

South Korean NGOs' Humanitarian Aid to North Korea

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in South Korea have been providing humanitarian aid for and facilitating civilian exchange with North Korea in the hopes of helping North Koreans overcome the threats to their survival and improve their quality of life in sustainable ways. These humanitarian activities pave the way for increasing exchange and cooperation between the two Koreas, the peace of the Korean Peninsula and, ultimately, a peaceful national reunification. As such, these activities must continue independently of political calculations of Seoul and Pyongyang.

However, Korean NGOs have completely stopped their humanitarian aid and exchange-facilitating activities as of now. The escalating political tension between the two Koreas have ground all humanitarian activities to a halt, while the recent policies adopted by both Korean governments unabashedly contradict humanitarian principles. The crisis of humanitarianism, however, means the crisis of the entire range of South-North relations. The ongoing tug of war over humanitarian aid between the two Korean governments reveals that these governments consider humanitarianism as mere policy instruments that they may use or discard at will.

Humanitarian aid benefits North Koreans, but its source lies in South Koreans' commitment to peaceful reunification as well as their solidarity with North Koreans. The decrease in humanitarian aid and activities for North Koreans thus indicates something greater than the immediate contraction of cooperation between the two Koreas. It implies the weakening sense of community and the dissipation of practice-oriented fellow feeling in the South Korean society. The decline of humanitarian aid for North Korea should alarm us as it could undermine South Koreans' support and willingness for national reunification in the long run.

Current status of aid for North Korea

The Ministry of Unification (MU) in South Korea immediately responded to the fourth nuclear experiment by Pyongyang, on January 6, 2016, by announcing its decision to cease humanitarian aid from NGOs, material aid involved in projects of social and cultural exchange, and contact by

third-party governments and actors. After Pyongyang launched its long-range rocket missile on February 17, the MU announced its decision to cease all forms of aid to North Korea. Pyongyang yet went ahead with its fifth nuclear experiment on September 9. In the meantime, all channels of aid and exchange between the two Koreas remain shut off.

Table 1. Humanitarian Aid by the South Korean Government and NGOs

(In 100 millions of KRW)

Year Administration		99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16 (July)
		Pres. Kim Dae-jung				Pres. Roh Moo-hyun				Pres. Lee Myung-bak				Pres. Park Geun-hye					
Governmental aid	Gov't	339	944	684	832	811	949	1,221	2,000	1,432	-	-	183	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Via NGOs		34	62	65	81	102	120	134	216	241	77	21	-	-	-	-	24	1
	Via IOs	-	-	229	243	205	262	19	139	335	197	217	-	65	23	133	141	116	-
	Total	339	978	975	1,140	1,097	1,313	1,360	2,273	1,983	438	294	204	65	23	133	141	140	1
	Food (rice) loans	-	1,057	-	1,510	1,510	1,359	1,787	-	1,505	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Total	339	978	975	2,650	2,607	2,672	3,147	2,273	3,488	438	294	204	65	23	133	141	140	1
Non-governmental aid (free support)		223	387	782	576	766	1,558	779	709	909	725	377	200	131	118	51	54	114	15
Total		562	2,422	1,757	3,226	3,373	4,230	3,926	2,982	4,397	1,163	671	404	196	141	183	195	254	16

Even the United Nations Security Council, in sanctioning North Korea this year with resolution No. 2270, stresses that “measures imposed by this resolution are not intended to have adverse humanitarian consequences for the civilian population of the DPRK,” suggesting that efforts by international organizations and NGOs to aid North Korean civilians should continue. The South Korean government, however, has not only dropped all governmental programs of aid, but also regulates NGOs’ activities, barring them even from seeking indirect contact with North Koreans. The Korea NGO Council for Cooperation with North Korea (KNCK), representing 54 NGOs in Korea providing humanitarian aid, thus released a statement on June 28, 2016, demanding that the MU “revoke its decision on refusal of applications from NGOs for pre-aid contact with North Korean civilians” and “guarantee support for NGOs’ humanitarian activities for North Korea.”

The South Korean government even banned NGOs’ effort to reach out and provide emergency relief for the victims of the flood that hit the North Hamkyong Province in late August and early September. The MU dismissed the KNCK’s application for pre-aid contact with North Korean civilians in early September. Summoned, on October 14, to the National Assembly conducting the semi-annual inspection of the administration, Hong Yong-pyo, incumbent minister of Unification, expressed that his ministry was “currently contemplating no measures of aid regarding flood victims in North Korea,” and that “while the government agrees with the basic

principle of humanitarian aid, South Koreans still need to approach the situation from an angle different from the United States', due to the specialness and gravity of the events that have conspired since the fifth nuclear experiment [by Pyongyang]."

Forced by the government's uncompromising stance on the issue, the KNCK formed an agreement with the International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC) on October 7 to deliver member organizations' donations, totaling USD 187,000, to North Korea via IFRC. The donations so delivered have gone to IFRC's acquisition of shelters and non-food items for North Korean flood victims. In addition, the Korea Sharing Movement, Peace 3000, and other various NGOs in South Korea continue to wage campaigns for aiding the flood-affected region in North Korea, delivering wheat flour, first aid, winter clothing, and home repair materials to the region via NGOs of Koreans living abroad.

NGOs' position on the normalization of humanitarian aid

South Korean NGOs maintain a clear position on the normalization of humanitarian aid.

First, the current Korean government's requirement that NGOs seeking pre-aid contact with North Korean civilians submit applications to the government first has no basis in South Korean law. The Korean government should therefore abolish this requirement and accept any and all applications for contact with North Korean civilians, which is essential to humanitarian aid.

Second, humanitarian aid must continue irrespective of political circumstances. The South Korean government should keep its promise to allow ongoing humanitarian activities for the most vulnerable in North Korea. It should comply with UNSC Resolution 2270, which states that measures of governmental sanctions ought not to have adverse impact on vulnerable civilians or humanitarian efforts for them.

Third, NGOs will work with the National Assembly to enact a legislation that would ensure sustained and stable humanitarian aid for North Korea irrespective of political circumstances.

On January 16, 2013, around the time the current Park Geun-hye administration came to power in South Korea, the KNCK launched its campaign for the Social Agreement on Humanitarian Aid for North Korea, proposing the legislation of a new statute to guarantee ongoing humanitarian support. While a number of drafts were proposed in the 19th National Assembly, all were dismissed. The effectuation of the North Korea Human Rights Act in early September this year has since made humanitarian aid subject to the Act. The legislation, however, makes the provision of humanitarian aid contingent upon the North Korean government's effort to protect the human rights of its subjects first, and therefore leaves much room for political manipulation. The KNCK thus decided in July to organize a subcommittee as part of its Policy Committee to address the side effects of the Act. Through four subcommittee meetings and one internal policy

discussion, the KNCKK has drafted the bill for the Act on Humanitarian Aid and Development Cooperation between South and North Korea and submitted it to the National Assembly's review. The purpose of the bill is to provide legal grounds for ensuring sustained humanitarian aid for North Korea regardless of political circumstances. The Main features are as follows.

- Objectives of humanitarian aid for North Korea: Humanitarian aid and development cooperation enable North Koreans to overcome threats to their basic survival, help improve their quality of life, and pave the grounds for peaceful reunification by fostering fellow-feeling and trust-building at the level of civilians between the two Koreas.
- The draft offers a clearly defined scope of humanitarian aid to minimize possible political controversies.
- Humanitarian aid should be provided in a neutral manner in response to humanitarian needs, without the interference of political and military circumstances.
- The draft proposes the creation of the Public-Private Partnership Committee on Humanitarian Aid for North Korea to help build and strengthen the societal consensus.
- The governments of both Koreas should ensure that NGOs and local governments could autonomously decide and provide humanitarian aid and make their own efforts to ensure the fairness and transparency of the aid they provide. The governments ought not to restraint NGOs' humanitarian initiatives without the deliberation of the Public-Private Partnership Committee.
- The draft also proposes the creation of the South-North Humanitarian Cooperation Group, tasked with researching and developing policy measures on humanitarian aid for North Korea.

Over the past two decades, NGOs in South Korea have actively sought out contact with North Korean civilians, planned projects to help them, ran fundraising campaigns, and operated diverse programs of humanitarian support on their own. These activities have been indispensable to narrowing the psychological distance between South and North Korean civilians. Of course, NGOs do not presume that their humanitarian activities can solve all the complex issues characterizing the South-North relations now. Nevertheless, humanitarian aid independent of the political and military issues has crucially built and maintained a momentum for gradual improvement of the South-North relations. Sadly, this no longer appears to be the case. NGOs have been barred from playing any effective roles over the last six years. They can provide humanitarian aid only via the participation of third-party organizations.

The current environment for humanitarian NGOs in South Korea is evocative in many ways of the atmosphere surrounding aid for North Korea in the early and mid-1990s. At the time, the Korean government banned NGOs from directly contacting anyone in North Korea, ordering that all private channels of aid be centralized into Red Cross Korea. Interestingly, even then the South Korean government left at least the minimal room for humanitarian aid for North Korea to continue. The current administration, on the other hand, blocks any and all channels of aid in South Korea.

The representative of an American NGO for North Korean aid, in attendance at the 8th International Conference for Aid for North Korea held in Seoul on October 17, concluded his presentation on the damage done by the latest flood with the following remark:

“I would like to emphasize that sustainable peace can be built only upon safety for all. The humanitarian crisis caused by the September flood in North Korea reminds us yet again of not only the country’s vulnerability to natural disasters, but also the multiple difficulties that the international community faces in responding to the need for humanitarian support for North Korea. Now is the time for us to remember that aid must be provided for all people in need regardless of politics.”

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