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North Korea: Denial of right to food

"Public executions were highest between 1996 and 1998 when the famine was at its peak. People were stealing the infrastructure of society such as electric lines and copper wires and selling it."

(Interview by Amnesty International with Lee Sung-yong of the Seoul-based NGO, Good Friends - Centre for Peace, Human Rights & Refugees on 4 December 2002)

"I saw a 15 or 16 year old boy die; the boy was there [in detention] as he had sold glass from his school. After 15 days' detention, the boy died, because of malnutrition. There was so little food."

(Lee, North Korean man in his early forties, who gave testimony to Amnesty International on 3 December 2002)

North Korea is one of the world's most closed and isolated nations. For more than a decade, the people of North Korea have suffered from famine or food crisis. In a new report, Amnesty International argues that the North Korean government should ensure that food shortages are not used as a tool to persecute perceived political opponents and that humanitarian organizations, in particular UN agencies, have free and unimpeded access to all parts of North Korea.

"Hundreds of thousands of people have died as a result of acute food shortages caused by a series of natural disasters, the loss of support from the former Soviet Union and economic mismanagement. Several million children suffer from chronic malnutrition, impairing their physical and mental development," Amnesty International emphasized.

Government policies are at least partly to blame. The government appears to have distributed food unevenly, favouring those who are economically active and politically loyal. Government restrictions on freedom of movement prevents North Koreans searching for food or moving to an area where food supplies are better, as they face punishment including detention if they leave their towns or villages without permission. They also hamper the movement, access and monitoring of international humanitarian agencies who have been involved in distributing food aid. This has contributed to donor fatigue and a fall in food aid commitments.

"The right to food is a basic human right, and the government of North Korea appears to be failing in its duties to respect, protect and fulfil this right", Amnesty said.

Widespread malnutrition has led to the movement of tens of thousands of people into China. Thousands have been forcibly repatriated by the Chinese authorities, and have then been detained by North Korean authorities in appalling conditions. Detainees are reported to

have died of hunger. Many have reportedly been tortured during interrogations by the North Korean authorities.

Some North Koreans have been publicly executed because they have stolen food or goods to survive - school children have reportedly been taken to see the executions.

Children, women and the elderly are reported to be among the principle victims of North Korea's famine. Many women forced to go to China in search of food have been preyed on by trafficking gangs, which operate on both sides of the China-North Korea border.

Efforts by the international community to assist in the provision of food to North Korea have been undermined by the government's refusal to allow swift and equitable distribution of this food, and by the restrictions on freedom of information.

"Notwithstanding the obstacles to providing assistance, foreign states able to help must also provide the necessary food aid, to enable the North Korea government to fulfil its obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the right to food", Amnesty said.

"Provision of humanitarian aid should be guided at all times by human rights considerations and should never be used by any government as a bargaining tool to further political or economic interests."

For the full text of the report, please go to:

"Democratic Republic of North Korea: Starved of Rights: Human Rights and the Food Crisis in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea"

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa240032004>

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