Challenges of North Korean Food Crisis

Marcus Noland, reporting on new surveys of North Korean refugees, says the United States must engage the Pyongyang government despite myriad frustrations and obstacles standing in the way.


Steve Weisman: This is Steve Weisman at the Peterson Institute for International Economics. Our guest on Peterson Perspectives today is Marcus Noland, senior fellow at the Institute, author of several books and papers about, among other things, North Korea, the subject of our conversation today.

Welcome, Marc.

Marcus Noland: Thank you very much.

Steve Weisman: Marc, you made a presentation at the Institute this morning with some others on North Korea and the famine, in particular on surveys done of refugees. Our listeners and readers might be interested to know first a little bit about this survey.

Marcus Noland: The material I presented earlier today was based on two surveys. The first one was done basically in calendar year 2005. It was conducted in China. It involved more than 1,300 respondents. I helped design the survey instrument. I did not personally administer the survey. Simply because of my race and nationality, I would have stuck out in that area, and these people are technically illegal migrants. They are extremely worried, with good reason, about forced repatriation to North Korea if they’re caught, and so my physical presence would have simply endangered both the respondents and other people doing interviews.

The second survey was conducted in South Korea in November this past year. That survey was done in a much more secure legal environment, which permitted us to administer a much more detailed and nuanced questionnaire. As a consequence, most of the results I presented this morning were from that recent survey done in November 2008.

Steve Weisman: But I think you said the results have been fairly consistent.

Marcus Noland: One of the things we were concerned about was the fact that our sample in China was more or less any North Korean refugee we could find. There was really no way to do any kind of normal social science sampling. Obviously, this was easier to handle in South Korea, where these individuals are legal residents. And so, it was reassuring that the results that we obtained in South Korea largely confirmed the results we had obtained in the earlier survey done in China.
Steve Weisman: Unfortunately what all surveys have shown is a humanitarian catastrophe in North Korea that’s almost unimaginable, and it’s taking place in the most isolated country in the world. I’m especially interested in this, by the way, because I’ve actually been to North Korea myself as a journalist in the early 1990s when the famine that we’re describing was just getting underway. But the famine is gigantic and has been a disaster. Tell me some of the basic statistics.

Marcus Noland: I estimate that 600,000 to a million people died, which would be about 3 percent to 5 percent of the precrisis population, which would make it one of the worst famines of the 20th century. And it’s a famine that’s had an enormous legacy. Once the famine ended in the late 1990s, North Korea entered into what is really sort of a chronic food emergency. We see the legacy of that famine continuing today with high rates of malnourishment, stunting, a particular problem nowadays with women who were children during the famine period, who didn’t develop properly themselves and are now having quite a few problems with child-bearing and maternal health.

One of the things we found in the survey was that about a third of the respondents reported having lost a family member during the famine. And although the international humanitarian relief program at its peak was targeting roughly eight million people, or more than a third of the population, large numbers of people in both surveys reported not knowing of the existence of the humanitarian aid program. And of those who did know about it, the majority felt that they were not beneficiaries, that they had not received this food. And when we asked them who the beneficiaries were, a majority identified the military and secondarily, high government and party officials. Having this status of knowing of the humanitarian aid program, but believing that one was denied aid in one’s time of desperate need, turns out is an absolutely profoundly demoralizing and embittering experience.

One of the people I worked with on the first survey, Yuno Chung, has training in psychology and is very interested in mental health issues, and administered to the refugees a battery of tests typically used to assess mental health status. Most of these people would probably be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress syndrome in a clinical setting. Indeed, one of the people in the audience today was an author of a study that documented precisely this in a clinical setting.

And what we found is the poor mental health outcomes were highly correlated with their experiences in North Korea. The number one correlate was this status of knowing of aid but believing that one had been denied it. It had an even bigger negative impact on mental health than having lost a family member in the famine or even being incarcerated in the prison system.

Steve Weisman: It’s shocking. One of the speakers at this morning’s conference was again saying there really should be no alternative but to have a policy that would basically topple the regime in North Korea. On the other hand, it’s exactly the feeling of paranoia in North Korea that reinforces their intransigence and state control. North Korea poses a tremendously complicated challenge for diplomacy for the West. What do you think the United States should be doing right now to engage North Korea?
Marcus Noland: I think that in order to obtain real change in North Korea, we'll have to have some significant regime transformation, if not regime change. Being based in Washington, we have a tendency to think about changes in society as emanating from the top, from some conscious attempts to reform policy and then being transmitted from below. What's apparent in the case of North Korea is, it really worked the other way around. The famine of the mid-1990s was essentially a product of state failure. And ever since then, there's been a kind of tug of war within North Korean policy, where the government, which is highly insecure with respect to the domestic political implications of economic change, has attempted to control or even reverse the marketization from below that has happened over the last 15 years or so.

This is the source of their insecurity. One of the things the surveys demonstrate is that the so-called reforms of 2002 really didn't deepen marketization in any significant way. It had already occurred and indeed, even the attempts in 2005 to roll it back were really only partially successful. So it is a regime that's highly insecure.

So how can we be engaged with them? It's very difficult. Today, they've been making threats of apparently additional missile launches and even nuclear tests. And there was some analysis by one of the participants this morning that they might even undertake preparations to do some kind of atmospheric test, which would obviously be extraordinarily provocative. Even if they didn't do it, just to go through the preparations that would be observable from the outside world would be provocative.

So in the short run, at least, I really don't hold that much hope for engagement. In the longer term, it seems to me, the way that we should try to frame this question with the North Koreans is that we have a series of concerns involving not only the nuclear issue but things like human rights. Our concerns are not weapons that we're using to try to beat them over the head, but rather it's simply the very nature of the world system in the 21st century, that there are basic standards that countries have to uphold to really be full participants in that system. And we should, I think, try to explain it in those terms. In terms of specifics, I think that we should absolutely demand that the International Red Cross and the relevant United Nations agencies have access to the prison camp systems. And in terms of the humanitarian aid program and responding to the ongoing humanitarian crisis there, I think the results of our survey about how few people knew about these programs, and how the ones who knew about it overwhelmingly thought that it went to less deserving groups, at a minimum should give people pause in designing those programs.

If an engagement strategy is not successful, then the best way to address the human rights issues in North Korea is to get people out of North Korea. And here, the United States first and foremost has to deal with China. China, despite its presence on the executive committee of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, has refused to allow UNHCR to do interviews of asylum seekers within China or North Korean asylum seekers within China. That has to change. The Chinese claim that they are worried that an influx of North Korean refugees would upset the ethnic balance in their border provinces.
I think those concerns are overblown but nevertheless, I think we should take China at its word. And what that suggests to me is that, either through the UN or through some sort of coalition of the willing, we should approach the Chinese and indicate our willingness to fund temporary refugee resettlement camps. That is to say, these North Koreans will not be permanent wards of China, that South Korea, the United States, and other countries are willing to absorb them, but China needs to do its part in terms of allowing for smooth exit of people from what is really a desperate situation.

Steve Weisman: Today The Washington Post had an editorial urging the Obama administration and in particular Secretary Clinton not to abandon the six-party talks with North Korea. Those are the regional talks that involve South Korea, Japan, China, Russia, and the United States. Do you have any thoughts about whether direct negotiations between the United States and North Korea might be the way to go now?

Marcus Noland: I think we can walk and chew gum at the same time. There is a reason why we are in these multilateral talks. The previous nuclear crisis in 1993 and 1994 was resolved in all important aspects bilaterally. And the lesson that the US policymakers learned at that time was that if it ever happened again, they needed to have everyone else in the room hearing the same thing from the North Koreans and making it clear that everyone was on board. The United States was really faced with Monday morning quarterbacking, countries trying to impose various constraints on American behavior, sort of ex-post. And so the importance of it being a multilateral undertaking was learned during that previous experience.

Now having said that, of course there's always going to be room for bilateral negotiations. There are a number of issues where it's sort of natural that the United States take a lead. So I think, really, to resolve this problem diplomatically, you're going to need a combination of both approaches.

But I think the important thing to underline is, it’s the North Koreans who've walked away from the table. It’s the North Koreans who are now threatening that if the United Nations Security Council does not apologize to them and withdraw its recent action, it will engage in additional provocations. And while we may not always see eye-to-eye with China and Russia as well as Japan and South Korea, the other parties I think are willing to negotiate; it’s the North Koreans who have walked away at this point.

Steve Weisman: On that grim note of an impasse and a tragedy, Marc, thanks for joining us and we'll look for updates on this with you in the months ahead.

Marcus Noland: Thank you.