

Report: The Starving Korean People's Army - the Current Status and Structure

<PART 3>

Commentary: Why is the Korean People's Army starving?

By ISHIMARU Jiro

The group with the worst nourishment in North Korea right now is probably the Korean People's Army – I am beginning to form this opinion. The spread of malnourishment in the Korean People's Army is becoming grave. If we look at the photos taken by the reporters in North Korea in detail, we see that while the appearance of the *kotchebi* (homeless) is shabbier, they appear to be better filled out. Why is this? This is possible because the soldiers have poorer access to food. The *kotchebi* pick up food they find laying around, or beg for charity. If they go to the market they will have an opportunity to find some nourishment. But many in the lowest levels of the army, like baby birds, just open their mouths and wait to receive food rations from the government. Aside from this, they do not have any other means to access food. Let us consider the reasons why soldiers under the "Military first policies" are starving.

The conscription process and unfairness

Under North Korea's conscription system, service is mandatory. Once men turn 17, they are conscripted and serve for ten years. In the case of women, they are specially selected, and only about 30% are conscripted. The service period is seven years. Many of those in military service from the generation born around the time of the great famine in the latter half of the 1990s, upon joining the military starved to death. Since that time, there has been a trend to avoid getting pregnant. Due to these factors, the number of available men for conscription has drastically dropped. Possible due to this reason, it has been said that the percentage of women being conscripted has risen recently.



A women chorus unit of the air force military band. All looks fleshy face. Usually it is difficult to join the military band without influential connections and money. Photo: 2011/December - Rodong Daily News(Organ paper of Korean Worker's Party)

North Korean compulsory education is one year of primary school, four years of The People's School, and six years of middle school, for a total of eleven years. During middle school, conscription officers come to schools to perform a preliminary assessment on those about to graduate. The passing requirements for boys is a height of 150 centimeters(4.92 ft) or taller, and a weight of 48 kilograms(106 lb) or more. But, since August 1994, this was changed to 148(4.85 ft) centimeters and 43 kilograms(95 lb) (source: South Korean Ministry of Unification North Korean Brief).

However, in North Korea where conscription is mandatory, even this process is not fair. First, children of the specially privileged class and wealthy families do not get conscripted after graduating from middle school, but instead go to university.

There are also exemptions from military service. In addition, there

are also cases where, after three years of military service, upon the unit's recommendation, people are discharged and go to university.

Furthermore, the unit in which one is sent is heavily influenced by the political and economic clout of the parents. If the parents have the power, it is possible for their children to go to easier units. Lee Sang-bong is a North Korean defector living in Japan. When his son was conscripted at the end of the 1990s, he paid a bribe.

He explains the situation as follows:

"I paid the two conscription officers some certain amount of money. (It was about 250 USD at today's exchange rate/Editing Team) each, and had my son sent to the Training Regiment in <redacted> province. The Training Regiment is where regular civilians go to receive military training. There is a lot of interaction with non-military people so you can receive bribes, and you can do business on the side. It is much easier than the almost constant hard physical labor that Construction/Engineering Units do. Other organizations with good treatment include the gymnastic group associated with the army, the military band, the artistic organization, the media/propaganda unit, and the communications unit. The border security unit near the Chinese border receives bribes from smugglers and defector brokers, so it also pays well, and thus is uncommon for them to become malnourished."

A man in his 30s from Ryanggang Province interviewed by the editor related how, at the beginning of 2000, his parents used a bribe to have him placed in a western coastal unit. In North Korea, security and inspection is carried out by the army (often the border security unit). Documents are necessary every time someone leaves or enters the port. Every time fishing vessels, merchant vessels, freight vessels and the like enter or leave, those who want to do business at the port pay a bribe to inspections to facilitate a smoother process.

"In the army, I constantly ate white rice. With my savings from bribes and 'patronage' from civilians, I was often able to eat barbequed meat. It seems business people support the troops where they do business. And that is not all, his family used bribes to have him discharged after about a year and sent to university.

In this way, by joining units that have control over civilians, you can expect bribes and do not often have problems with food. Of course, there are units that receive extremely special treatment, such as the special guard office that guards Kim Jong-il's family and other top party executives, the air force, and special operations forces (however food problems are now starting to occur amongst soldiers in the air force and special guard office.)

The army's starvation began in the 1980s.

"The army was able to eat its fill until 1975. The split between rice and cereals was about fifty-fifty and the amount of food per day was about 800 grams(28.2 oz). Eggs and meat were also distributed and soldiers had better physiques than civilians. If you did not join the army, you could not join the worker's Party or be successful in later on in life. Once, parents fell over one another to send their kids to the army. But the army's food supply became bad around the beginning of the 1980s, and from the Arduous March famine in the 1990s, cases of soldiers starving to death began to occur," according to defector Lee Sang-bong. Other defectors and our North Korean inside reporter Kim Dong-cheol have given corroborating evidence.

The worsening treatment of the army overlapped with other industries collapsing as a result of the economic decline. Cases of malnourishment were especially common among units employed with civil engineering and construction. The photos at the beginning of this article(Part1) show an Engineering Unit and units labeled "7th general division" and "8th general division".

Kim Dong-cheol commented that "The food rations, by regulation are the same, but (the malnourishment) is because they do hard physical labor." In other words, the soldiers who end up in construction units, during their 10 years of mandatory military service, will hardly even fire a gun, but pass their time bearing shovels and pick-axes. It is unclear what percentage of the Korean People's Army is made up of the Engineering/Construction units, but the South Korean government has assessed it a around half of the entire army.

When the army's food supply becomes bad, officers and top leaders pilfer the unit's food supply, first taking food for their family and friends. In addition, the activity in the black is inversely proportional to the health of the economy. As the black market becomes active, those who line their pockets by taking food and equipment meant to be distributed to the unit and illegally selling it to black market merchants increases. The food that is distributed down to the soldiers at the bottom becomes increasingly sparse. Of course the soldiers that can't handle the hunger turn to mischief. Incidences of theft, muggings and violence by soldiers have become common, and incidences of soldiers escaping the army are many. Since the 1990s, what is considered normal in North Korean society has changed. Along with these changes, civilians now treat the army with caution or fear. It has become normal to ridicule the army, calling it a group of "bandits" or "burglars", or calling it "the Communist Army". (*note)

Note:

Communist Army:

During the Korean war, violence and plundering by the invading North Korean Army was the South Korean people's biggest fear. The "Communist Army" was remembered in South Korea as the object of fear and loathing. For some reason, this term is now being used in North Korea as a term of contempt for their own disorderly army.

"Even if the army steals, the regular police or security forces can not get involved due to rules from the Worker's Party. Only the military police can police the army. Since the military first policy was implemented, the army has become both powerful and awful. Nobody can stop them."

Lee Sang-bong commented that the problems with the food supply weakens the strength of the rules within the army and is inviting a deterioration in the relationship between the army and civilians.

I have also seen and been shocked by weakened North Korean soldiers. In a trip in 1993, from Changbai County in China's Jilin province, we traced back the Yalu river, and came upon the border between North Korea and China. We then climbed the tallest peak, called Mt.Paektu. Our chartered jeep had just passed the source of

the Yalu river and there was a land bridge across the border. We climbed to the peak, passing into North Korea. There was a North Korean army guardhouse there, and two young soldiers found our jeep and came over. The two soldiers were thin and pale. In addition, for some reason their teeth had been discolored so that they were green.

One of the soldiers said, "Let's have lunch together." As the peak of Paektu had no stores or anything else, we had brought a lot of bread, sausage, beer and other food supplies. As one does not often have the opportunity to eat with North Korean soldiers, I was happy for the chance, and went and fetched some bread from the jeep.

As soon as I said, "Let's eat", one of the soldiers grabbed the bundle of bread, ripped it open and started eating it right there. Towards me, as I looked on in surprise, while still indulging the bread, he put out his other hand and said, "If you have any other food, please let me have some."

The Chinese border guard with me (who was ethnic Korean) yelled out, "Hey, stop it, it's a shame" and the two soldiers quietly returned to the guardhouse, still stuffing bread into their mouths.

After a great flood washed out rice fields and dealt a blow to the food production, the North Korean government made its first appeal to the world community for aid; it was about two years after this story, in 1995. Even before that, it seems very likely that the food situation in North Korean People's Army had already significantly deteriorated.



A soldier taking a break beside civilians enjoying a day off in the park. "The soldiers seem listless compared to the ordinary folks; this is because they are hungry," commented our reporter Lee Jun. (August, 2006, Chongjin City, Photo by Lee Jun) (C)ASIAPRESS

An excessive number of soldiers

The current strength of the North Korean People's Army, according to the "South Korean National Defense White Paper" is 1.19 million people. Accurate population figures for North Korea are not available, but it is estimated that is around 20 million. If this is correct, the army comprises over 5% of the populace. In the U.S, 5 % of population is 15 million. The South Korean army is about 0.65 million, or 1.5% of the population. First, the size is fundamentally too big. In North Korea, where the economy is failing, the means to feed this unproductive group simply does not exist.

Since the 1970s, there was a steady economic decline. In addition,

the collapse of socialist countries resulted in the loss of military support. At the beginning of the 1990s, the military readiness towards the South Korean and American military was qualitatively inferior. This became a decisive point. In order to make up for this, a concentrated investment was made into nuclear and biological weapons of mass destruction. However, the majority of conventional war equipment being used, such as fighter planes, ships, vehicles, and firearms, were manufactured between the 1960s and the 1980s. Without funds to renew these, they are becoming decrepit. One of the strategies to make up for the poor quality of armaments, is to maintain a large military. Maintaining an army that is beyond the country's means can be seen as an act of desperation.

One of the reasons the military is not reduced is that the military can be used as a source of cheap labor. The army is not just used to defend the country, but also build bridges, dams, electricity generation stations, homes, and other construction projects. Having a work force that will work on command is very useful for those in power. In North Korea, work is not done based on contractual conditions, but based on a sense of duty, and semi-mandatory recruitment of regular people, referred to as a "recruitment economy". Take for example, the so-called "Attack Units". These typically dispatched in rotation to every area, mainly doing construction projects for three year periods. Payment consists of a tiny sum of money and the chance to enter the Worker's Party. The "recruitment economy" starts young. In schools, acorns are gathered (to make alcohol), rabbits are bred (the pelts are donated to the army or exported), and other such recruitment-based activities are imposed on the students. Even the People's Unit(a local administrative group) are recruited to help with construction or cleaning nearby. These are all completely unpaid services. In this way, in the "recruitment economy", people are broadly recruited for manual labor in an attempt to make up for financial difficulties. However, recruited manual labor is patched together, and the skill level is low. As a result, the laborers typically just do simple tasks at the factory. In this "recruitment economy", the largest working force is the army. The army's authority allows them the cheap use of a young labor force that can be easily ordered around for 10 years. Due to these factors, the military force is not likely to be easily

reduced.

Unable to secure army rations, they have begun requisitioning provisions

The North Korean authorities have traditionally supplied military provisions in the following ways:

1. Delivery to the state from domestic production by collective farms, etc.
2. Provisions received through importation or international aid
3. Supplemental farming by the army

Currently, the supply from the 3 sources listed above is entirely inadequate, so in 2010, requisition of provisions has become a fourth source.

Open plundering from city residents has started. Taking army supplies from farmers in collective farms started twenty years ago. The remaining part of the harvest, after the government quota has been collected, is to go to the farmers as their distribution, which they receive every autumn. But there have been programs such as "Patriotic Rice", "Military Rice", or "Capital Rice" (for Pyongyang), which are subtracted from the amount the farmers were to receive. These continue to this day. In 2011, the food taken from the farmers was not enough, and the practice was expanded to city resident's food supplies. Since the end of January, under the deceptively named "Donations to the Army" program, a program of mandatory contributions began. The newest target is the business people.

From January to April of 2011, Kim Dong-cheol gathered reports about the requisition of food supplies for the military. "Donations to the Army" are demanded from people doing business in the public markets. Images have been captured of them intimidating those they could not collect from. It is not the army that actually collects the army supplies, but the "market supervisor" who goes around, forcing payment of rice and corn one-by-one from the merchants at the market.

In addition, even the deliverymen and wholesalers, who do not directly go to the market, are now being targeted. Kim also

gathered reports from the *decori*, who are small scale merchants. The *decori* go out to the farms to purchase rice, corn, fruit and vegetables. They then sell the food wholesale to the merchants who in turn, sell them in the market. The police wait for the *decori* on the roads, and when they are transporting more than a certain volume of cereals, they are stopped.

One man said, "The corn I bought in the farming village was confiscated. Are they trying to starve us to death?"



A big blackboard at the entrance of a public market in the suburbs of Pyongyang. The sign in large letters reads "Leaders in the good custom of supporting the troops". Merchants' names, the products they deal with, and the amount of their "contributions" are listed. "Sundries 2 pairs, Ryu Yon-shil 50 kg(110 lb)". "Manufacturing materials, Rim Gyon-hi 40 kg(88 lb)". 8 names are visible. (February, 2011. Photo by Kim Dong-cheol) (C)ASIAPRESS

370,000 tons necessary per year

Let us consider how much food is necessary to avoid starvation in the 1.19 million strong army.

Each soldier is allotted 800 grams(28.2 oz) of food supplies per day, according to regulation. In one day 952 tons is required, and 347,480 tons is required per year. Supplies for officer's families must be added to this amount.

Assuming one officer per 30 soldiers, there are 39,667 officers. If each officer supports 3 others, and each supported person is allotted 500 grams per day, an additional 59 tons are required per day, and 21,535 tons are required per year. Combining the two figures, if there are roughly 370,000 tons of food supplies, soldiers, officers and the officers' families can be sustained without anyone going hungry.

We ask, is it possible that the amount of food being supplied to the army is less than half of the necessary amount of 370,000 tons? Let's do some calculations, assuming for now that all of the food is imported from China.

The average price per ton of the rice North Korea imported from China over the last 10 years was 2,858 CNY. The average price for corn over the same period was 1,816 CNY. If the entire 370,000 tons were rice, the cost would be 1.05746 billion CNY or 156.2 million USD. If the entire amount was corn, it would cost 671.92 million CNY or 99.249 million USD. The average rate over the 10 year period of 1 USD = 6.77 CNY was used for the currency conversion.

If rice and corn were purchased in a 1:1 ratio, the entire food supply could be imported from China for roughly 127.7 million USD. Considering that domestic supply is being appropriated for the army's food supply, yet malnourishment is spreading, it would indicate that that even under the military first policy, they either are not attempting to use foreign currency to feed the soldiers, or the supply of foreign currency is insufficient.



Moran market in Pyongyang. Bread is crammed together. The female sellers' spaces are about 80 centimeters(2.6 ft) each, and they are selling bread they have bought from individuals or factories. (June, 2011. Photo by Gu Gwang-ho) (C)ASIAPRESS

Illegal selling of army food supplies to the black market is systemic; the market absorbs the army supplies

The food distribution system in North Korea nearly collapsed in the 1990s. Since then, the black market economy has been active. In 2003, the black markets became legal. Although the markets went through periods of tightened then loosened controls, the sale of food at the markets has also become legal. Now, the majority of North Koreans get their food at the markets, and the amount of food that does not pass through the hands of the government has steadily increased. Agricultural products that belonged to the government have also found their way to the markets. In order to get cash, public assets began to be sold on the black market by corrupt officials. The main sources of food in the markets are

corrupt officials and the small businesses working hard make a living. A large portion of the food that, according to regulations, is to be given to the army, including both domestic and imported supply, likely ends up in the markets instead of with the soldiers. The percentage of army supplies that end up in the market is unknown.

While markets in every area seem to suffer no shortages of food, many of the people working in groups that receive their food supply from the government (such as munitions manufacturers, state run miners, etc.) often suffer from food shortages.

Looking at the markets, it is obvious that the total amount of food is sufficient. However, those who cannot participate in the markets and groups with heavy restrictions cannot secure enough food and are forced to struggle. The army exemplifies this problem. The army is the farthest group from the markets. Unless the management of the army changes, it seems the soldiers are destined to have to put up with starvation.

The emaciated, worn-out, young soldiers in the photographs by Kim Dong-cheol and Gu Gwang-ho are truly unfortunate. In the middle of their youth, aged 17 to 20, they are recruited to waste their time toiling away on an empty stomach. There does not seem to be any way to help ease their hunger. Even if you cry out "Let's give food aid to the North Korean army!", the international community will likely not agree. The only thing I can think of to reduce the number of soldiers starving to death is to suggest to the North Korean authorities to drastically reduce the size of the army, and allow the soldiers to return to society and participate in the markets. If this can be realized, the majority of soldiers could quickly start to live without starvation.

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PROFILE:

Ishimaru was born in 1962 in Osaka, Japan. He is the Osaka office representative for ASIAPRESS.

He studied abroad in Seoul for two and a half years and then in '93 traversed the entire 1400 kilometer China-North Korean border. He has made reports from inside North Korea three times, and has been to the border region more than eighty times. Up to now he has

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