

# The Poor Environment In North Korea

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## An Open Letter on Human Security and the Environment in North Korea

To international policymakers, humanitarian organizations, journalists, and concerned citizens:

Discussions about the Democratic People's Republic of Korea often begin and end with nuclear weapons. Nuclear risk is undeniably serious, but security should also include the conditions under which ordinary people obtain food, clean water, health care, shelter, and protection from floods, droughts, heat, and environmental degradation. Treating humanitarian welfare as a secondary issue creates an incomplete understanding of the Korean Peninsula. (World Food Programme, n.d.; UNICEF Democratic People's Republic of Korea, n.d.)

The original letter rightly asks the international community to consider hunger and human suffering, but several historical and factual claims require correction. The Korean War was fought from 1950 to 1953 and ended with an armistice, not a peace treaty; it was not a "1960s war." North and South Korea followed sharply different economic and political paths after the war. North Korea's severe famine occurred primarily in the 1990s, after economic disruption, loss of external support, natural disasters, policy failures, and breakdowns in food distribution. Current conditions also cannot be described as unchanged for half a century. Crop outcomes vary by season, while chronic structural vulnerability persists.

## Human Security Is Part of National and International Security

Human security asks whether people are protected from hunger, preventable disease, violence, and environmental disaster. A state may possess missiles and armed forces while households remain vulnerable to malnutrition or unsafe water. These two realities are not separate. Poor nutrition weakens health and learning, environmental damage reduces agricultural output, and disaster losses increase social and economic pressure. (World Food Programme, n.d.; UNICEF Democratic People's Republic of Korea, n.d.)

Humanitarian concern should not be used to dismiss nuclear diplomacy, and nuclear diplomacy should not silence concern for civilians. The responsible position is not "food instead of denuclearization." It is to pursue risk reduction, peace, humanitarian access, and environmental resilience at the same time.

# Historical Roots of Food Insecurity

North Korea emerged from colonial rule, national division, and a devastating war. The state developed an industrial and collectivized agricultural economy supported by trade and assistance from socialist allies. The collapse of the Soviet Union and changes in external trade during the early 1990s sharply reduced access to fuel, fertilizer, machinery, and favorable exchange. Flooding and other natural shocks worsened an already fragile system.

The famine commonly called the “Arduous March” caused extensive mortality, though exact numbers remain disputed because reliable demographic data are limited. State restrictions, failures of the public distribution system, unequal access, and delayed acknowledgement contributed to suffering. Informal markets and household coping strategies later became important sources of food and income.

This history shows why hunger cannot be explained by weather alone. Climate hazards become disasters when institutions, infrastructure, resources, and public policy cannot protect people. Conversely, political analysis should not ignore geography. North Korea has limited arable land, mountainous terrain, short growing seasons in many areas, and exposure to floods, droughts, typhoons, and heatwaves. (World Food Programme, n.d.)

## What Current Evidence Shows

Current assessments must be stated carefully because access and independent data collection are restricted. The World Food Programme reports that the country continues to face serious food and nutrition challenges. Its country profile cites an estimated 10.7 million undernourished people and stunting affecting 18 percent of children, drawing on earlier international estimates. These figures should not be presented as a precise real-time census, but they indicate the scale of chronic vulnerability. (World Food Programme, n.d.)

At the same time, not every season is uniformly disastrous. The Food and Agriculture Organization’s country brief dated 10 March 2026 reported generally favorable weather for 2025 main-season crops and a favorable beginning to the 2025/26 winter season. Rice and maize account for much of main-season production, while winter and spring wheat, barley, and potatoes provide important food during the lean period. Above-average rain produced localized flooding in parts of 2025, but FAO did not report major nationwide crop damage from that event. (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2026)

These two observations are compatible. A favorable harvest can improve supply without resolving chronic undernutrition, limited dietary diversity, inadequate agricultural inputs, distribution inequalities, or disaster exposure. Responsible reporting should avoid both exaggeration and complacency. (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2026; World Food Programme, n.d.)

## Soil, Forests, and Agricultural Vulnerability

Environmental conditions directly affect food security. Much of the peninsula is mountainous, leaving a limited area suitable for cultivation. Farming on steep slopes can accelerate erosion when forests and ground cover are removed. Soil loss reduces fertility, increases sediment in waterways, and makes fields more vulnerable to intense rain. (World Food Programme, n.d.)

Deforestation has been linked to fuelwood demand, conversion of marginal land, timber use, and economic hardship. Tree loss can worsen runoff and landslide risk, although environmental change varies by region and satellite interpretation should be combined with local evidence. Reforestation is valuable only when planting is maintained, species are appropriate, and households have alternatives to cutting trees for energy.

Shortages of fertilizer, fuel, machinery, spare parts, and irrigation capacity can reduce yields and post-harvest efficiency. Increasing production therefore requires more than distributing seed. Soil restoration, crop diversity, water management, storage, transport, energy, and access to technical knowledge must work together. (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2026; World Food Programme, n.d.)

## Climate-Related Disasters

WFP identifies droughts, floods, typhoons, and heatwaves as recurring threats that damage crops and infrastructure and contribute to erosion, landslides, and soil degradation. A small shock can have a large effect when households possess few reserves and public systems already operate near their limits. (World Food Programme, n.d.)

Disaster risk reduction is more effective than repeated emergency response alone. River dredging, embankment repair, reforestation, slope stabilization, soil improvement, drainage, resilient seed varieties, weather information, and safe storage can reduce losses. Such programs should be evaluated for environmental impact and designed with communities rather than imposed as short campaigns.

## Water, Sanitation, and Health

Food is only one part of nutrition. Unsafe water and inadequate sanitation increase diarrhea and other disease, preventing children from absorbing nutrients. Health facilities require reliable electricity, clean water, medicines, equipment, and trained staff. Pregnant women, nursing mothers, infants, older people, and people with disabilities face particular risks when services fail. (UNICEF Democratic People's Republic of Korea, n.d.)

UNICEF's work in the country includes nutrition, health, water, sanitation, and hygiene. Therapeutic and fortified foods can save lives, but prevention requires varied diets, vaccination, maternal care, clean water, and functioning local services. Humanitarian programs should protect dignity and avoid using recipients as political symbols. (UNICEF Democratic People's Republic of Korea, n.d.)

## Government Responsibility and International Constraints

The North Korean government bears responsibility for public policy, resource allocation, transparency, movement restrictions, and the ability of humanitarian agencies to assess need and monitor assistance. Military priorities and political control can compete with investment in household welfare. A rights-based analysis must acknowledge these choices.

International conditions also matter. United Nations sanctions include humanitarian exemptions, but banking restrictions, shipping risk, compliance uncertainty, procurement delays, and donor reluctance can complicate legitimate assistance. Governments should enforce measures against prohibited weapons activity while ensuring that humanitarian goods, agricultural inputs, medical equipment, and disaster support can move through clear and timely channels.

Blaming only sanctions would ignore domestic policy; blaming only the government would ignore the practical effects of isolation and external restrictions. Effective action requires evidence rather than slogans.

## Why Access and Transparency Matter

Humanitarian planning depends on knowing who needs assistance, where shortages occur, and whether aid reaches intended recipients. Independent access, household surveys, market information, nutrition screening, satellite crop monitoring, and transparent distribution data improve decisions. Restrictions on monitoring create uncertainty and weaken donor confidence. (World Food Programme, n.d.)

International agencies must also be honest about the age and limitations of their data. Repeating one estimate for years without explaining its source can create false precision. Satellite imagery can assess vegetation and weather but cannot directly reveal household diets, hidden markets, or unequal distribution. Multiple methods are necessary.

## Ethical Obligation Beyond Political Sympathy

Peter Singer's argument in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" asks individuals and affluent societies to

prevent severe suffering when they can do so without sacrificing something of comparable moral importance. North Korean civilians should not be denied concern because of disagreement with their government. Children do not choose nuclear policy, sanctions, borders, or agricultural systems. (Singer, 1972)

Ethical action, however, requires more than fundraising imagery. Assistance should be effective, monitored, culturally appropriate, and designed to avoid reinforcing abuse or diversion. The duty to help includes a duty to learn whether an intervention works.

## A Practical Agenda

First, diplomatic agreements should protect sustained humanitarian access from changes in political tension. Food, vaccines, therapeutic nutrition, water systems, and emergency supplies should not depend entirely on short-term negotiations.

Second, support should strengthen resilient agriculture: soil testing, erosion control, diversified crops, integrated pest management, repairable machinery, post-harvest storage, and efficient irrigation. Programs must account for local climate and labor conditions. (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2026)

Third, disaster risk reduction should connect environmental restoration with household livelihoods. Tree planting succeeds when communities have secure benefits, alternative energy, and responsibility for maintenance.

Fourth, sanctions procedures should be clear, predictable, and fast for legitimate humanitarian transactions. Banks and suppliers need practical guidance so that lawful exemptions work in reality.

Fifth, authorities should permit credible monitoring and publish more reliable information. Transparency is not an attack on sovereignty; it is necessary for directing scarce resources and demonstrating results. (World Food Programme, n.d.)

Finally, international media should report North Korea as a society of human beings rather than only as a weapons problem. Coverage should avoid sensationalism, unverifiable claims, and comparisons that erase the country's specific history.

## Conclusion

North Korea's environmental and humanitarian challenges demand sustained attention alongside nuclear and military concerns. The country's food insecurity reflects limited arable land, climate hazards, soil and forest degradation, shortages of agricultural inputs, distribution problems, political choices, and international isolation. FAO's favorable assessment of the 2025 harvest season is

welcome, but it does not eliminate chronic malnutrition or the need for resilient systems. Human security requires nutrition, water, health care, disaster prevention, transparent data, and protected humanitarian access. The international community should neither ignore state responsibility nor allow political conflict to make civilians invisible. (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2026; UNICEF Democratic People's Republic of Korea, n.d.; World Food Programme, n.d.)

Sincerely,  
A concerned advocate for human security

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