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UN Warns North Koreans Face Starvation

By Celia Hatton

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North Korean children eat lunch, including rice provided by U.N. World Food Programme, at nursery in Yomju county, North Pyongan province (WFP handout photo)

The U.N. World Food Program is warning that food stocks in North Korea are dipping to dangerously low levels. WFP officials warn that without new donations, they will have to cut food rations to some of the country's most vulnerable people.

The World Food Program is issuing an urgent appeal to the outside world for more aid donations to North Korea.

The U.N. agency is seeking international donations of 500,000 tons of food, about \$200 million worth, to cover the expected shortfall in the coming year.

WFP Asia operations regional director Tony Bradbury said that for the past few months the aid pipeline has been adequate to feed the 6.5 million highly vulnerable North Koreans - such as children and the elderly.

But Mr. Bradbury warned that food stocks were quickly drying up, and that some of the agency beneficiaries would soon suffer the effects.

"It is a very bad confluence of events where we are about to run out of [donated] food and they are about to run out of their own food, and unless we get on a very urgent basis, new contributions in the next coming weeks, we are going to face these very serious cuts," he said.

The World Food Program says it has already stopped giving vegetable oil to 900,000 elderly North Koreans. As of next week, the U.N. program will also have

to stop providing oil rations to kindergarten children, nurseries, and pregnant and nursing women.

He said the WFP beneficiaries receive the equivalent of one 250-gram cup of rice a day in food aid.

Mr. Bradbury rejected concerns that food aid from his agency was actually helping to feed North Korean government and army personnel. He said the food was going to average North Koreans, who desperately need it.

"Food is needed in the country right now, very badly," he said. "But it is the people that need the food, not the government and not the army. The government is going to be okay, the army is going to be okay; I am not worried about them."

Some analysts have speculated that North Korea's major donors of aid, including the United States and Japan, are deliberately withholding aid in order to force North Korea to resume negotiations over its nuclear weapons programs.

But Mr. Bradbury said he is confident that such countries were not using the issue of food aid as a political weapon. He expressed optimism that donor countries are willing to separate political issues from the immediate needs of the North Korean people.



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