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NORTH KOREA - FOOD SHORTAGE AND POLITICAL STABILITY

A severe shortage of food in North Korea is affecting all sectors of that society, including the military. The 1996 harvest fell about 1.5 million tons below estimated need. Pyongyang's efforts to purchase grain on the international market have been complicated by a lack of credit and hard currency.

Despite pervasive hardship, there have been no clear signs of impending domestic unrest. North Koreans do not blame their political leadership, ideology, or economic system for their plight. Rather, they view it as a consequence of recurrent imperialism over the past two millennia. The continuing strength of their family-centered Confucian value system gives this society profound resilience.

Although, the North Korean government has informed its people that food shortages will continue, public confidence remains high that the government is equitably distributing all available supplies through its food ration system. This once cloistered and xenophobic government in 1995 took the unprecedented step of appealing for international assistance. It has even encouraged private barter trade, both domestically and along its border with China. Food from China is exchanged for North Korean manufactured goods and handicrafts. Private individuals then "market" this food at numerous unregulated "farmers markets" which have appeared across North Korean.

Abnormally heavy rains in the summers of 1995 and 1996 destroyed thousands of homes and a very significant percentage of crops. The food shortage has caused thousands of deaths, and many children and elderly people show signs of serious malnutrition. International assistance helped to avert a human disaster in 1996. Japan, the Republic of Korea, and China have donated large amounts of food to North Korea. The World Food Program and International Red Cross coordinated an extensive relief effort to which the United States, and many European nations, made significant contributions.

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