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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Chairman Kerry and Ranking Member Lugar, and distinguished Senators, thank you for the invitation to speak today. We are gathering at a time of particularly high tension between the US and DPRK governments, as my expert colleagues will be able to address. I would like to focus my comments today on the experiences of US non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in addressing critical humanitarian needs within North Korea.

I have been working on assistance programs in North Korea since my organization, Mercy Corps, first became involved in 1996. Even in the face of shifting political dynamics, humanitarian assistance has been effective through the last decade at making continuous progress in meeting real human needs while also promoting constructive communication with the North Korean people.

In particular, I would like to highlight the recent USAID-supported food program that fed 900,000 North Korean children, pregnant women and elderly who needed food. A precedent-setting agreement between the US and DPRK governments gave the NGOs greater ability than ever before to ascertain need and accountably deliver food to the most vulnerable through a 16-person in-country team.

This program provided an important model for how we might normalize humanitarian assistance based on international humanitarian standards. It also demonstrated the spirit and goodwill of the people of the United States toward the people of North Korea.

A DECADE OF NGO HUMANITARIAN ENGAGEMENT WITH THE DPRK

Many US NGOs, including my organization Mercy Corps, first became involved with the DPRK in 1996 during a time of serious famine. The NGOs mobilized to provide urgent relief assistance to the people of North Korea as news of the famine surfaced, with strong support from private donors.

In 1998, the USG embarked upon its first large food assistance program in response to the famine, which continued through the year 2000. A group of US NGOs known as the Private Voluntary Organization Consortium (PVOC) monitored a portion of that food assistance. The lessons we learned from that three-year food program proved invaluable for designing and implementing the most recent food program.

Since those famine years, approximately a dozen US NGOs have remained continuously engaged in providing humanitarian assistance. We have worked to build and maintain relationships within North Korea that have enabled us to work ever more effectively. Our programs address basic human needs such as healthcare and disease prevention, water and sanitation and food security. We have sent and received many dozens of delegations over the years, providing both technical education and, importantly, enabling people to people connections that seek to improve mutual understanding and communication.

We have all relied upon private funding and the interest and support of our communities. For Mercy Corps, dedicated volunteers in our hometown of Portland, Oregon have been steadfast supporters. They have given technical and financial assistance, traveled to North Korea and provided hospitality to visiting groups of farmers and members of our North Korean partner agency.

As a result, many NGO workers have developed an understanding of the opportunities, constraints and realities of operating within North Korea. We have been able to work with the Health and Agricultural Ministries, as well as with provincial and county officials. We have also helped North Koreans better understand how we operate and deliver needs-based programming. We are all mission-driven organizations dedicated to provision of humanitarian assistance as well as to the importance of building bridges of understanding between people.

USAID FOOD PROGRAM 2008 – 2009

The acute famine has subsided since the late nineties, but North Korea remains highly food insecure. In November of 2008, the UN estimated that this year's food gap would equal approximately 1.8 million metric tons. This means that over 8.7 million elderly, pregnant and lactating women, children in nurseries, kindergartens and primary schools, children in residential institutions and in pediatric wards would require food assistance to meet their basic food needs.

In 2008, officials from USAID, the National Security Council and the Department of State, working with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the DPRK, negotiated a protocol that outlined the delivery of 500,000 MT of food over 12 months according to international standards for food programs. This groundbreaking protocol served to significantly normalize humanitarian assistance programs in the first USG food program since 2000.

For this program, 400,000 MT of food was allocated to the UN World Food Program, while 100,000 MT were allocated to a consortium of five US NGOs. All five NGOs -- World Vision, Global Resource Services, Christian Friends of Korea, Samaritan's Purse and Mercy Corps as lead -- brought more than a decade of experience in humanitarian work inside North Korea, with significant understanding of the culture and long-standing relationships.

The USNGOs negotiated a separate Letter of Understanding (LOU) with the Korea America Private Exchange Society (KAPES), our partner agency within the DPRK, based upon the protocol agreement between the two governments. The LOU outlined in much greater detail the specifics of how the program would operate. **The official protocol and resulting LOU equipped us to mount a program based on identified humanitarian need and international standards, with significant levels of access to all points of food delivery.**

Key provisions of our LOU included an initial needs assessment effort, signage at all distribution points that indicated the food was a gift from the American people and USAID, an agreed upon list of institutions and individuals targeted to receive food, the ability to track the food as it went from port to warehouse to distribution point, all the way to the beneficiary's home with a minimum of 24 hours notice; and the inclusion of Korean speakers on our team. We established two offices in the provincial cities of Huichon and Sinuiju plus a main office in the diplomatic compound in Pyongyang. These provisions are well in line with international standards.

The program began with a rapid food security assessment in June 2009, conducted over an 18-day period in our two target provinces of Chaggang and North Pyongyang (see attached map). The ten-person team interviewed county officials, the heads of kindergartens, nursery schools, orphanages and warehouses and conducted household visits. This assessment affirmed chronic levels of malnutrition within the DPRK. Critical key findings included:

- The DPRK public distribution system is the primary source of food for most North Korean citizens, with a stated provision of 600 grams of cereals per person per day. Rations had been reduced to 350 grams in April, then down to 250 grams in May and 150 grams in June, providing each recipient with a handful of rice or corn per day;
- Cereal stocks were anticipated to be exhausted by the end of June, 2008, in 24 of the 25 counties surveyed;
- A decade of food insecurity had resulted in chronic low birth weights, cases of malnutrition among children under five years of age and greater vulnerability to other illnesses.

As a result, we identified a group of 900,000 “most vulnerable” beneficiaries within the 25 counties where the NGOs would operate, focusing on children under five years of age, pregnant and lactating women and the elderly.

Over the next nine months, we fielded a team of 16 program monitors who lived for up to eight months in country, 12 of whom lived in the two provincial field offices over the tough winter months. This team was supported with dozens of visits by technical support personnel.

We trained more than 100 provincial and county officials in handling food as it transited from the port to their areas. We encountered numerous problems associated with moving large amounts of food, including bag miscounts, spillage and warehouse storage issues. Importantly, we were able to work with local officials to remedy these situations. Our ability to identify and jointly solve problems as they arose was an important positive feature of the program.

We brought in 12 vehicles for the program, which were plated with yellow license plates that read AF1 through 12, signifying either American friends or American food, depending upon the translation – or both together as we sometimes heard.

Our teams saw undeniable need among the people we served, and they also heard many thanks from the thousands of North Koreans with whom they interacted. During household visits, team members were welcomed graciously and usually offered the warmest seat of the house as a gesture of respect.

Throughout the program, we frequently had to re-affirm or clarify key provisions of the LOU. Many times there were differing interpretations of critical issues. However, we were able to work constructively with our DPRK counterparts to solve problems as they arose and, as a result, meet the food needs of nearly a million of the most vulnerable, with a greater level of accountability and certainty than ever before.

I would like to share a few critical factors that contributed to the success of this program – factors that have been the foundation of most NGO humanitarian programs:

- Significant knowledge of the culture and country, including long-standing relationships with individuals within KAPES, enabling us to understand and solve problems that surfaced along the way;
- Ability to focus on technical level problem-solving;
- Consistency in interaction and focus on humanitarian issues;
- Follow through on commitments;
- Flexibility when possible, within an overall framework based on humanitarian need and action.

The food program was, regrettably, prematurely ended on March 31, 2009, at the request of North Korean authorities. The NGOs at that point had brought in 71,000 MT of the 100,000 MT allocated, with 50,000 MT distributed according to the negotiated agreements. At the time of the program closure, 21,000 MT had not been fully distributed, with 4,000 MT still at the port and the remainder in transit or in country warehouses. KAPES has since reported to us that these remaining commodities have been delivered according to the negotiated implementation plan with the exception of 4,000 MT that were reportedly used for food for work activities in the two provinces. We have not been able to confirm this distribution plan through independent program monitoring.

The program, despite the disappointing early end and many challenges, set new precedents for working in the DPRK with normalized assistance programs that meet international standards. Above all, we believe we served to demonstrate the compassion and goodwill of the American people through provision of much-needed food as well as through thousands of conversations and individual contacts.

All of the five NGOs that participated in the food program continue to work in the DPRK with ongoing programs focused on health, water sanitation and food security. Three of the participating NGOs have made return visits to the DPRK since the closure of the food program to move forward ongoing assistance programs, with excellent cooperation from relevant authorities.

We believe continued humanitarian engagement is vital to maintain. The political tension between the USG and DPRK governments is well known. Humanitarian assistance has been on the few areas of continuous, positive steps forward through the last decade. These humanitarian programs meet critical human needs, demonstrate the best of American values and maintain an important channel for people to people connection.

Thank you.

