



CHRISTIAN FRIENDS OF KOREA

FALL 2020

조선의 그리스도인 벗들

*Bringing Hope and Healing to the People of North Korea in the Name of Christ Since 1995*

“For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end –  
it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come;  
it will not delay.”

Habakkuk 2:3 (NIV)

## GLOBAL COVID-19 OUTBREAK IMPACTS NORTH KOREA AND ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS

Could anyone have anticipated that in our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, we would not be able to do what we have done multiple times in every prior year of our existence - visit the DPRK to continue meaningful humanitarian work and ship vital humanitarian goods to the country? The Covid-19 global outbreak that rapidly gained momentum in January has caused profound loss and disrupted daily life around the globe in more ways than can be counted. The impact in the DPRK and on our normal work and activities so far this year has also been significant, but we are hopeful that it will ultimately prove to be a temporary, pregnant pause.

On January 23<sup>rd</sup>, the same day China announced a lockdown on Wuhan, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) announced a ban on foreign visitors, and all scheduled flights in and out of the country were halted. Strict quarantine and prevention measures were rapidly adopted, immediately impacting the economy and many facets of daily life. On January 30<sup>th</sup>, North Korea’s news agency, KCNA, declared a “state emergency” and reported on the establishment of an anti-epidemic headquarters to oversee Covid-19 prevention and national response measures. Nearly all border crossings were immediately closed to normal trade and traffic, although a handful of Covid-19 related shipments and some humanitarian shipments from UN agencies were ultimately delivered, albeit with delays and significant challenges. North Korea restricted internal travel, cancelled major public events, and closed resorts, restaurants, schools and other public gathering places. Schools were later restarted, and closed again. Mask use was mandated in public places. To date, North Korea still has “no confirmed case of the coronavirus so far,” meanwhile more than 10,000 people have been quarantined, and over 2,700 have been tested – reportedly all results have come back negative.

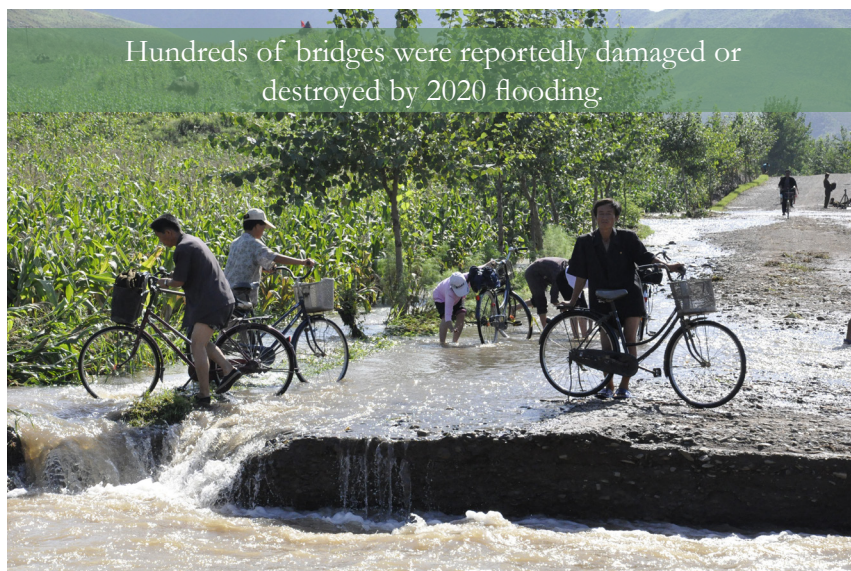
Now, nine months into the pandemic, strict internal Covid-19 prevention restrictions remain in place which have largely stopped longstanding UN and NGO work and activities – including ours. Since January, foreign diplomats and aid workers have been prohibited from visiting areas outside Pyongyang’s city limits, which is essential to carrying on humanitarian projects and engagement. Several diplomatic and NGO offices have closed, and significant numbers of international staff/dependents have left the DPRK (one larger group by a special evacuation flight in March, but others by land). Only a small fraction of the usual resident UN/NGO staff remain in country, their normal activities still greatly curtailed. It is unclear if these offices can remain open if current restrictions remain in place. The DPRK has publicly stated that it will not reopen its borders until a vaccine or treatment is readily available to its 25 million citizens.

The sudden border closure and halt in trade and humanitarian engagement have resulted in a severe contraction of the local economy and adversely affected the livelihoods and health of ordinary citizens. The abrupt shutdown came at a time of year when critical agricultural goods needed for the spring planting season are usually being imported into the country



The central region of the Korean Peninsula north of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) ranges from coastal rice-growing areas, to lowlands (planted with corn, soybean, fruit trees and other crops), to mountainous areas. Here steep mountain slopes are drained by small creeks running down through narrow valleys, feeding into larger rivers that meander through agricultural areas alongside villages and towns, to the sea. On previous visits to the country, we have seen the widespread devastation that happens when too much water falls in these vulnerable areas in too short a time.

Homes, care centers, and other buildings rim the edges of these valleys, and when heavy rains hit steep slopes, the small creeks that drain them turn into rushing torrents that soon sweep away everything in their path. Mountainsides depleted of cover vegetation can quickly become saturated and slough off, burying buildings below in rivers of mud. Standing water around the base of mud-brick buildings can cause them to ‘melt’ and suddenly collapse. Rural dirt roads turn quickly into mud, making the surface impassible. Bridges break as abutments wash away or as their road beds made of concrete slabs overflow with water, shifting and breaking the slabs off their abutments by the force of the current. As the ground becomes saturated and rivers overflow, nearby croplands are inundated, and if water stands in them too long or if high winds have bent them over, crops – including corn, soybean, and rice that were weeks away from being harvested - instead rot in the fields.



Hundreds of bridges were reportedly damaged or destroyed by 2020 flooding



Local people engaged in road repair after flooding.



cleanup begins. The damage to the roads alone makes it very difficult for relief supplies to be delivered – sometimes even major roads can be practically impassable for months after a flood event while bridges are rebuilt, forcing long, time-consuming and arduous detours. People already malnourished and suffering struggle even more for basic survival in the ensuing weeks and months as the effects of contaminated water sources, the sudden loss of food stocks or garden produce, and the stresses of rebuilding take a further toll. Prior to Covid-19 and the 2020 floods, the UN estimated that nearly 40% of the North Korean population was “chronically food insecure.” The new International Food Security Assessment report (published in August by the USDA) now estimates 59.8% (15.3 million) are “food insecure.”

All of this is made even more difficult due to the current Covid-19 context that for months has severely restricted internal travel and economic activity, and prohibited entry of most international humanitarian shipments due to tight quarantine measures. In a rare public admission prematurely scrapping the country’s five-year economic plan, the DPRK’s leader acknowledged in a Workers’ Party of Korea



A home damaged by flooding in 2011.

Plenary Meeting on August 19<sup>th</sup> that due to “unexpected and inevitable challenges” its “planned attainment of the goals for improving the national economy has been seriously delayed and the people’s living standard (has) not been improved remarkably.” The current situation was referred to as a “year in which we faced unexpected and inevitable challenges in various aspects.” A new 5-year economic plan is expected to emerge at the Eighth Congress, now scheduled for January 2021.

Of course, looming in the background of all this are the unresolved nuclear and diplomatic tensions, including layers of restrictive UN and multilateral sanctions that remain in place with their adverse impact on the national economy. It seems there has been little progress on the diplomatic front after the failed summit in Hanoi.

## CFK IS PRAYING AND PREPARING FOR RE-ENGAGEMENT

While key elements of our work (including further shipping and travel) have had to be put on indefinite pause until the DPRK reinstates shipping services, clears humanitarian goods through quarantine, and reinstates flights and travel permissions, preparations continue at our headquarters in North Carolina to restart full operations as soon as it becomes possible to do so.

As we wait on the Lord to remove obstacles that are far beyond our control, we remain hard at work. Thankfully our modest North Carolina office is spacious enough to allow social distancing for our staff of three, so we have continued to do our work at the office. Even if we are not able to travel or send shipments, there is still legal compliance, donor communications, planning, administrative work, research and project organization that must continue. We are staying in regular contact with our major in-kind partners, and mutually hope to reinstate shipments as soon as it becomes possible again.

Like many people, we have found ourselves in a time of reflection and asking questions as we all face deep uncertainties in the midst of this truly unprecedented situation. Our staff has spent time recently in the book of Habakkuk – a short book – but one of great depth and honest struggle. It brings comfort in the midst of so much disruption, uncertainty and waiting. Habakkuk reassures that God welcomes our questions and laments, and responds –not always with fully satisfying answers, but in ways that remind us of his holy character, and trustworthiness. Among Habakkuk’s many questions, the Lord responds, “Has not the LORD Almighty determined that the people’s labor is only fuel for the fire, and that the nations exhaust themselves for nothing? For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” (Habakkuk 2:13-14 NIV). We lay claim to this promise, even now, in this context.

With this faith, we remain deeply concerned for each and every one of the hospitals and rest homes where we have been working now for many years, for their staff and patients, and for the North Korean people in general. Some facilities were greatly impacted in 2018 or 2019 by flooding that occurred in their regions, bringing great damage to their communities, and in some cases, their facilities. Now we wonder if they have been struck again – as the rains this year were heavy in some of these same areas. We are very concerned for Ministry of Public Health counterparts, provincial and local officials who must be faced with unthinkable challenges, difficulties and desperately competing priorities, yet with extremely limited resources to respond.



We are deeply concerned for the staff and patients at TB and hepatitis care centers.

The disruptions caused by Covid-19 will have many unintended impacts in the DPRK. The economic impacts of Covid-19, combined with the flood damage to crops and livelihoods will likely result in significant increases in malnutrition and poverty. Longstanding efforts to control communicable diseases like tuberculosis and hepatitis cannot help but be gravely impacted as programming and shipments are stopped, training is suspended, supply chains are exhausted, and normal diagnostic, treatment and prevention activities are unavoidably curtailed. Flooding damages food production and contaminates unprotected water supplies that many people have no choice but to rely upon, causing further sickness, and malnutrition.

In spite of all this, we rejoice in the fact that so much of the work that God has enabled us to do over the last twenty-five years remains solidly in place, and is impacting countless lives in spite of the present difficult situation. For example, I think of the TB rest homes renovated with our support that continue to give help and healing to thousands of patients every year. And how thankful we are that in



2019 we were able to send 15 container shipments, including food, medicine, hygiene kits, blankets and many other goods – we trust that these supplies are helping to sustain care centers through these difficult times. Among these shipments were 3,500 water filter buckets sent to TB and hepatitis care centers in fall 2019 for further distribution to patients and their families. We pray that these are now being used well to preserve the health of patients, their families and local communities by providing them with clean, safe, filtered water in some of the most heavily flood-affected areas. We were also able to get an order of greenhouse plastic delivered in fall 2019 – we trust that this will bring new life to greenhouses this fall, and help to quickly restore food production in some of the most vulnerable areas.

We have born witness to enough of the challenges faced on a daily basis to know how painful and isolating the current context must be for local officials, care center staff and patients. Our hearts break at what they must be going through, alone and with no outside help in sight. We have come to truly love our brothers and sisters in North Korea, and we long to come alongside them in friendship and Christian love.

As we wait for the Lord's timing that will determine when it is possible for us to return, we pray that you will faithfully continue supporting this ongoing work. The needs for clean water, nutrition, life-saving medicine, training, and many other things will be overwhelming and acute whenever we are able to return. We know there are many competing priorities and needs in our world, but we trust that with your continuing faithful and generous partnership, we will be poised to demonstrate His love and grace in lifesaving ways.

In the meantime, in our wrestling with hard circumstances that are beyond our full understanding, may God lead us to a place where we can say, with Habakkuk, “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; He makes my feet like the feet of a deer, He enables me to tread on the heights.” Habakkuk 3:17-19



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