

Humanitarian Crisis in North Korea

Panel: Session 1 (Lilac/Tulip)

Date/Time: April 25, 2012/15:45-17:00

Organizing Institution: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Speakers: Shin Chang-Hoon, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies (Moderator)

Go Myoung-Hyun, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Sandra Fahy, University of Southern California

Joanna Hosaniak, Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights

Gordon Flake, Mansfield Foundation

Panel Short Summary

Rancy Kim, Ewha Womans University
Pia Won, Seoul National University

Shin Chang-Hoon, the moderator, began the session by introducing the varied expertise of the panelists, and allotting each panelist ten minutes to present their view on a specific aspect of the humanitarian crisis in North Korea.

Gordon Flake spoke about the grave situation in North Korea's political prison camps, and North Korea's continued denial of their existence. The lack of access to North Korea and the lack of any real political leverage against the DPRK make it difficult to remedy the situation. However, activists are increasing pressure on North Korea by raising awareness, for instance by releasing a report by the U.S. Committee of Human Rights in Korea. Improved satellite technology substantiates personal narratives with hard data, presenting opportunities to bring the situation in prison camps to light.

Sandra Fahy described the humanitarian crisis in North Korea as being created by abuse of state power, particularly in food distribution. Nutritional discrimination has hit hardest in the most vulnerable social groups, women and children, who face consequences in their health and abuse by unemployed husbands and fathers who turn to alcohol, drugs, and domestic violence for stress relief. Fahy described her unique methodology, which uses linguistic analysis of personal narratives to extract insights about North Koreans' awareness of the social injustices they face and the ways in which they learn to cope with them in everyday life, indicating that North Koreans are not passively accepting of their situation.

Go Myoung-Hyun described how satellite imaging identifies the causes of the food

crisis by tracking the centralized Public Distribution System (PDS) which shows that food surpluses from the agriculturally viable West are not re-allocated to the mountainous East. Furthermore, the hub-and-spokes structure of the PDS deprives rations to those living far away from railroads. Thus, the government can economize by systematically reducing the population sustained by the PDS. This structural inefficiency is more responsible for the food crisis than quantitative food shortages. Go notes that the DPRK refuses two easy solutions--allowing free movement to areas with better food distribution, and implementing a market system to supplement the PDS. The DPRK would never allow food aid to undermine PDS by being delivered directly to deprived areas.

Joanna Hosaniak described the social changes caused by black markets in North Korea resulting from food shortages. First, black markets empowered women. Under the PDS, women received rations only through their fathers or husbands; working in black markets made them independent. Black markets could also foster economic development in Northern provinces bordering China if China allowed freer trade with North Korean black markets. There are also negative aspects. Corrupt officials who make profits from black markets support the inefficiencies that create them. The black markets also encourage the use of child labor, creating a cycle of illiteracy and low education.

The panelists agreed that humanitarian difficulties, especially the food crisis, exacerbate existing social inequalities in the DPRK and are perpetuated by continued official denials and inefficiencies in resources allocation. Shin Chang-hoon wrapped up the session with brief remarks on increased international debate about legal protection for North Korean defectors, particularly in China, where they are treated as economic immigrants rather than refugees.

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