

Opinion - Remembering North Korea's Human Side

Written by Gabriela Bernal

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GABRIELA BERNAL, JAN 6 2023

When most people hear “North Korea” many immediately think of nuclear weapons, missiles, dictatorship, and military issues. Whilst these do play a large part in forming the identity of the country, they are by no means the only noteworthy facts about North Korea. Behind the frightening headlines and missile tests is a country of 25 million people who deal with their own human issues on a daily basis. The problem is, however, that these people don’t get nearly as much attention as the country’s authoritarian regime, its leadership, or its military activity. The purpose of this short piece will be to correct such an oversight.

Over the past twelve months, the North Korean people have grappled with COVID-19, food insecurity, economic instability, increased surveillance, natural disasters, and much more. Life continues to be difficult for the majority of the population and the prospects for 2023 do not seem that much better.

Although North Korea kept a tight lid on its COVID-19 situation for the first two years of the pandemic, things began to change this year. North Korea took the virus seriously from the very beginning, before much of the world even began to pay attention to what was happening in China. As a precautionary measure, North Korea decided to close its border with China in January 2020. Although this resulted in major negative economic outcomes, which are still affecting people to this day, this extreme move was supposed to help keep the virus out and prevent the country’s already vulnerable medical system from collapsing.

According to a Daily NK report, North Korea reportedly made the COVID-19 issue its “number one national project” for 2022. Then, in the May of 2020, North Korea announced its first official outbreak of the disease, confirming the virus was spreading within the country. A vigorous campaign to eradicate the disease was accelerated from that point. For instance, authorities ordered guard posts around the country to step up their vigilance and ensure people stay in place, since the government considered bans on internal migration and movement the most significant response to the outbreak.

Mass testing campaigns also took place, with those refusing to be tested labeled as “disloyal.” The people, however, were not impressed with the government’s handling of the outbreak. Many complained that the government was not providing medicine but instead only ordered people to stay at home. These stay-at-home orders also reportedly resulted in the deaths of an unknown number of people who, amongst other challenges, were consequently unable to access nourishment, vastly undermining their food security. Alongside this, where medicines were distributed, citizens state that there were massive discrepancies concerning who received assistance, rolling out thoroughly asymmetric aid.

Although it’s impossible to know exactly how many North Koreans were infected with or died due to COVID-19, the government managed to get a hold of the spread of the virus by the August of 2020. By August 10th, Kim Jong Un, the North Korean leader, had declared “victory” in the country’s battle against the virus. By September, vaccinations against COVID-19 had reportedly began, particularly in areas with a high number of cases. Rumors developed that the vaccinations came from China, and, indeed, that North Korean health authorities referred to them as shots to prevent fever and flu, rather than vaccinations for COVID-19, undermining the claim to their ‘victory’ had this been the case. A second round of vaccinations then took place in October.

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Due to a combination of international sanctions and the more recent border closure with China, ordinary North Koreans throughout the country have been facing severe economic difficulties for years. In March 2022, the price of oil skyrocketed as a result of the fallout from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In fact, oil prices in North Korea climbed even faster than domestic exchange rates and international oil prices. As a result, North Korean authorities began restricting private sales of oil in markets. Those caught would have their oil confiscated without compensation. This was reportedly aimed at providing both state and government bodies with priority deliveries of oil and to restrict individual oil usage.

In addition to this, with a lack of raw materials coming from China and other financial challenges, many domestic North Korean industries failed to fulfill their economic targets for the first half of the year. Even if citizens wished to set market stalls to sell goods, fees at some markets in the country doubled, making it even more difficult for people to earn a living in 2022.

Another noteworthy economic policy development came when the government began issuing cash vouchers, called *donpyo*, for use in commercial transactions instead of cashless bank slips in May 2022. The vouchers were first issued in 2021 but were not enthusiastically received. People usually try to hold onto foreign currencies, such as dollars or yuan, given the volatility of the North Korean won.

Things became even more problematic with the onset of winter, as many have had difficulty securing supplies of fuel for heating. Kim Jong Un has been emphasizing the importance of increased forestation in recent years, which has resulted in increased punishment for unauthorized logging. Thus, this has further limited the options of ordinary people in finding a source of heat for their homes.

Surveillance and harsh policing are nothing new in North Korea, but with the spread of COVID-19 and many restoring to illegal activity so to put food on the table, policing measures against the citizen population has also increased. In February 2022, for example, inspections were launched targeting grain processing facilities so to uncover corruption involving illegal stockpiles of grain. Subsequently, it was revealed that various high-level officials had been operating their own private grain warehouses throughout the country.

The North Korean government has also continued its crackdown on “anti-Socialist” behaviors. According to one Daily NK report, lectures concerning the country’s ‘anti-reactionary thought law’ were held in South Hamgyong Province to emphasize party loyalty and warn of ‘the dangers of foreign thought’.

As with the example of the grain syphoning, high level officials were once again targeted with the outbreak of COVID-19. According to sources inside the country, a large number of disease control and security officials in Pyongyang and other parts of the country were blamed for the outbreak and sent to political prison camps.

Meanwhile, crackdowns against private food vendors have also increased lately. The move seems to be aimed at preventing people from buying and selling food on the streets but instead ensuring that they goods at state-sponsored outlets, bringing food prices under the direct control of the central government.

The food situation remains precarious in North Korea. In March 2022, Tomas Ojea Quintana, UN special rapporteur for human rights in the DPRK, said that some 40% of the country’s population lacks adequate food supplies and that “there are serious concerns that the most vulnerable segments of the population may be facing hunger and starvation.” Thus, food insecurity in North Korea is thought to be at dire levels of malnutrition.

According to reports, some have even been forced to commute to areas so they may beg for food, and others that many must steal food from farms; all whilst others resort to suicide, since defecting has become almost impossible. The desperation for food is reportedly at a level where authorities have had to place armed guards on several farms so to protect crops yields from theft. Indeed, a combination of winter and natural disasters could make the already dire food situation even more deadly in 2023.

North Korea has been grappling with natural disasters for decades. This year, for example, various towns were

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flooded due to heavy summer rains. Since natural disasters have a direct impact on crop yields, climate issues have also directly affect the food security problem facing North Korean citizens. To make matters worse, with no international cooperation possible on humanitarian problems, due to the ongoing strict border rules and North Korea's international position, it is difficult to make major progress in preventing recurring natural disasters from leaving a trail of destruction for local people.

Whilst the North Korean government will likely continue to focus on its military capabilities in 2023, life for ordinary people is unlikely to improve significantly. With the pandemic still not completely over and trade not nearly back to its pre-2020 levels, finding ways to earn a living remain difficult for many North Koreans. Nevertheless, there are signs that North Korean exports to China of manufactured products are slowly restarting. This could lead to the gradual full resumption of cross-border trade and help local markets recover. With China relaxing its own COVID-19 policies, economic exchange between the two countries may significantly increase in 2023. Nonetheless, we shall have to wait and see, especially as a number of individuals have been found to be travelling internationally with the virus, urging a number of states to enforce restrictions and tests on those coming from China.

If borders do indeed fully reopen, however, this would also mean the return of smuggling practices and, consequently, harsh crackdowns on black market activity and unauthorized business dealings.

Equally, the possibility also exists for international humanitarian cooperation to resume to some extent in 2023. For instance, South Korea could lead the way in coordinating between North Korea and international organizations to promote aid and the resumption of much-needed humanitarian projects on the ground in North Korea. This, however, would require the leadership's agreement in Pyongyang and a willingness on the part of the South, which seems lacking for the time being.

Whilst it is easy to forget the human face of North Korea, it does exist and should be remembered. Although military provocation will likely continue, or perhaps even accelerate, in 2023, it is also important to closely monitor developments on the ground affecting the daily lives of those in such an isolated and policed state.

About the author:

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