

STATEMENT ON
DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA
UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS
VALERIE AMOS
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(Beijing, 21 October 2011) Thank you very much for coming to this press briefing - especially so given that it's Friday evening.

I have literally just come off the plane having completed a five day mission to the DPRK. While there, I met with Government officials, UN agencies, NGOs, donors, and members of the diplomatic community in Pyongyang to discuss the humanitarian situation and response. I also spent two days on a field visit to South Hamgyong and Kangwon provinces to see some of the challenges on the ground and the work of the international humanitarian agencies.

I went to two hospitals, an orphanage, a communal farm and visited one local market. I spoke to a wide variety of people from various walks of life including health workers, mothers, local officials, NGO and UN agency staff and visited a family currently being assisted by WFP. I visited a public distribution centre run by the Government, a biscuit factory run by WFP, and a medical warehouse assisted by WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA.

The background for my visit was the increasingly worrying information coming from the DPRK Government and in-country aid agencies, indicating that over 6 million people are in need of food assistance this year.

Rations provided via the Public Distribution System (PDS) fell from 400 grammes per person per day in March 2011 to around 200 grammes per person per day in July, and have stayed around that level since then, further deepening the hardship experienced by ordinary people in the DPRK.

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The average annual food gap is around 1 million tonnes per year, out of a total food requirement of 5.3 million tonnes. The poor nutritional mix - people survive on maize, rice if they are lucky, and cabbage - has led to high levels of malnutrition, particularly among children.

Recent figures for children under five years of age show chronic malnutrition levels (i.e. stunting) at 33 per cent nationwide, and 45 per cent in the north of the country. One nurse that I met at the pediatric hospital in Hamhung told me that the number of malnourished children coming to her hospital had increased 1.5 times (i.e. 50%) only since last year.

People in the DPRK suffer from a complex set of challenges including chronic poverty and under-development - structural causes with humanitarian implications. The slow deterioration in living conditions since the mid-1990s has increased exposure to vulnerability. Those least able to cope are now much more likely to be affected by any shock that upsets the very fragile support systems that the Government has in place, like the PDS and an outdated and poorly resourced health system. When the PDS cannot provide enough food, there are few ways for vulnerable people to cope beyond the now very limited international assistance that is being provided.

Agricultural production is constrained by a range of factors including: soil degradation; lack of inputs like fertilizer, fuel and quality seeds; very, very limited mechanization; difficult weather conditions; and post harvest losses. Average per hectare yields for rice are less than half what they are in most other countries at 2.8 tonnes per hectare.

Koreans are proud people. During the field visits, I was usually shown the best, rather than the worst. I saw a country and people coping despite some really tough conditions. At the same time, people freely explained to me the very real problems they face.

I was provided with access to all the places that I had asked to see, including a surprisingly vibrant market and a public distribution centre in Wonsan, neither of which are usually freely accessible to humanitarian agencies in the DPRK. During site visits, I saw for myself the positive impact of the limited humanitarian assistance being provided by the UN and its partners.

As a result of my field visits and the discussions I had with Government officials, health workers and others several things became clear:

- Firstly, a large number of children in the country are stunted. Chronic malnutrition will have long-term implications for generations to come, even if drastic action is taken today. Travelling around the country, one cannot help but notice that people – children and adults alike - are generally short and thin.

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- Secondly, despite efforts made by the Government to improve access to inputs such as fertilizer and quality seeds, DPRK simply does not have enough arable land to produce all the food it needs.
- Thirdly, it's clear that new solutions are needed if we are to see an end to this chronic, seemingly never-ending crisis. This year floods have been blamed for harvest shortfalls - but if we look back over the last few years more often than not a severe weather event has occurred in DPRK. This country cannot be food self-sufficient in the foreseeable future. Small changes, like giving greater support to kitchen gardens, which assessments have shown help to improve nutrition, would be a good first step.

In my discussions with the Government I stressed:

- The importance of sharing data and information in order to clearly show what the challenges are and to reassure donors that their money is being well spent.
- Monitoring and access conditions for international humanitarian organizations in the DPRK need to continue to improve. Allowing all humanitarian agencies, not just WFP, access to markets, random access to homes and institutions, 24 hour notice of monitoring visits and the employment of Korean-speakers on their staff should be the rule rather than the exception.
- The Government needs to lead the humanitarian effort, not be an onlooker. As in other countries, the responsibility for the care of the people rests with the Government; our job as international humanitarian actors is to provide support.
- I made clear that the quality of international support will rest on the credibility of the information that we are able to provide, particularly on humanitarian needs and how donor money is being used.

In summary, the DPRK remains a highly food insecure country, with a population made increasingly vulnerable by continued reliance upon unreliable food supplies; a mix of which is provided by the State, bilateral donations and through the UN and its partners. The most vulnerable people are victims of a situation that they have no control over, and find themselves in distress through no fault of their own. For this reason, we are not in a position to turn our backs on the people of the DPRK, despite the many difficulties that I have outlined.

Thank you.

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