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Relief managers from Portland-based Mercy Corps say U.S. let North Koreans starve as retribution for missile launch

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A North Korean mother lies with her acutely malnourished son, plagued by sores, at a county hospital in September 2011. Portland-based Mercy Corps and other humanitarian organizations warned of widespread hunger, but the U.S. canceled food aid after North Korea launched a rocket.

Matt Ellingson/Samaritan's Purse

A 3-year-old girl weighed less than 16 pounds, surviving on saline solution and ground rice. Babies lay passively, too weak to cry. **Relief workers saw stunted and wasted children** languishing in unheated hospitals amid floods and reduced rations during an unusually harsh winter.

That was two years ago. Portland-based **Mercy Corps** and four other humanitarian organizations given rare access to North Korea warned: "a catastrophic situation is developing." After a year of prodding, the **U.S. Agency for International Development** announced 120,000 metric tons of food for North Korea.

But food never reached hungry Koreans. The Obama administration let political distrust, instead of need, dictate food policy.

Communication and good will broke down, leaving White House officials little to draw on today as Pyongyang ratchets up threats of nuclear attack.

"They evidently decided that starvation is a foreign diplomacy tool," said Ken Isaacs, vice president of **Samaritan's Purse**, a North Carolina-based Christian humanitarian group that joined the food effort. So much, he said, for former President Ronald Reagan's statement that steered policy for 30 years: "A hungry child knows no politics."

U.S. negotiators conditioned food on North Korea's promise to curtail nuclear weapons development. When **Pyeongyang launched a missile in April 2012**, officials spiked the aid.

To this day, no one knows how many North Koreans died last year without the U.S. food. "Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands," said **David Austin**, Mercy Corps program director for North Korea.

Mercy Corps, Samaritan's Purse and other relief organizations rarely highlight failed projects. But Austin, Isaacs and **Jim White**, a former Mercy Corps vice president, are speaking up out of concern for starving Koreans, dismay over the politicization of food and worry that humanitarian operations could be compromised again.

The only certainty, given recurrent food crises, is that North Koreans will need outside help again, no matter how deep U.S. contempt may be for their leaders.

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Food, not politics

The aid managers make no apologies for North Korea's repressive regime. The

cult-like

communist dynasty has grown even more belligerent under its new leader, **Kim Jong Un**. As **Secretary of State John Kerry visits the region this weekend**, U.S. intelligence reports North Korea may now have a nuclear warhead in its arsenal.

But North Korea's people are some of the most desperate in the world. **Two-thirds of the nation's 25 million people scrounge daily** for food. More than a fourth of its children won't reach normal height and weight because of chronic malnutrition and will probably die young.

The U.S., the world's biggest food donor, has assisted North Korea over the years, helping during a 1990s famine that killed millions. The last U.S. food program ended abruptly in 2009 when North Korea ejected Mercy Corps and other relief organizations.

USAID is the government's main aid and development arm. It donates food through the United Nations and politically independent nonprofits that can operate between estranged nations such as the United States and North Korea.

But USAID's director reports to the secretary of state and the president. The National Security Council guides its policies.

And the United States hasn't always kept politics out of food aid, says longtime U.S. diplomat **Morton Abramowitz**, a former ambassador to Thailand and Turkey.

He said Reagan's hungry-child policy, from the 1980s, when Washington fed Ethiopians under a communist dictatorship, has often been breached, although not so flagrantly as with North Korea. Yet U.S.-backed relief groups have gotten food to citizens of other repressive nations: to Afghans under the Taliban, to Somalis threatened by Al-Shabaab and to Syrians ruled by Bashar al-Assad.

Abramowitz argued publicly for food shipments to North Korea during 2011. "I got nowhere," he said.

"If North Koreans need the food, I would give it to them. But that's not the way it works. The bottom line is, nothing has happened."

On their knees

The bureaucracy of delivering food to starving people can be brutally slow. But managers at Mercy Corps and Samaritan's Purse found it especially sluggish after North Korean diplomats first asked in September 2010.

The relief groups took up the delicate role of middleman between countries that remain technically at war since the 1953 armistice.

It took until January 2011 for U.S. **Ambassador Robert King**, special envoy for North Korean human rights, and Jon Brause, then a top USAID manager, to meet North Korea's U.N. representatives. "We met in a coffee shop, somewhere in New York," King said.

The next month **Mercy Corps' Austin led the assessment team** into the world's most isolated nation. They visited families who ate seed stock and wild grasses, spending 90 percent of their income on food.

Fertilizer shortages, crop failures and increased prices cut daily rations of corn and rice to an average 400 grams. That's about 1,375 calories, one-third of what the average American consumes.

Austin's pen froze in one unheated hospital. In one apartment, when he interviewed an elderly couple about their lack of food, the interpreter started to cry.

"You know enough," she said. "This is too hard."

People chipped through ice on riverbanks for plants and roots. "Protein is eaten only a few times a year, with many people able to name the exact date on which they last consumed meat or eggs," the team reported.

USAID officials suggested Mercy Corps' coalition ask the agency for 160,000 tons of food aid for children younger than 10, nursing mothers and the elderly. The agency would consider donating another 160,000 tons via the United Nations.

Their proposal sat during assessments by five more teams, including one directed by King and Brause. "I don't think there was any question that there was a need for food assistance," King said. USAID has declined for almost two years to release the team's report.

By summer 2011, food diplomacy further bogged down. **Rep. Ed Royce, R.-Calif.**, sponsored a Farm Bill amendment to ban food aid to North Korea.

After renewed floods, the State Department gave \$900,000 to the relief groups for supplies such as plastic sheets and tents -- but no food -- for North Korea. USAID Director Rajiv Shah exasperated coalition members by saying that monitoring agreements still were inadequate to ensure food would reach those in need.

"That was false," said White, the former Mercy Corps vice president. He said USAID knew that North Korea agreed to let relief groups monitor distribution more closely than ever. Supplies would feed children, the elderly and nursing mothers -- not soldiers, politicians or government insiders.

Coalition members wrote to Shah for an explanation and called again for urgent intervention.

They never heard back.

In September 2011 coalition members pooled private donations, flying emergency food to Pyongyang with the U.S.-funded supplies. **Acute malnutrition among children appeared worse.**

Inexplicably, in October, a USAID official told relief groups to reduce their proposal to 120,000 tons. The cut dictated painful choices. Placing medical priority on the youngest meant no food for kids age 6 to 9.

Food still didn't move despite talks between North Koreans and a U.S. delegation. During a media briefing, a State Department spokeswoman insisted assistance was separate from politics. "The food aid decision will be made on ... our assessment of the need," she said.

Diplomatic talks in Beijing ended Dec. 16, a day before a defining event in North Korea: the death of "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il, in charge since his father's 1994 death.

Still, talks resumed in the New Year. On Feb. 29, 2012, North Korea agreed to a moratorium on uranium enrichment and long-range missile tests, and to international inspections. The **Leap Day agreement** also said the United States would donate 240,000 tons of food, split between the Mercy Corps coalition and the U.N. World Food Program. Despite a U.S. denial, news organizations widely reported the deal as a trade of nuclear concessions for food.

USAID told relief groups to be ready to send the food within six weeks. The organizations geared up to order a porridge-like corn-soy blend, soybeans, wheat, vegetable oil and a therapeutic food mix for the sickest children.

But in March, North Korea announced plans to launch a long-range rocket carrying a satellite. Western governments denounced it as a banned ballistic missile test. The State Department put the food on hold.

Last April 13, the rocket took off, only to explode in mid air.

Ten days later, Mercy Corps received a perfunctory USAID letter saying the agency would not fund the program. The three sentences thanked Mercy Corps for the "unsolicited emergency food assistance proposal" and for "interest in USAID food assistance programs."

White, Austin and Isaacs were incredulous -- at the plight of starving North Koreans, at the bureaucratic brush off and at the clear tie between food and politics.

"If the two had not been linked, the launch should not have changed anything," White said. Instead, he said, talks that trade nuclear weapons for food teach North Korea to make more bombs as bargaining chips.

Nancy Lindborg, a top USAID official and former Mercy Corps president who oversaw the nonprofit's North Korea initiatives, sees the issue differently. North Korea's violation of the nuclear agreement, she said, convinced U.S. officials they couldn't trust the regime to allow monitoring of who got the food.

Lindborg, who **joined USAID in October 2010**, runs the agency's bureau for democracy, conflict and humanitarian assistance. She said the United States did not break its long-standing policy insulating food aid from politics.

"These streams are separate," Lindborg said. "We do not condition our food aid on political objectives, but rather on the ability to ascertain need and the ability to monitor it."

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Malnourished children lie in North Korea's North Hwanghae Hospital in September 2011 after renewed flooding destroyed crops.

Jim White/Mercy Corps

U.S. officials won't say precisely who cut the food program. **Stephen Bosworth**, the ambassador who led negotiations with North Korea until resigning in November 2011, said he believed the decision was

made "at a very senior level" of the National Security Council after consulting Congress. A security council official wouldn't comment.

But Bosworth, dean of the **Fletcher School** of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, said that everything concerning North Korea has become intensely politicized.

In Congress, Democrats headed off a Republican ban of Farm Bill aid to North Korea by allowing the president to issue a waiver. President George W. Bush, who branded North Korea a member of the "axis of evil," authorized food there while Obama has not.

Bosworth said that as special envoy, he argued for food regardless of politics.

"It is still not in the long-term American interest to tie humanitarian assistance, particularly food, to political conditions," he said. "But I do recognize fully how difficult the implementation of that principle can be when you're dealing with a government as reviled as that of North Korea."

--Richard Read

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