. This first visit was followed by visits from individual agencies, like UNICEF and WFP, whose representatives started to report evidence of severe malnutrition, in both the child and adult population, throughout the country, in farming families as well as among urban residents. By January 1996 UNICEF had a full-time international officer based in the DPRK, traveling all over the country, who reported seeing severely malnourished children wherever he went. Reports from UN humanitarian agencies as well as from South Korean and Korean-American NGOs, some operating in China in the Korean speaking region of Yanbian that borders North Korea, played a big part in raising international awareness of what we now know was a huge food crisis in which probably up to half a million people died, directly or indirectly because of food shortages.

From this period, we see the start of a huge international operation to provide food assistance to North Koreans. One of the first major donors of food aid was the Japanese government which provided a massive half a million tonnes of food aid directly to the North Korean government in 1995/1996, enough food to feed 4 million Koreans for one year! This was quite astonishing given the historic enmity between the two governments. Other old enemies like the United States also gave generously – in 1998, the first year that the UN started to systematically record aid to North Korea – and in 1999, the USA was the largest international donor of aid to North Korea.

What has been the main form of aid for the past 25 years, and can you give a rough estimate of the

scale? What distinguishes the aid to North Korea, specifically the form and scale, from the aid given to other underdeveloped countries in Asia or Africa?

First, it is very difficult to provide exact figures for either global humanitarian assistance provided to the DPRK or to specific sectors of aid – and that is the same in all humanitarian operations everywhere in the world, for different reasons. Humanitarian aid is of its nature emergency aid, designed to be distributed quickly to save lives, and the priority is not, at least initially, to set up sophisticated data capture systems. Of course aid organisations, like the UN agencies and bilateral agencies like the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and NGOs have record keeping procedures, even if in emergencies they are not quite as fine-tuned as in longer term development activities.

In the case of the DPRK operation, as the UN agencies became more established in the DPRK after 1995, with the main UN agencies becoming resident, data collection became a major part of all

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humanitarian operations, so that knowledge outputs became more sophisticated and more accurate. Data coordination became also routinised as the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UNOCHA), as in all humanitarian operations throughout the world, began to collect and organise data systematically. So that's where we get most of our data from.

One point is that not all NGO aid, especially the early contributions for example from Korean-American organisations, would have been fully recorded via the UN system as OCHA only started including NGO contributions in its reporting in 1998. All in all, though, that really doesn't make much difference to our knowledge of aggregate humanitarian aid patterns. That's because NGO aid to North Korea was always much smaller in volume than the multilateral assistance provided by what very quickly became a huge United Nations humanitarian operation.

On the form of aid, we know that most humanitarian assistance to the DPRK came in the form of bulk food aid – for example rice, corn, or wheat. Of the \$800 million dollars' worth of UN humanitarian assistance donated to North Korea in the immediate post-famine years – between 1998 to 2004 – a massive \$760 million went on food aid, leaving a total of around \$40 million for everything else, including agriculture, health, education, water and sanitation.

The UN annual appeals for humanitarian assistance to North Korea were consistently underfunded in the health, education and water/ sanitation sectors – but had much less trouble meeting targets for food assistance. This was because donor governments were on the whole very wary of giving assistance that could in any way be understood as assisting the government, directly or indirectly. Some donors

argued that if they provided non-food aid then this would mean the North Korean government would have more money to spend on its nuclear and missile development programmes. Their view was that the provision of food aid minimised these risks.

#### What about the overall scale of humanitarian assistance to North Korea over the last 25 years?

From the UNOCHA records, we can see quite clear patterns in humanitarian assistance to the DPRK across the years.

In retrospect, we now know that international humanitarian assistance to the DPRK was a significant phenomenon only between 1998 and 2004, the peak years being from 1998 to 2001. We also now know, over 20 years later, that 2001 was the high point of humanitarian assistance to North Korea.

Compared to the UN agencies transfer of about \$800 million worth of humanitarian assistance to North Korea between 1998 and 2004 – NGO (including the Red Cross) aid amounted to about \$110 million. Governments like Switzerland, and also the EU, gave humanitarian assistance separately from their contributions to the UN agencies – at around another \$100 million. So altogether, between 1998 and 2004, North Korea received at least a billion dollars' worth of humanitarian assistance – that would amount to about 1.7 billion dollars at today's prices.

In 1998, the first of the peak years of aid, North Korea received a very large \$335 million worth of humanitarian assistance. In 1999 and 2000 the amount of aid remained high in comparative or global terms, even though the totals decreased a little – to about \$235 million in 1999 and \$224 million

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in 2000. In 2001, total humanitarian assistance was again very large, reaching around \$375 million.

After 2001 the volumes of humanitarian assistance gradually decreased, until by 2005 and 2006 annual aid totals were about \$50 million. Between 2006 and 2013 the DPRK received sometimes higher and sometimes lower amounts of aid every year, depending on political relations with the United States. But, since then, the volume of humanitarian assistance to the DPRK has been negligible, at around \$40 million a year up until 2020, worth about one and a half dollars per North Korean on average. In 2021 and 2022, humanitarian assistance dipped to almost nothing – to a total of around \$14 million in 2021 and about two million dollars in 2022.

So, even before the expanded UN sanctions of 2016 and 2017 and the DPRK closure of its borders in 2020 made it difficult for international humanitarian organisations to deliver assistance, the volume of international aid to the DPRK was already very low. In 2023 just over one million dollars has been promised, by the Swiss government.

These tiny amounts don't touch the surface of need; in 2018 for example UNICEF reported that 140,000 children under five were so seriously undernourished that they needed medical treatment as well as food if they were to survive. That figure will be much more now given five years of continuing failed harvests and economic decline.

To come to the final part of the question – what distinguishes the aid to North Korea over the past 25 years, specifically the form and scale, from the aid given to other underdeveloped countries in Asia or Africa?

To answer this, we need first to remind ourselves that North Korea was never allocated aid because it was underdeveloped economically.

Instead, North Korea received humanitarian assistance because it was judged to be facing a food emergency.

Now, comparing humanitarian aid programmes is difficult as each international humanitarian emergency is different, lasts for different periods of time, requires different remedies, has different consequences and the primary causes can be very diverse – including conflict and war, government mismanagement, earthquake damage, unexpected drought, and flooding – or a combination of all of these.

Also, we probably need to remind ourselves that humanitarian emergencies have not been confined to the poorest countries in the world or, geographically, to Africa and Asia. In 1995, for instance, the largest recipient of humanitarian assistance in the world was Bosnia, in Central Europe. In 2023 so far Ukraine is the second largest recipient of humanitarian aid in

the world, after Ethiopia and before Yemen in third place.

But, even given these caveats, we can still make useful, knowledge based comparative observations about North Korea as a recipient of international humanitarian assistance.

We know, for example that in 2000, North Korea was the largest recipient of international humanitarian assistance in the world at around \$224 million – out of a total global humanitarian assistance of around two billion dollars in that year.

We also know that even though by 2021 humanitarian assistance global totals had jumped to over 30 billion dollars, since 2019, North Koreans have received next to nothing.

This compares to Yemen, which received between 2.2 and five billion dollars annually between 2017 and 2021. Syria, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Lebanon each received between one and three billion dollars in 2020 and 2021.

We know of course that all these countries are facing catastrophic humanitarian emergencies and should of course be receiving as much assistance as possible. But this takes us on to what probably most distinguishes the DPRK from other poor countries in terms of international humanitarian assistance. North Koreans are acknowledged throughout the UN system as facing starvation today yet the United Nations has prevented humanitarian agencies from meeting these acknowledged humanitarian needs. Since the expanded UN sanctions of 2016 and 2017, almost every component of humanitarian aid has been banned from entering North Korea without going through a hugely expensive and time-consuming procedure to secure an ‘exemption’

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– and almost all humanitarian agencies did not have the wherewithal to undertake this process. Secondly, from 2021 the UN excluded the DPRK from its annual global humanitarian appeal – which is the gateway to accessing UN humanitarian assistance. It is the only country in the world facing a food emergency which is excluded from the UN humanitarian appeal system.

What this has all meant in practice is that the tiny amount of humanitarian assistance still going into North Korea in 2022 and 2023, at least as recorded in the UNOCHA tracking system, has come only from Switzerland, Sweden and Norway and from the European Commission, that is governments and organisations whose approach continues to uphold what used to be a fairly universal commitment to separating meeting humanitarian needs of vulnerable individuals, especially children, from political considerations. All this recent assistance is destined for children via UNICEF programmes, which are currently staffed by national North



Korean officers, as the COVID border closures continue to prevent international officers from returning to North Korea.

It's probably worth reminding ourselves that it's not uncommon for international assistance programmes to be staffed by national officers – in many places which are suffering war and conflict and/or local populations are hostile to outsiders, it is really only national officers that have access to local populations. In 2021 of the 140 aid workers killed worldwide, 138 were national officers, reflecting the disproportionate reliance that the entire international humanitarian system places on national officers. Humanitarian assistance could be provided to North Koreans via the very many North Koreans that have worked with the UN agencies for over two decades, even without the presence of international officers.

In terms of comparisons between the form of humanitarian assistance to North Korea and other countries facing food emergencies – there are more similarities than differences. North Korea received

mainly food aid – and in similar food crises where governments are antagonistic to the major donors, donors have historically been more ready to fund the food aid part of humanitarian appeals, as compared to health for example.

This is not to say that donors ignored DPRK health requirements. GAVI (the multinational vaccines alliance) and the Global Fund gave assistance to the DPRK, via UNICEF and the WHO, to support national immunization, TB and malaria programmes. A number of NGOs also worked with the DPRK government on health. These programmes spanned the humanitarian/development nexus in that they offered short term help to vulnerable people and, in so doing, helped the country overall in building a healthier population.

Although it's not completely straightforward to account for the amount spent by GAVI and Global Fund in North Korea, partly because GAVI and Global Fund reporting modalities are not easily compatible with UN recording procedures, these



recording inconsistencies do not invalidate the main trends I have talked about so far in terms of the patterns of humanitarian assistance to North Korea. GAVI and the Global Fund support for North Korea has not been very large, either in world terms or as a proportion of humanitarian assistance to North Korea.

Over the entire GAVI reporting period of 2001 to 2023, just \$66 million was spent on North Korea programmes – compared, for example, to a billion dollars for Ethiopia. Similarly, the Global Fund allocated an average of \$15 million a year during its involvement in North Korea while Ethiopia, again by comparison, received on average around \$200 million dollars a year. These funds were certainly helpful for the North Koreans that benefitted – but they were far too small to address the enormous scale of need, especially on terms of children's poor health and undernutrition, all of which had been meticulously documented by the resident United Nations humanitarian agencies in survey after survey between 1995 and 2019 – and until international officials left the country in 2020 due to COVID border closures

[The humanitarian aid to North Korea has a long history. What, if any, changes have there been? In other words, is it possible to differentiate between time periods in relation to the humanitarian aid? If so, what are the main features of each period?](#)

The main difference over time is that the volume of assistance diminished really quite quickly after the immediate post-famine years, as I've mentioned already.

What has improved over time is the quality of

data collection and systematization – by 2020 the social survey data coming out of the country was very comprehensive and very robust. There is an extremely comprehensive national social survey available online dated from 2014 as well as multiple reports published in 2019 derived from the 2017 Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys that quantify geographical disparities, among other things, all based on fine-tuned quantitative analysis. This is all available online via the UN agency websites, including UNOCHA, FAO and UNICEF, although these data sources are extremely underutilized by both scholars and commentators worldwide.

In terms of change over the years, one what is quite striking to me relates to the levels of international awareness and also compassion for vulnerable North Koreans during the famine years compared with recent years, when food shortages have reemerged in North Korea.

The first donations, between 1995 and 1997, came from numerous sources, including the very large donation of half a million tonnes of food from the Japanese government I have already mentioned, at least 100,000 tonnes from China – and at that time China was not the prosperous country it is today – and from many NGOs from all over the world, including from countries that had extremely fraught relations with North Korea, like the US, South Korea and Japan. These NGOs provided food but also things like warm clothing for children and medical supplies. Initially, there was no exact data on child malnutrition although every humanitarian international official who visited the DPRK in the 1990s reported a nationwide famine affecting almost all sectors of the then 23 million population, especially young children, who were becoming ill and dying from malnutrition related causes

The international response was tremendous, some

of it based on political curiosity – this was a chance for outsiders to access what had been a very closed country, at least to the US and Western Europe – but a lot of the global response was truly altruistic. The feeling seemed to be that while the North Korean government was certainly not a good government, a very clear distinction could be made between the population and the government. The international consensus was that the former already suffered because of the latter; and that if international assistance could save lives, then that was sufficient reason to send significant assistance to North Korea.

Today, by contrast with the 1990s, we know so much more about the country. We absolutely know, even without physical access to the country, that children and other vulnerable groups must be starving – because we know how much food is being produced and we know, more or less, what food imports are going into the country. We know that China probably helped out with massive food and fertilizer aid in 2019 and 2020 but also that in 2021, 2022 and 2023 there is not the evidence that food shortages are being filled by Chinese and other country exports to North Korea. That's why the reports of starvation from North Korea that have emerged since 2019 are credible. Yet, today North Korean children are receiving next to no international humanitarian assistance.

Today we do not see democratic governments, NGOs and religious organisations, and the global media advocating for humanitarian assistance for starving North Koreans. Partly this is a question of lack of visibility. The UN Security Council does not want to call attention to the very harmful effects the last round of UN sanctions has had on the food economy in North Korea – and partly because the North Korean government does not want to advertise that its economy is a catastrophic failure by admitting that starvation has returned to the

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country. Partly also there appears to me a general lack of international interest, at least as expressed through globally influential media, in starving populations everywhere. Of course we know that the UN is responding to the awful poverty and starvation conditions faced by children in Yemen, Ethiopia, the DRC and Afghanistan right now – but these humanitarian emergencies are not very often at the fore of international public consciousness. We, for example, at least in the UK and the US, do not see prime time reporting on the famine in Yemen – although access to Yemen is not impossible.

Whatever the reasons, while other starving children are at least receiving some help from UN humanitarian agencies in other parts of the world, quite unbelievably, the United Nations in 2022 cut North Koreans completely out of the UN's annual global humanitarian appeal. This is despite the UN humanitarian agencies themselves having since 1995 charted severe chronic and now, acute food insecurity, which they also report is negatively



impacting some 10 million undernourished North Koreans, especially young children.

I personally find it very surprising that those who have professed sympathy and support for North Korean children in the past are not engaging in urgent advocacy for these millions of highly vulnerable children today.

## 2. International Society

*Who are the main agents responsible for humanitarian aid, and what are their motives, goals, and distinguishing characteristics?*

In North Korea, the humanitarian landscape is populated by a huge variety of humanitarian actors. There are lots of ways of categorising and differentiating these organisations, but probably the most fundamental conceptual difference is between donors and implementing organisations. Of course, in practice the difference between donors and implementing organisations in North Korea, as everywhere, is blurred. Donors can also be implementing actors. Nevertheless, the conceptual core distinctions remain useful as it helps us think about two important sorts of humanitarian activity. One is to provide funding. The other is to actually implement humanitarian programmes.

We can also categorise international humanitarian actors in terms of their organisational principles; as multilateral, bilateral, or non-governmental. Multilateral agencies, like the UN agencies, are comprised of governments. The agencies rely on member state funding but member states do not automatically fund every humanitarian emergency.

The bilaterals are single government agencies – like the UK's Department for International Development. NGOs comprise a variety of actors – all they have in common is that they are not government run organisations.

Again, in practice, there are always blurring of organisational boundaries. Multilateral governmental actors, like WFP, for example, routinely provide a funding channel for NGOs carrying out discrete projects in emergencies. The Red Cross movement, which is comprised of two international agencies, the IFRC and the ICRC, is often classed as an NGO, but its special international legal status and large size means that it operates much more like a big multilateral agency.

Another differentiation often made is between resident and non-resident humanitarian actors. In North Korea, the UNDP, WFP, UNICEF, and FAO, became resident in the 1990s and stayed in the country for the last 25 years or so, as did the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, and large NGOs, like the Irish NGO, Concern Worldwide and Welthungerhilfe, which is known in English as German AgroAction. Some multilaterals and bilaterals were non-resident, as were many NGOs – especially those whose home countries were the US, South Korea and Japan. The politics were just too difficult for this last group of NGOs to become permanent residents of North Korea – although that did not prevent nationals from these countries staying for several months at a time working on projects all over the country, sometimes in the most remote reaches of the north-east.

In terms of delivery of humanitarian assistance, which I take as the main thrust of this question, humanitarian organisations have a shared goal, which is to save lives and alleviate suffering, and a shared philosophy and legal responsibility, which is

that humanitarian aid must be given unconditionally to those most in need, irrespective of the politics of the government or non-governmental entity that controls territory in which operations take place.

Where they differ is their size, capacity and mandate, or specialism, for example food, health, education, or agriculture.

In terms of their relative importance, aid delivered via bilateral and NGO implementing agencies, although not negligible, was always much less than that which came through UN mechanisms and reached far fewer people. In 2001, at the height of the international aid operation, for example, the UN WFP was feeding 8 million North Koreans. In the same year, one of the largest NGO projects, from one of the largest and most established international NGOs, German Agro-Action, targeted 75,000 children.

## The multilaterals

Of the multilateral humanitarian agencies, the United Nations agencies are the most important, and the most ubiquitous, because they have the size and the reach to respond quickly and effectively to large-scale emergencies. Given the primary function of humanitarian agencies is to respond to immediate threats to life it should be no surprise either that the UN World Food Programme, whose job is to provide food when there is none available through normal channels, is the international humanitarian agency most involved in immediate responses to what are often volatile, unpredictable and therefore dangerous situations.

We also know that in humanitarian disasters and in

conflict children and women are disproportionately negatively impacted, so it should also be no surprise that UNICEF, which works in health and nutrition with a focus on children and women, is always a major actor. In emergencies that generate refugees and internally displaced persons, the UNHCR is the major actor, but the UNHCR never worked inside North Korea, although it did some work in China with North Korean asylum seekers. In North Korea, the major humanitarian agencies were and are UNICEF and the WFP.

Food aid dominated humanitarian operations in North Korea and most was transferred multilaterally, through the UN World Food Programme. It was an enormous programme. Between 1995 and 2005 WFP provided more than four million tonnes of commodities, mostly food, valued at around an enormous US\$1.7 billion. In 2001/2002, the North Korea operation was the largest food aid operation in the world. The sheer scale of the operation made WFP the most influential UN agency in the DPRK and the WFP representative assumed the UN

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coordination role usually reserved for the UNDP representative in any emergency operation. Given the overwhelming dominance of food aid in the North Korea operation, one issue was that the government only wanted to deal with those it knew were directly responsible for bringing in the millions of dollars' worth of aid it was receiving in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This meant that WFP had the ear of the government in a way that the UNDP representative, who had direct responsibility for only a small amount of aid, did not.

Many other UN agencies worked in the DPRK – most importantly the FAO and the WHO. Both these agencies delivered aid to North Koreans but their primary role, as everywhere in the world, was to deliver technical advice to the government on agriculture and health, respectively.

Part of this technical role involves data collection, organisation, systematisation and dissemination. They do this in conjunction with other agencies, in North Korea especially UNICEF, and also with the government. These agencies have done a fantastically good job, to the extent that masses of socio-

economic data, covering now a 25-year-old period, using internationally standardised methodologies, carried out by highly qualified and experienced consultants from round the world drafted in by the UN agencies, is now available and accessible online. As I've mentioned already, this is a very under-used resource by scholars.

The WHO also works with the DPRK government to generate international funds for national health programmes, especially for immunisation and campaigns against malaria, TB and HIV/AIDS. One very damaging effect of the inability of international humanitarian officials to access the country since 2020 is that WHO and UNICEF, have not been in a position to either monitor the impact of the COVID pandemic or provide advice and support.

In terms of providing a complete picture, I should mention the European Union, also a multilateral organisation, as it has had resident staff in Pyongyang. EU officials worked with UN agencies and NGOs to support a variety of humanitarian programmes, including in the food security sector. But, in analytical terms, it's probably more accurate

to think of the EU primarily as a donor agency. It's not been a large donor – between 1995 and 2023 providing just under 150 million dollars to North Koreans – which works out at just under five and a half million dollars on average per year, but it also played a very important in support of NGOs after resident NGOs were asked to leave the country in 2005. The European Union office negotiated a deal which allowed European NGOs to stay provided they registered as subsidiaries of the European Commission.

### The bilaterals

Many governments funded bilateral humanitarian aid to North Korea, not the least being China, Russia, and South Korea. The Swiss government is also a donor but via the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, it also acted as an implementing agency over a sustained period, from the 1990s right through until international officials left the country after the COVID border closures. SDC's technical cooperation programme on individual farms was supported by a permanent

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presence in Pyongyang staffed by agronomists and food security specialists. SDC was quite exceptional in trying to maintain a humanitarian operation in North Korea that separated itself from what over the years was always an internationally volatile and tense political environment.

### The NGOs

We still don't have a full empirical record of all the NGO activity in North Korea – and we certainly do not have a developed body of scholarship relating to explaining why NGOs became involved in North Korea. From 1998 onwards the UN tried to keep records of all NGO humanitarian activity in North Korea but as this was almost entirely dependent on self-reporting it's highly likely that not all activities were recorded and those that were may have been mis-recorded and/or based on inaccurate information. But still, even given these caveats, we have enough data and pockets of reliable analysis in the secondary literature that allow us to offer knowledge-based comment on the broad outlines of NGO patterns of assistance.

Firstly, the volume of NGO assistance to North Korea was relatively small compared to the amount of assistance from multilateral and bilateral agencies. Secondly NGOs covered a variety of sectors, including food, health, agriculture. Thirdly NGOs were both donors and implementing organisations.

But probably the distinguishing factor of NGO humanitarian projects in the DPRK was their sheer number and diversity in terms of size and country of origin. NGOs from all over the world provided humanitarian support to North Korea. Some, for instance a number of Japanese NGOs, raised

money which they then donated through UNICEF. Other NGOs, including some South Korean NGOs, donated aid via channels set up by the North Korean government, as of course did bilateral and multilateral donors. A small number of NGOs delivered aid programmes directly within the country – mainly established European NGOs like the Irish NGO Concern Worldwide, the Italian CESVI, the French Handicap International and German Agro Action.

Many United States NGOs fundraised and delivered humanitarian aid in North Korea – and although none were officially resident, American NGO officials spent months at a time in the country; some American humanitarian officials had previously lived in South Korea for years, had South Korean families and, contrary to the mythology we often hear about the DPRK government not allowing Korean speaking international officials in the country – were fluent Korean speakers.

It's fair to say that all were united at some level by a desire to save lives and alleviate human suffering – but of course there were also mixed motives for

NGO involvement. South Korean NGOs were motivated by a sense of kinship and a sense of national duty to aid visibly suffering fellow Koreans in the North. Many South Korean NGOs were also motivated by strong religious principles. United States NGOs on the other hand were often hopeful that they could somehow contribute to peace building between their respective governments as a by-product of their activities in North Korea. These additional motives were not always harmonious; nationalist objectives for example could mean seeing NGO operations as peace-building but for some support for NGO activity was motivated by a perceived opportunity to expose an illegitimate government and advocate for its downfall.

**What are the main procedures of providing and evaluating aid to North Korea? Are there any typical processes? If not, what processes do international organizations such as WFP follow?**

Most humanitarian agencies follow highly structured, standardised assessment, monitoring and evaluation processes. For the major aid providers – the UN organisations – these processes are hardwired into all operations as they are part of the way in which they account for the billions in public money spent by the UN. These standard operating procedures were followed in the DPRK. One outcome is that there are literally thousands of these assessment and evaluation reports on different North Korea programmes and projects freely available on UN agency websites, including WFP, FAO and UNICEF, most but not all also available for download on the UNOCHA Reliefweb site.

Most NGOs followed similar processes as the UN, even if the implementation modalities were not quite

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so sophisticated, especially for the smaller NGOs. Some of the bilateral aid providers were perhaps the least likely to insist on transparent monitoring and evaluation procedures. Large amounts of food aid from China and South Korea were handed over without the incorporation of demanding monitoring and evaluation procedures.

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In terms of the detail, the first job in providing aid is always to assess humanitarian need. In North Korea the early needs assessments were by experienced international officers who had previously worked in complex emergencies in many different and often dangerous parts of the world – including Rwanda, Bosnia, and the Thai-Cambodia border.

From 1998, assessment of humanitarian need was helped by regular national nutritional and health surveys, the UN Population Fund sponsored national census of 2008, as well as systematised

collection and analysis of data by all UN agencies. All of the agencies regularly brought in very senior, internationally recognised professionals to conduct additional evaluation of aspects of each programme, for example to look in detail at child nutrition or the incidence of disease.

The provision of aid was facilitated by the fact that the WFP, UNICEF, FAO and UNDP established permanent offices in Pyongyang, staffed by nutritionists, food security official and medically qualified specialists, all of whom made regular monitoring visits all around the country. By 2000 WFP, the largest agency, was making about 500 visits a month to homes, schools, clinics, hospitals, and what were known as food for work sites – where adults worked, generally on flood relief projects engaged in hard physical labour in miserable conditions – in return for UN provided food rations.

In terms of the actual delivery of bulk food aid, most was carried in tankers to the main ports of Chongjin and Nampo. Less bulky aid was delivered by road or rail from China. These supplies were then picked up by trucks belonging to the county administrations.

The scale of food aid – for literally millions of recipients

– was beyond the capability of any international humanitarian organisation, including the UN agencies, to deliver to households and individuals. Food aid was generally therefore delivered via local government authorities. How it worked was that the WFP would draw up an agreed priority distribution list with the government – almost always children and pregnant and nursing women were the main beneficiary groups. North Korean adults rarely received food aid as the priorities were always children. This is one reason that when adults are interviewed when they leave North Korea for South Korea, it is very likely that when they are asked if they ever receive international humanitarian food, the answer would invariably be ‘no’. They didn’t receive aid because they were not allocated food aid.

After arriving in county warehouses, food was then distributed via the county food administrators. Food was distributed via schools, kindergartens, nurseries and the child residential institutions, while pregnant and nursing women accessed food through the local public distribution centres. Bilateral agencies and NGO sometimes bought and collected their own imported goods, sometimes directly from Dandong in China, and delivered these direct to project sites – for instance a specific farm, hospital or nursery.

All international organisations and NGOs evaluated the effectiveness and appropriateness of humanitarian aid. The national nutrition surveys carried out over the years by the international organisations in conjunction with the government provided largescale data, but these national exercises were supplemented by micro evaluations of all projects and programmes that were built into all humanitarian project proposals and therefore project implementation.

It’s difficult to separate out the impact of international food and other humanitarian aid from that of

improved access to food and income from markets and trade, and improvements in domestic food production that took place up until 2018, especially as international assistance was really only large enough to make a difference for two or three years. Nevertheless these evaluations were helpful in that they showed that, whatever the primary cause, between 1998 and 2017, there were significant improvements in child nutrition.

The first nutrition survey of 1998, carried out towards the end of the famine years, showed that 64 percent of North Korea’s children under seven were suffering from what the nutritionists call ‘stunting’ or chronic malnutrition and 21 percent from ‘wasting’

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which describes such acute, severe malnutrition that without medical intervention the child faces death. These are very high figures indeed. By 2017 though, the percentage of children with stunting was recorded at 19 percent, with wasting at three percent. By 2017 North Korea's malnutrition figures were much lower than other poor countries in Asia. In Pakistan in 2018, 38 percent of children suffered from chronic malnutrition, and seven percent from wasting. In India, a much richer country than North Korea, 38 percent of children in 2015, the latest figures I have, were suffering from chronic malnutrition and a very high 21 percent from wasting. Of course it is unacceptable if just one child is suffering from malnourishment but it's still useful to have some sober reflection on the fact that North Korea is by no means unique in its malnutrition statistics, nor by far the worst.

Of course child nutrition gains will now have reversed in North Korea – given five years of failed food harvests and UN sanctions policy that does not exempt food production and health services from trade bans

Are there joint platforms through which international organizations and groups can join forces, discussions and activities? If so, what are they and what are their functions?

In terms of the organisation of humanitarian aid, I would say that has not changed much over the years. The UN coordinates humanitarian aid organisations, including non-UN humanitarian agencies, both outside and inside the country. In terms of effectiveness, compared to many humanitarian emergencies, coordination between agencies on the ground in North Korea was quite good from the beginning.

Outside the country the humanitarian agencies, including UN organisations and NGOs, work out humanitarian policy in an organisation called the IASC – the Inter Agency Standing Committee. Detailed modalities as to how humanitarian agencies should provide, monitor and evaluate programmes are debated, refined and set out in numerous codes of practice and guidelines, and are constantly





updated through longstanding mechanisms overseen by IASC.

The IASC is a little-known organisation, but it is highly influential and authoritative in the humanitarian world as it acts as the international coordination and policy development mechanism for all UN agencies involved in delivering humanitarian aid, the Red Cross and three large international consortia of NGOs. Not every humanitarian agency is represented in the IASC, and policies are not mandatory, but they do tend to act as international benchmarks for most humanitarian agencies worldwide.

In terms of operational and information coordination, the United Nations Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance, OCHA, coordinates UN agencies, bilateral agencies and NGOS. It collects information on humanitarian operations and disseminates huge amounts of information, including detailed reports, press releases, quantitative data, maps, sometimes photos, on its website. There are thousands of such pieces of information on North Korea on the website going back to 1995.

OCHA often, although not always, has an office in the country in which humanitarian assistance is delivered. Either OCHA or UNDP will coordinate in-country activities – depending on the emergency. In an acute emergency that primarily involves refugees and displaced persons, UNHCR may take on this role. WFP, whose staff are often first on the frontline in the most dangerous emergencies, and which carries out logistical operations that involve transport of commodities by ships and planes for the whole of the UN, has a hugely important coordination role in emergencies.

In country, coordination works on several levels. Is common for weekly information sharing meetings

to take place – and in long term emergency operations for agencies to develop joint work in different sectors, like health, water and sanitation, and food security. When I was working in North Korea, for example, we had a special working group that coordinated information and activity in respect to children who lived in the provincial residential homes. In North Korea, weekly coordination meetings included relevant visitors to the country, like consultants or donor representatives. These are operational, not policy meetings, and their function is to share information, common problems, and good practice.

At a more systematic level, in-country agencies often coordinate on larger national projects, which take months of planning, implementation and analysis of the results. In North Korea, UNICEF and WFP worked together on national nutrition surveys for example, while the FAO and WFP provided very regular national assessments of food supply and food needs. These are hugely sophisticated and detailed projects – and always involve bringing in very senior consultants from around the world, who have professional qualifications as nutritionists, agronomists, statisticians, and with experience of working in other countries, often in very complex and difficult environments.

By definition, humanitarian work takes place in countries with governments which are not functioning effectively – whether because of war or corruption or state failure or any other reason. Not only must coordination take place between agencies but also with the government or political authority that controls the territory in which humanitarian officials work. In North Korea this meant very patient negotiating of every step in the process with a government that was and is intensely suspicious of all foreign agencies as potential spies.

Finally, when humanitarian emergencies carry on for a long time, as in Yemen or Syria, the UN has a process that coordinates joint humanitarian appeals for an individual country, on an annual basis. Most humanitarian agencies, including the UN agencies, bilaterals, NGOs, resident and non-resident agencies, participate in this exercise which reviews the needs of the population and then itemizes what projects each agency would like to carry out, including the amount of money requested.

So the process of putting together these appeals and reviewing their implementation provides yet another forum in which humanitarian agencies can talk to each other.

Probably it is worth mentioning here that a minority of agencies, especially some NGOs, prefer to work more independently of the various coordination mechanisms than others.

The two Koreas have a very special relationship, and as such, considerable effort has been put into

providing North Korea with humanitarian aid. What are the distinguishing features between the aid provided by South Korea and that by the global community?

Yes, this is a very interesting and important issue and of course a lot of good work has been done by South Korean academics looking at the various relationships between the South Korean government, NGOs and the rest of the international aid community. I think Dr Choi Gyubin's recent work at KINU is actually very useful in this respect.

First though, we need to think about commonalities between South Korean humanitarian assistance and that coming from other countries. As with the general pattern of humanitarian assistance to North Koreans, by far the majority has been from government. Between 1995 and 2009, about 75 percent of South Korean aid to North Korea came from the government and the rest from NGOs and church groups, among others. Second, the time period in which most South Korean aid came to North Korea, was very narrow. Apart from a big



government donation in 1995, almost all South Korean humanitarian assistance came between 2000 and 2008. Trickle of aid came up until 2021, but UN statistics record nothing in 2022 and 2023 so far. In other words, South Korean humanitarian assistance to North Koreans was a short-lived phenomenon.

In terms of distinctiveness, my view is that there are three aspects of South Korean humanitarian aid to North Koreans that together distinguish humanitarian aid policies and practice from those of other countries

The first is that humanitarian aid is highly politicized in that humanitarian aid patterns have been almost directly reflective of differing political priorities rather than changing humanitarian needs of the North Korean people. South Korean administrations have had diverging approaches to the North Korean government – crudely reflected in different perspectives on engagement – but have also had to manage those approaches with efforts to maintain the security alliance with the US. This has never been easy, especially for the more pro-engagement administrations. It is one of the reasons why the Moon Jae-In administration, which might have been expected to take a more pro-active approach to providing humanitarian assistance to North Koreans, did not do so, as it prioritised trying to manage the often-strained relationship with the Trump administration.

The second aspect of a specific South Korean perspective, and this is really a sub-category of the first, is the national question. This is a complex issue and does not lend itself to easy generalizations. In the 1990s, when there were many more living closely related members of separated families, it resulted in a very large feeling of familial solidarity towards North Koreans. At the same time, just because the

Korean War was still very close for many people, the bitterness from the conflict also engendered a backlash from some towards extending any support to North Korea that might remotely help the government.

One of the consequences of viewing aid through a national prism is that most South Korean government aid to North Korea, some 83 percent between 1995 and 2009, was bilateral and largely unconditional. This was quite different to other major donors who preferred to channel aid via multilateral aid agencies that insisted on forms of transparency and accountability in aid distribution. The view in South Korea seemed to be a little different – that this was inter-Korean business, involving the welfare of compatriots, and was not necessarily the business of others.

Thirdly, South Korean NGOs have played a hugely important role in advocating and providing humanitarian assistance to North Korea. These NGOs have been extraordinarily well-supported, by individuals, churches and non-governmental sources. Between 1995 and 2009, the government provided just under 110 billion won to fund NGO work in North Korea, but this already large amount was dwarfed by NGO private fundraising, which raised a massive 818 billion won during the same period.

Of course, NGOs in other countries are also supported by non-governmental donors but, given the history of bitter conflict between North and South, it seems to me worth underlining that assistance did not only come from the South Korean governments but also from South Korean individuals motivated by compassion and human decency.

In South Korea today though, probably a major block to South Korean humanitarian aid is an increased lack of personal connection to Koreans

in the North, and perhaps an indifference to the needs of North Korean people who are physically proximate but because of a real dearth of good information about what is happening in North Korea, perhaps mentally and emotionally very far away indeed.

[What negative impact do North Korea's aggressive actions, including nuclear development, have on international aid?](#)

I think I've touched on most of these questions earlier but just to reiterate that humanitarian assistance is about saving lives. Vulnerable populations, especially children, require humanitarian assistance because their governments fail them. It is contrary to international law to deny humanitarian assistance to vulnerable, suffering populations because of the actions of their governments

These basics of international law seem to be getting lost in the debates today. It's common to see a rather unpleasant and unfeeling assumption that for the sake of punishing the government it's acceptable to inflict deprivation, including precipitating the return of starvation, on the already very long-suffering population of North Korea, including North Korea's eight million children.

The tragic consequence of failing to distinguish between humanitarian assistance and development aid is that the most vulnerable, especially children and the frail elderly, are dying prematurely. According to the UN agencies, maternal mortality figures were improving up until 2017, when the last national social survey was conducted, as this had been a priority intervention area for UNICEF in North Korea for over 20 years. It is unlikely that

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these improvements could have been sustained given the deep economic crisis and the now negligible assistance from the international agencies that had previously provided crucial support for North Korea's health system. Women deprived of access to food and decent sanitation standards must now be dying in and after childbirth of sepsis and/or anemia related blood loss. These are horrible, painful deaths and they are mostly preventable.

[How do international organizations and groups view North Korea's behavior?](#)

In a nutshell, the broad, the shared view of international humanitarian agencies is that the North Korean population today is in urgent need of assistance – to save lives and ameliorate suffering – the reason that humanitarian agencies exist in the first place.





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