Andrew S. Natsios
Administrator, U.S. Agency for International Development
before the
Committee on Foreign Relations
Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs
United States Senate
June 5, 2003

Chairman Brownback, Members of the committee: It is an honor to be here today to discuss "Life Inside North Korea." As you may know, during the North Korean famine I have researched the living conditions of the average North Korean for many years with a particular focus on their food security. I have traveled inside the country, visited the border areas in China, and interviewed North Korean refugees in a number of countries.

My testimony will be based on five propositions about the nature of the North Korean regime and the way in which it controls North Korean society.

- The central operating principle which drives all of the decision making of the North Korean government is regime survival and protection of the system which supports it at all costs because the leaders believe that reforming the system could lead to its collapse.

- No totalitarian regime of the last century has exercised a greater degree of absolute control over its society than the North Korean government, though cracks began to appear in the state apparatus of terror beginning in 1996 because of economic collapse and the famine crisis.

- The unwritten and unspoken compact prior to the famine was that the people surrendered their freedom in exchange for which the state agreed to care for them, heavily tempered by political loyalty, from cradle to grave. This compact began to crumble by 1996 as virtually all public services including the food distribution system collapsed except those serving the party cadre, the security apparatus, and the capital city.

- While the regime under Kim Il Sung had widespread public support prior to the crisis of the 1990s, the famine, the collapse of services, and the rise in the human misery index have meant a substantial decline in public support even among the party cadres for Kim Jong Il and his government, which now more than ever relies on the state security apparatus and military to maintain control.

- The economic crisis of the 1990s, which led to a famine that killed more than 2 ½ million people, or 10% of the population of the country, has caused irreversible changes to the old order and the system which supports its.

It is a fact that no government in the world is more reclusive, more suspicious of contact with the outside world, more isolated, and more devoted to absolute control and secrecy than North Korea. This fact makes it difficult, but not impossible, to develop an accurate understanding of conditions in the country. We now have more information on life in North Korea than at any time in the recent past. Extensive reporting is available, from a wide variety of reputable sources, which paints a consistent and all

too clear picture of the Orwellian society that exists in North Korea today. Human Rights Watch, Jasper Becker's research and reporting on the famine, Good Friends (a South Korean Buddhist nongovernmental organization), Amnesty International, Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, Doctors Without Borders, and Action Contre la Faim, among others, have reported extensively on their direct experiences in the country and on the results of interviews with North Korean refugees and defectors. Additional evidence exists in professional journals and an increasing number of private books which describes in great detail the lives of specific individuals who have lived in North Korea.

There are apologists for the North Korean government who contend that the regime in North Korea is not as repressive, controlling, and brutal as I am about to describe. They are wrong. North Korean refugees have often described their country as one massive prison.

Every Aspect of Life Controlled

Mr. Chairman, life in North Korea today is less free and less humane than life in any other country now or in modern time. Every aspect of life is controlled and every bit of individualism destroyed. This is not simply the result of a totalitarian regime. There have been many totalitarian regimes that have aggressively, even brutally, controlled their citizenry. Upon review, however, most other recent totalitarian regimes have allowed some measure of private freedom in the lives of the people if they avoided dissent and did not threaten the political system. In the case of North Korea, we have no evidence of underground dissent, as there was in the Samidazat

literature in the Soviet Union, for example. Buddhism and Christianity have been virtually destroyed as religious institutions in the country.

On March 31, 2003, the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor released its country report on human rights practices for North Korea. That report provides an accurate and balanced description of life inside North Korea today, and I strongly support its findings.

In order to convey the true horror that is life in North Korea, I would like to discuss a number of aspects of the North Korean regime that help explain the extent to which all aspects of life are controlled and regulated.

The Potemkin Village Syndrome

When discussing the regime's control over the population of North Korea, many people cite the surveillance and monitoring capability of the large military and security service apparatus. While it is true that these organizations have their eyes and ears imbedded throughout the country, it is not these physical controls that give the regime its power over the population. The regime in North Korea derives the vast majority of its influence over the minds and hearts of the people through its absolute control and manipulation of all information made available to the local population. By controlling what a person hears, reads, and sees, one controls what he or she thinks and believes.

In North Korea, all aspects of the media are controlled completely by the regime. Newspaper, radio, and television reporting are all centrally

managed and convey only the messages that the regime condones. Radios and televisions in the country are built to receive only State approved stations, and any attempt to modify a set to receive foreign broadcasts is a criminal offense. A system of travel permits modeled after Stalinist Russia restricts the movement of people outside their villages. Even travel between counties and provinces by individuals is severely restricted to prevent the transfer of information between different groups in the country. As an example of how restricted the travel of North Koreans within their own country can be, the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) staff have reported that, on many of their monitoring visits throughout the country, their handlers reveal that the trip is their first visit outside the county where they lived.

Today in North Korea, maintaining control of information remains of paramount concern to the regime. In fact, given the informational contamination that has been precipitated by the humanitarian crises over the last eight years, regaining control of the population's access to information has taken on new importance. Since the mid 1990s, the flow of international food assistance has been accompanied by international staff who insist on following the food for monitoring purposes. In addition, beginning in 1997, the United States insisted on labeling each bag of U.S. food donated to North Korea with the phrase in Korean "gift of the people of the United States." By some estimates, there are over 30 million Korean-marked bags circulating around North Korea. Each visit by a foreign humanitarian monitor and each food aid bag distributed around the country represent informational contamination that requires an explanation by the regime. In

the case of the food bags, refugees have reported that the U.S. food aid is explained as reparations for damages caused during the war.

It has also been suggested that the aversion of the North Korean regime to providing greater access and more random monitoring for humanitarian workers has little to do with military security – which is the regime's excuse of record. Instead, broader access around the country and the more random monitoring of humanitarian deliveries are believed to concern the regime because it would lack the means to control the flow of information that the expansion of these systems would induce.

Food Allocation as a System of Control

In North Korea, a "public distribution system," or PDS, was used to provide both food and many material needs to the majority of the population. In addition, the PDS was used to promote loyalty to the regime and prevent or limit the travel of the population. In their book, *North Korea after Kim Il Sung*, Henriksen and Mo state that, "*Food ration levels were traditionally determined by a combination of social rank, the importance of one's profession to the state, and political status.*" The ration system promotes loyalty to the regime, as any misconduct, real or perceived, could result in demotion to a lower rank of the scale and thus less food for the individual. The ration system severely regulates the desire of the beneficiaries to move around the country as the beneficiaries must be present at their local PDS station to receive rations.

The collapse of the PDS, except for the party elite, capital city, security apparatus, and the defense industries, has meant that this means of controlling behavior has declined in importance. The collapse of the PDS, which the central authorities were unable to reverse, was finally acknowledged when the authorities announced in 2001 that people were responsible for feeding themselves (except for the groups mentioned above).

Since 1995, when the international community began providing food assistance to North Korea, the needs of the most vulnerable groups – presumably those among the lower ranks of the food system – have been the focus of international aid. Unfortunately, there are increasing reports that the most vulnerable are not receiving the international assistance despite the best efforts of the international community.

On March 9, 2000, the nongovernmental organization, Action Contre la Faim (ACF), issued a report explaining its decision to withdraw from North Korea. ACF had been working in North Korea since January of 1998, attempting to provide humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable in the country. One major justification that the organization cited for closing its program was the regime's denial of access to the most vulnerable people. The ACF report stated:

> *"By confining humanitarian organizations to the support of these state structures that we know are not representative of the real situation of malnutrition in the country the authorities are deliberately depriving hundreds of thousands of truly needy Koreans of assistance. As a consequence any humanitarian assistance provided is only*

helping the populations which the regime has chosen to favour and support, and which are certainly not the most deprived."

Today, the United States is leading the international community in its efforts to address some of the programmatic deficiencies that undermine the credibility and effectiveness of the international food aid activities in North Korea. The UNICEF and WFP-sponsored nutrition survey in North Korea that was completed in November of 2002 clearly shows that there are no longer famine conditions in the country. The survey also shows that, while the nutritional situation has improved in the country in the aggregate, the improvements are uneven and focused predominantly in the areas in and around Pyongyang and Nampo. Both the Pyongyang and Nampo districts have malnutrition rates about half as high as some of the northern provinces. As a result, current and future food aid activities will require greater access and monitoring capabilities to ensure proper targeting and delivery of food assistance to those most in need.

Healthcare

The healthcare system in North Korea has been in a steep decline since the beginning of the 1990s. Without the economic support from the Soviet Union, the ability of the regime to purchase medicines and maintain the medical infrastructure immediately began to fail. Today, notwithstanding a relatively well trained staff, the healthcare system in the country has all but collapsed. Only the elites at the highest level have access to modern medical care.

Today, the only access that the average North Korean has to modern medicine is either through the black market or, if extremely lucky, through international assistance programs. Generally, herbal or traditional medicines are used by the average North Korean, unless they have the financial capability to purchase the needed medicines from the black market.

Following visits to hospitals in North Korea, international aid workers have reported that even the larger regional hospitals have no regular electricity, little or no medicines, and no functioning modern medical equipment. Smaller hospitals are even less equipped. Only those medical facilities that receive direct assistance from international aid agencies can be expected to have any resources to address the medical needs of the local population.

As a result of the almost total lack of modern healthcare and poor water and sanitation systems in North Korea, the country is a breeding ground for communicable diseases. Currently, tuberculosis, malaria, and hepatitis B are considered to be endemic to the country, and other diseases if introduced into the country could have a devastating effect on the population. In particular, the possibility is great that SARS will enter the country through the porous border with China. The regime is making strenuous efforts to restrict the movement of people into the capitol city via air, including a 10-day quarantine for every traveler to Pyongyang. However, similar measures are not being undertaken at land crossings. If the disease takes hold, the impact would be tremendous.

Concentration/Re-education camps

The regime in North Korea operates approximately ten concentration or "re-education" camps for political prisoners. The Far Eastern Economic Review has published satellite photographs of one camp that is estimated to hold as many as 50,000 people. The ten camps are estimated to hold between 200,000 to 250,000 prisoners in total. The regime uses the camps to punish anyone who fails to adhere strictly and completely to every "law," but arrest and confinement can come at any time with no explanation. In some reports, people have been arrested and detained for years for failing to show appropriate respect to the "Great Leader" or the "Dear Leader." In other cases, entire families have been arrested because flaws have been found in their family history.

The camps differ in that each serves a specific type of prisoner generally ranging from those considered "redeemable" to those who are "expendable." Those who are redeemable are often released after a number of years of hard labor and re-education. Expendable prisoners are never expected to leave the camp and usually die of malnutrition, exhaustion, and abuse. Two recent books provide graphic explanations of deplorable conditions in the more "lenient" re-education camps: Aquariums of Pyongyang by Kang chol-Hwan and Eyes of Tailless Animals by Soon Ok Lee. Torture is wide-spread along with gradual starvation from the minimal food rations.

Attempts at Economic Reforms

In June of 2002, the regime in North Korea introduced a number of economic reforms. These reforms, which included raising the prices of staple food commodities, increasing wage rates, and devaluing the Won, were apparently intended to stimulate the agricultural sector and promote increased industrial productivity.

Unfortunately, the reforms instituted by the regime in North Korea have not improved the economic situation in the country. As Bradley O. Babson stated in his report, Economic Cooperation on the Korean Peninsula, "*the reforms are not sufficient to assure a turnaround in DPRK's economic crisis and even add new risks, particularly the risk of inflation*." While the risk of inflation as a result of the reforms is significant, the humanitarian community is more concerned about the large segments of the population who have seen their ability to support themselves decline or disappear. As the World Food Program points out in its 2002 report on its operations in North Korea, "*Surplus labour created by a reform-induced drive for industries to become more efficient is supposed to be redeployed by the state and continue receiving a salary. However,…there may be insufficient capacity to absorb a potentially significant labor force.*" Recent reports indicate that unemployment and underemployment particularly in the northeastern parts of the country are a significant and growing problem. Obviously the unemployed do not receive a salary and therefore are incapable of taking advantage of any "improvements" in food availability. In addition, the agricultural system remains mired in the collective farms, and thus higher food prices have not resulted in increased food production.

Mr. Chairman, it is astonishing to me that the international humanitarian and human rights community, which has been so outspoken in its condemnation of human right violations in countries like Burma and Sudan, has been so late in acknowledging the reality of life in North Korea and the nature of the regime. The President has reversed this relative international silence on what the North Korean regime is really about in his many comments on North Korea and through the aggressive reporting of the State Department (Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Bureau reports).

We will continue our efforts at every opportunity to publicize the true nature of the North Korean government and, through our humanitarian programs, to effectively and transparently address the most urgent needs of the people. Since 1995, our humanitarian programs have provided almost two million tons of food aid to North Korea, valued at approximately $650 million.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I would be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.