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## North Korea's Food Shortage in the Post-COVID-19 Era

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Observations reveal that North Korea has imported a substantial amount of rice and wheat flour from China for the past few months. As North Korea has gradually increased border trade with China, the trend might have raised expectations for alleviated food and economic conditions in a post-COVID-19 North Korea. Some North Korea experts, however, forecast an aggravating food shortage compared to other years mainly due to unfavorable harvests in the previous year. While existing discussions on North Korea's food situation focus on the volume of food production and imports, one needs to pay attention to the regime's recent attempts to control food markets, thereby increasing the likelihood of a worsening food problem among the North Korean people.

Since the last harvest season, the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) has strengthened its grip over food production and distribution against low yields of staple crops. North Koreans might have rushed to secure foodstuffs with rumors of the WPK banning market trades of food in *jang-ma-dangs* (North Korea's market system). Such

growing anxiety among North Korean residents might help explain the soaring maize prices in January 2023.

Noticeable is that rice prices dropped while maize prices surged, which suggests a widening disparity in food availability among different income groups. Considering that North Koreans have yet to recover purchasing power (largely due to the partial resumption of trade and the restrictions on market activities), the rise in food prices might imply an exacerbating food situation within the country.

Historically, the North Korean government abandoned its food rationing system in 2003 and alternatively introduced a semi-legalized market for foodstuffs. Since then, the food issue has been a matter of individual survival and self-sufficiency for most North Koreans. Contrary to the tradition, the Kim Jong Un regime, since its inception, has attempted to regain state control of food distribution but most of them remain failed. Once markets and trade activities dramatically dwindled under COVID-19 control measures, the government seems to have better chances of implementing its food policy and institutions that can actually intervene in the markets. According to testimonies (as of December 2022) by residents from the provinces of Pyonganbuk-do, Yanggang-do, and Hamgyungbuk-do, state-run grain stores are in place, selling rice and maize at fixed prices lower than the market. The problem is low quality and stock shortage, which make it less likely for

such grain stores to substitute the market or function as a centralized food rationing system in the near future. Nevertheless, the North Korean government will likely continue and even reinforce its food intervention by blocking market trades of food and expanding state-run grain stores. The regime's stronger hold on food allocations would lead to extra pain for those who have been suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic and prolonged food shortage within the country.

Keywords: North Korea, food shortage, hoarding maize, food control, food availability, food import