

Secret Message Just Smuggled Out of North Korea

The words in the above headline are only part of a message we recently received from a North Korean believer who shared about the food crisis North Koreans are facing in their country. While good news recently came out that North Korea has reopened communication lines with South Korea, the daily living conditions for North Korean citizens continue to worsen.

Normally, North Korea is slow to admit anything negative in the country or ask for help from the international community. But in April, North Korean ruler Kim Jong-un made public statements about the crisis—signaling a dire situation.

Speaking to his party officials, the 37-year-old leader called on them to “wage another, more difficult ‘Arduous March’ in order to relieve our people of the difficulty, even a little.” The Arduous March refers to the name the North Korean people gave the great famine of the 1990s in which 2-3 million people died.

Kim’s reference to the “more difficult ‘Arduous March,’” offers a glimpse of the crisis North Koreans are currently facing. Days before the conference, Kim remarked that the country faced the “worst-ever situation” and “unprecedentedly numerous challenges.” These are terms Kim has never before used in public, suggesting the crisis is severe for the North Korean people—including more than an estimated 400,000 underground Christians.

Sadly, food shortages are not unusual for most North Koreans. The country often experiences extreme weather events, such as flooding, which stifle any harvest. The little food that is harvested often doesn’t make it to ordinary citizens.

North Korea operates a “military first” policy, meaning that high-ranking officials and those in the military get the first allotment of food and other essentials; the rest of the population gets whatever’s left, which often isn’t much.

A Precious Commodity

The global COVID-19 crisis has made this situation even worse. At the start of the pandemic, in an attempt to keep out the virus, North Korea closed its borders completely. The restrictions prevented official imports from other countries and halted the smuggling of goods to be sold on the black market—where North Koreans often get their food, medicines and other essentials. Although some trade has now resumed and the borders are no longer closed completely, the situation is still critical.

“People are worried about the prices of rice, corn and essential foods, which have risen rapidly,” North Korean believers told us. They explained that the prices of some items, such as salt and cooking oil, have quadrupled.

The price of corn, the staple diet for most of rural North Korea, has reportedly fluctuated tremendously. At times, 35 ounces of corn have cost more than a month’s wages.

Food is a scarce and precious commodity. North Koreans told us: “There are new barbed wire fences built around the farms and food factories, with guards watching 24 hours a day.”

“Most families can’t get rice,” the message continued. “Instead, they are eating ‘speedy powder’ and wild vegetables they can forage themselves.” In North Korea, speedy powder is a salty broth with little nutrition; it’s difficult to ingest.

“Some households are struggling to eat even once a day,” our sources shared.

Feeding the 60,000

While the situation might sound hopeless, your prayers and support are helping our North Korean brothers and sisters survive. Through our safe houses and networks in China that serve North Korean refugees, Open Doors is providing vital food aid for 60,000 North Koreans every year, as well as medicine and clothes.

A North Korean believer shares: "We were overwhelmed when we received this food. No matter what circumstances we encounter, we will break through all difficulties with united hearts, and your loving support and prayers. It is God's grace and blessing."

While the border closures have made it more difficult for our networks to provide food for North Koreans who make it to China, by God's grace the work has continued. We have even increased the amount we're providing, says Brother Simon*, coordinator for Open Doors' ministry among North Korean believers.

"Our distribution projects that provide food and medicines for North Korean Christians have been very significant in supporting their survival during this desperate situation in North Korea," he explains. "And we have increased the amount we are providing. Even during such difficult times, God continues to show us His faithfulness."

Brother John* is an Open Doors worker who has helped with food distribution for North Koreans at our safe houses in China. He shares what he often hears from North Korean believers: "They all say that not even their relatives would help them like we do. Many of them travel to China to visit their relatives to ask for help. But in many cases, those relatives are not able to help; some are not willing.

"So, when we give them something, they just start to well up. They weep, and they try to say thank you, but we know that some things are not possible to say through words, and we see

that on their faces. Lots of tears shed.”

Many North Korean believers will share the little food that they have with others and will do the same with the food they receive from Open Doors—called “holy rice.” Brother John remembers meeting one North Korean woman whose grandmother would share their food with her neighbors.

“When she was young, she used to get very upset with her grandmother for giving out food when there was not enough left for the family,” Brother John says. “Her grandmother would smile and say, ‘That’s what life is.’” At the time, this woman had no idea her grandmother was a Christian. After she fled the country and became a Christian herself, she realized that the songs her grandmother would sing were Christian songs.

‘Thank You With All My Heart’

Another message we received from a North Korean believer who was helped at a house in China reflects both courageous faith and simple gratitude: “With everlasting love, God takes care of us. As a representative of the North Korean underground church, I want to thank the international believers. I thank you with all my heart.”

* Representative names and images used for security reasons.

Pray with the underground church in North Korea

- Pray for an end to the COVID-19 pandemic and that North Korea’s borders will open even wider.
- Ask God to provide “hidden manna” for His people in North Korea.
- Pray that the food provided by Open Doors through our networks in China will reach those most in need.
- Pray for wisdom and protection for those involved in Open Doors’ ministry to North Koreans in China.

- Pray for courage and protection for North Korean believers who are taking food and other essentials, as well as the gospel, back into North Korea and to their neighbors. {eo}

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