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Kkotjebi Frozen to Death by Sudden Snow Storm

In North Hamgyung Province there were sudden and heavy snow storm on the April 19th to 20th 2006. Three Transformers for electricity in the city council broke down and was only able to recover on the April 21st. This disabled the power supply for three days causing confusion and discomfort. All transports on halt, tele-communications and the frozen water supply prevented entire city from using water. Residents had to melt snow instead, and drew water from the rivers in the vicinity by trolleys.

A number of Kkotjebi live in the waste-dumps were found dead due to sudden temperature fall by the snow storm. They were in each others arms when found, most of their bodies buried under snow, except for their faces. The local police removed the corpse by an ox-wagon. The maximum snowfall on the April 20th was 63cm. Transport was only recovered on the April 22nd upon when snow started to melt.

According to the materials from the meteorological board of North Korea, the precipitation on the April 19th in Sunbong, North Hamgyung province was 21mm, and 10.3mm on the April 20th. Chungjin had precipitation of 17.6mm and 24.0mm on the respective days. It is difficult to see how much snow had fallen from these precipitation measures, but on the average about 30-60cm of snow seemed to have fallen throughout the region.

Meanwhile, in the Yanbian Autonomous District, too, was damaged by heavy snowfall, according to the News from China. 8 counties, 36 districts and 223 administrative divisions have been hit producing 30,000 affected people by the unexpected heavy snow storm.



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Photo 1: Kkotjebi living in the Waste-Dumps

City of Sineuiju, Under Major Constructions

Construction work is in progress in everywhere in the city of Sineuiju: 신의주. The major roads and houses are being renovated, and the markets are being re-organised. A road leading directly to the Bidan Island; *Bidan-sum*: 비단섬 from South Sineuiju, and a bridge connecting Sineuiju and Dong-gang(東港) in Dan-dong(丹東), China along with a driveway. Required construction materials and cements are supplied directly from China.

The houses are built high-raised as those in Dan-dong. Participating in this residence construction are the Sineuiju Urban Construction Team: 도시건설대 and the North Pyongan Provincial Urban Construction Team and the workers selected from each workplaces. Youth troops: 청년 돌격대 who were mobilized at the Nampo: 남포 road construction, are also taking part. The market is designed to take a role as an international-market. It is yet to be determined

that this construction is a part of the plan to construct a Sineuiju Specialised Zone: 신의주 특구. The North Korean officials only comment that nothing has been determined, as yet.

Young Delinquents, Making the Teachers Cautious

It seems the 'Free education' remains only in the name these days in North Korea and the 'deviant' behaviours among students are increasing. It is because students cannot afford attending school since they would have to earn the living, many also find it tough to concentrate even if they do come to school.

No matter how they endeavor in learning, only a limited number of students could succeed the tertiary education. Thus, the learning motivation is very low. 9 out of 10, 5th grade students from a high school in Hoeryung does not bring bags to school. The textbooks are not properly provided, and it takes a considerable amount of money to have all the stationeries like pencils, erasers and exercise books. Many students who cannot afford, fail to attend schools or attend school with intention to just kill time. Children from the 'better-off' families take private tutoring and make efforts to succeed in schools. Circumstances have changed since the mid 90s when the majority of young people became Kkotjebi and wondered around for food.

Post-'Arduous March': '고난의 강행군', there has been a wider disparity between the wealthy and the poor.

Girls 'hang-around' boys with wealthy family, they drink with their friends, dance to foreign music on the backstreets till night. Sometimes girls and boys gather in a room, watch videos, eat, drink, entertain themselves and go to school together in the morning. Most boys smoke cigarettes, many girls wear make-up and their bags are full of cosmetics instead of books. Also they would go to expensive restaurants (unaffordable for most students), take drugs called, Bingdu: 빙두(冰豆); a stimulant drug, also called 'Ice: 얼음', in karaoke rooms. But the schools take no action for these children even when they are aware of the situation. Instead, teachers cover-up complaints against these students from their peers and outside of school, even to fix the academic records for them because these teachers are relying on parents of these students for extra income or gifts, since they are poorly paid.

Set-back in the Construction of 60 Houses in the City of Hoeryung

City of Hoeryung has decided to build 60 new residences in the Dae-duck: 대덕 farm until April 25th, but not much progress has been made even after the 25th. Last February 27th, the construction authorities agreed to begin the work on the March 1st, and work until April 25th (refer to NKT 13). The set-back was already predicted since the funding for the construction was not in the budget of the central government, the construction was left to the local departments and organisations to be responsible.

The residence construction has started before the water supply and drainage construction was finished; the water for the construction site is drawn from the vicinity of the river by oxcarts. Due to the shortage of cements and transportations, only the groundwork has been done in the entire month of the March 2006. The construction authorities claim on top of the lack of construction materials, with just an excavator and 4 trucks to finish the construction by April 25th, 2006 was an impossible mission from the beginning. The completion of the construction might be difficult even in May. Meanwhile, other farm sites from other parts of the country are having residence construction in progress, but the situation does not seem different.

Illegal Fertilisers Still Popular in Market, Despite the Control

All fertilisers provided from foreign countries are registered in each province, city and county council management committee then evenly distributed to each farm management committee in each divisions(리;리). The management committee then redistributes to each work divisions; 작업반 as each groups are required. The problem is often, the foreman of the work division and the officers at the management committee illegally hoard fertilisers and sell them in markets on a 'black market' price.

The government has a policy to distribute all the foreign aid fertilisers and there is ban on retailing them on markets, however, since the fertilisers are high on demand and is a good source of income, these illegal activities are hard to eliminate.

Military Officers are Hard to 'get by' just with the Wage

While ordinary citizens rely only upon the special provisions on the national holidays, party officials,

legal officers and military officers are mostly receiving reasonable provisions. Military officers would receive more maize than rice grains, receives wages, but the amount is well below the required amount for living. To earn extra living, the military officers on the border area would sell antiques, drugs, illegal trespassing. The government enhanced control and there are increased risks, but the tacit activities of the military are still on-going. When caught it would, at worst, would cost their life, but with luck, they could earn extra income fast. Party officials, police officers, national security agents, persecutors and legal officers generally do not find difficulty in living since they could buy goods at government price. Meanwhile, the border patrols and military officers received 5days worth of rice, which is 3days more than the ordinary citizens.

Military Food Provisions, Managed at the No.2 Operation Division (Grain Management Department; 양곡관리국)

Each provinces, cities and counties have National People's Committee and it has the, 'No.2 Operation Division', this called as Grain Management Department; 양곡관리국. The Grain Management Department manages various kinds of food rations and collect 'wartime food provisions', 'military food provisions' to 'patriots provisions' as first priority in one region. Under the care of Grain Management Department, there is Grain Policy division; 양정사업소, where it goes off to cooperative farms, purchases grains at government price then distributes to the people. The Grain Policy Division then has to report to the Grain Management Department, the calculated amount of purchased and the amount that has been provided. Grains from the Military food provision are called No.2 rice, since it is the No. 2 Operation Division is managing the grains.

Special Provisions Made on the Birthday of Kim Il Sung – the 'Day of the Sun: 태양절'

The government presented gifts for all students nation-wide to commemorate the 'Day of the Sun; 태양절, the birthday of the Great Leader Kim Il Sung. Provisions are same as the provision made on the birth day of the Chairman Kim Jung Il, 200g of biscuits, 200g of sweets, 100g of Fried Rice, 5 chewing gums. Ordinary citizens

received 2days worth special 'low price' provisions have been made. Each household received 1kg Rice (46won), 1kg Maize (24won), a bottle of Wine (200won), 1kg of Soy sauce(64won), 1kg of Bean paste; 된장 (72won), 100g Seasoning [MSG](460won). Since it was public holiday, the extra electricity was provided from 14th to 16th both 6hours during the day and night each. Hence, people tend to expect what they would receive on the public holiday, rather than planning how they would spend the national public holiday.

Only Four Months Worth of PDS Provided for Six months of Work

As it was reported on the 17th edition of the NKT, there will be 5-6 months of halt of the PDS in Pyongyang. Workers who work at institutions, workplaces would still receive reasonable amount, yet others will suffer the consequences. Meanwhile, even those workers who work on a normal full-time hours, will not be able to receive a normal ration of the PDS. Since other regions have already distributed last year's wet maize instead of rice and the ration of wet maizes included water still retained in maize. For instance, Grade 3 Worker (700g per day) would receive at least 120kg, if he or she was coming to work without an absence. But in fact, the worker only received 80kg because the Military food provisions and War-time food provisions has been deducted from the individual rations.

Expert's Analysis

Normalisation of PDS in North Korea Evaluation and Prospects in 7Months

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Seven months has passed since the normalisation of the Public Distribution System (PDS) has initiated in October, 2005. Some call this as the 'resurrection of the PDS', but the PDS officially never ceased; only it did not function and the PDS only remained in its name. Hence, the normalisation attempt was made by the government in order to provide rations proficiently. It is, however, difficult to determine the reality of the situation, although

one could find some clues. Ironically speaking, when there are no article on the PDS appear in neither the *Rodong Shinmun*¹:로동신문 nor *Chosun Shinbo*²:조선신보, particularly that the PDS is functioning as well as planned.

Thence, pieces of information on the North Korea Today from the past seven months would provide some clues to an attempt of putting the jigsaw puzzles together. First, one would need to treat Pyongyang separately from the rest of the country since, Pyongyang had relatively sound PDS rations all through out, but other regions were different (ref. NKT17). Hamheung, South Hamgyung province provided two months worth of grain(fully threshed maize and rice) rations in normal ration quantity for October and November last year, but there were no rations given out in December 2005, last year (NKT12). Hoeryung, in North Hamgyung province in another case, November ration was not provided and the December rations were only provided in the end of the month and to those who brought PDS distribution coupons for ten days worth of grains were provided (NKT12).

The rations appear to have reduced in this year. There has been just one full PDS celebrating the 64th birthday of the Chairman Kim Jung Il. But this was only food for two days (NKT 13&14) on average. From March, the setback on food situation appears to be getting worse. For instance, in Pyongyang, January and February rations were given on time, but from March, the cracks in the PDS seem to be getting wider then in April, only 10days worth of food has been provided. Sources say that, from May the PDS in Pyongyang will be on halt indefinitely (NKT 17).

As the normalisation of the PDS initiated, the government banned rice sales on the markets at the same time. Controls on rice sales, however, in the markets are uneven depending on the regions. Some regions appear as if there are no monitoring at all on markets, or even in the same region, it is done discriminately depending on the markets. Also, even when there was monitoring,

rice sales could not be prevented from the market (NKT 12). When there were tighter controls in the market, the rice sales was transferred to individual homes instead (NKT 12).

This issue could be explored from a different perspective, with the rice price trend. As the table below shows Hoeryong, North Hamgyung province could tell the yearly trend. The cost of rice instantaneously raised upon the initiation of PDS then fell back again to its usual cost in few months time. The cost of rice seems to be settled from January to March this year – the cost in March is very much like this time last year or slightly higher. This could be read through out nation-wide in North Korea. It is possible to read that the normalisation of PDS somewhat shocked the market when it began, but on the large scale, it did not have much of an affect. In other words, despite the North Korean government's will to reduce the cost of rice, the objective was not met.

In fact, North Korea, in its current state could not pursue PDS for a long term since the most crucial factor here is the supply. In the perspective of the people, either food is short for 10% or 90% makes no difference. As long as they do not receive the required amount of food from the PDS, the rice sales will not be rooted from the market. Otherwise, whether they are short of 10% of 90% of food, they would have to get the shortage from the market. In addition, when the supply and demands are not in balance, the cost of food is bound to rise and if there are hoardings involved in the process, the price could increase dramatically – this could explain the price inflation of rice in October and November, last year (2005).

One would also need to consider cost fluctuations between seasons, periods. Conventionally the cost of rice falls in October and November then rises by a small percentage in December. It maintains steady cost, but begins to rise again from March to April. Foreign assistance from China and South Korea may affect the cost of grain for a short while, but the major factor that affects the market price fluctuation is the internal grain production in North Korea. This year (2006), is not an exception, from end of last year to beginning of this year, the price of rice came a normal price. The problem is that the price of rice is increasing from spring when last year's grain stock is becoming scarce. Hence, it could

¹ Rodong Shinmun: the only Daily Newspaper published in North Korea

² Chosun Shinbo: Pro-North Korean newspaper based in Japan. The name literally means "New Paper of Korea". It is published by the GAKR(General Association of Korean Residents in Japan: 조총련(재일본조선인총연합회))

be said that the PDS nation-wide, except for Pyongyang, began to stumble from the end of last year and/or beginning of this year in January. Pyongyang is starting to stumble from March, this year and this is well reflected in the rice price fluctuation.

It has been noted several times that even the North Koreans themselves are not as welcoming the normalisation of the PDS – even some of the party officials assess with the current level of production normalising nation-wide PDS would be impossible. Some say the attempt to normalise PDS has been determined as a failure already (NKT 12).

As the attempt of PDS normalisation shows, despite the will of the government, the flow of the

market economy cannot be retracted. Presently, North Korea is on the ‘laissez-faire’ market economy and survival market economy. That is, it is the market economy without any support from the state. Thus, even if the government wants to return to planned economy, it could not be possible since the means to sustain the planned economy, that is, workplaces, factories that could carry-out the demands is unavailable for the North Korean government. Market economy will remain despite the fighting efforts – question remains whether the market economy activities will be private sectors illegally or legally in public sector.

Table 1. Trend of the cost of rice in Major cities

	2005							2006		
	Mar.	May	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.
Hoeryung (Nth, Hamgyung)	800	1,050	800–900	750–900	1000			850–900	850–900	800–850
Onsung (Nth, Hamgyung)				800–1,050				750–800	850–900	800–850
Chungjin (Nth, Hamgyung)				850–1100			850–900	800–850	800–850	800–850
Hamheung (Sth, Hamgyung)						1150–1280		850–900		800–850
Hyesan (Rygang)									800–850	800–850
Sineuiju (Nth, Pyongan)			750					79–850		
Pyongyang								800–850		850–900

Note: information was collected from different people laid on the series of time. Thus, there are limitations in analysing the trend.

Information on the above paper was drawn from the North Korea Today (NKT) 8, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14th editions.

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