



Japan and the Koreas

GOVERNMENT

North Korea on the Edge

Journalist Hilary Mackenzie was the first foreign journalist allowed into North Korea in the late 1990s. She went to report on a famine in that closed and secretive nation. Here, she describes what she saw.

They stand still in lines, hands by their sides, faces expressionless. Some with swollen bellies, some with ribs poking through their T-shirts looking like a birdcage. Some, like Hwang Yun Young, with rickets, a disease caused by lack of vitamins. Hwang stands in the front of the Sinsong kindergarten in the capital city of Pyongyang, in a pretty pink lace dress, her hair neatly pulled back in a ponytail, her feet badly swollen. . . .

I would have guessed that Hwang and her classmates are 3-year-olds. But the teacher says they are 6-year-olds. Stunting [slowed growth], caused by long-term malnutrition, means 80 percent of the school's children do not meet the standard height and weight for their age. Doomed to go through life as "nutritional dwarfs," many are also permanently mentally and emotionally damaged from malnutrition. . . .

This is the face of North Korea today, one of the last communist nations in the world. . . . North Korea [is] one of the world's most repressive [controlling] and isolated nations. Kim Il Sung, who ruled the nation for 50 years, espoused [upheld] a philosophy of complete political and economic independence from the world. For years, foreigners were barred from entering the country and North Korea's people had virtually no contact with the outside world. Since his death in 1996, his son, Kim Jong-Il, has steered the same course.

But North Korea's economy began to falter in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union, its major trading partner, and as a result of failed agricultural policies. When it was hit with three years of successive crop failures, brought on by floods and drought, famine set in. . . . At least three quarters of the nation's 23 million people are hungry. Deaths have been widespread, possibly numbering in the millions. . . .

The tragedy has been complicated by politics. Many nations haven't wanted to help North Korea because of its hostility to foreign countries, its Communist system, or both. Western nations feared that food aid would be used to feed only North Korea's army. And for a long time, the North Korean government, which portrays the country as a happy, socialist paradise, tried to hide the problem from the world. . . .

Pak Yong Sun, the school principal, sits beneath a poster of Kim Il Sung. It shows him giving directions to healthy, chubby children, attentive and bursting with energy. . . . "The children here can't concentrate," she says. "They don't pay attention. Some just lie on their desks." . . .

At lunch, the school serves a paltry 8.75 ounces of bread, noodles, and porridge made from corn given by the World Food Program to all children under age six. Korean radishes, cucumbers, and cabbage are added during the short vegetable season. The rest of the year, roots, tree bark, and leaves are mixed in.

Driving to Yomju, I see child “worker-brigades” marching into the fields to weed. . . . Red revolutionary flags stake the fields where the workers toil. “They spur people on,” my translator says. Martial [military] music blares from the loudspeaker van further exhorting [urging on] the workers, knee-deep and bent double in the . . . mud under a hot sun.

“We have to sing that our country is best in the world,” a female voice crackles over the loudspeaker to the worker-brigades. “And we are making every endeavor [effort] to overcome all the difficulties before us.” By the roadside, emaciated [extremely thin] men and women lie slumped over bundles of goods. “It is because they are desperately hungry,” the Yomju country chairman explains. “They are exhausted.” . . . Factories and mines have been closed because the state cannot feed the workers. Nurseries and kindergartens are entirely dependent upon the international community for all food.

Even the Communist party faithful, who usually receive larger rations, have been touched by the famine. “My own daughter ate one meal a day,” before the arrival of food aid, the county chairman says, his loyalty symbolized by a Kim Il Sung badge. “She was very sleepy and listless.”

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. What factors inside North Korea caused a food shortage in the 1990s?

2. Why did it take so long for other countries to help North Korea?

3. How did the famine affect North Korea’s industries? How did it affect the North Korean people?

Activity

Use library and other resources to learn about the food situation in North Korea today. Summarize your findings in a short report.