

**FAMINE IN NORTH KOREA:
MARKETS, AID, AND REFORM**
by Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland
Columbia University Press,
309 pages, \$35

Reviewed by JOHN FEFFER

IT IS HARD to even begin to understand the apparent contradictions in North Korea, a country that is both malnourished and appears to be a nuclear power. Yet political scientist Stephan Haggard and economist Marcus Noland approach this topic with the determination of archaeologists at a sparse excavation site. They attempt to construct a coherent narrative of the food crisis from the most fragmentary evidence—without access to the country itself, deprived of all but the most rudimentary of economic statistics, and operating in an environment of second-hand information and dicey extrapolations. Nevertheless, they do their best to describe how North Korea came near to economic collapse in the mid-1990s and how it dealt with the ensuing crisis.

The country has yet to recover from the devastating food crisis in the 1990s, and last fall's harvest was again insufficient, leaving a now-perennial shortfall of about a million tons of grain. Depleted soil on a relatively small amount of arable land can't quite meet the nutritional needs of the population. The international aid community, which has seen a 75% drop in donations, is struggling to fill this shortfall. Meanwhile, the global focus remains on the ongoing nuclear conflict with North Korea. Pyongyang exploded a nuclear device last fall, continues to devote a sizable portion of its limited resources to defend against a range of

perceived threats, and hopes to parlay its nuclear status into a financial package that can revive the economy.

Messrs. Haggard and Noland's study is a truly commendable effort to ferret out information from a country routinely described as an informational black hole. The analysis of the origins of the food crisis, the detailed assessment of the international response, and the careful scrutiny of North Korea's subsequent economic reforms all make *Famine in North Korea* a touchstone resource for understanding what happened to North Koreans in the 1990s and after.

The graphs and charts are alone worth the price of the book. The authors, for instance, chart agricultural imports against domestic production, look at grain harvest by region, and trace the rise and fall of fertilizer consumption, all to support the book's central thesis. "North Korea did experience severe floods in 1995 and a succession of natural disasters thereafter as well," they write. "But the country's vulnerability to those conditions was exacerbated at every point by decisions the government made that compounded risk."

Messrs. Haggard and Noland build a compelling case for human error and draw on an impressive range of sources. But they occasionally overreach, hastening to conclusions that are not supported by the evidence they present. There are intriguing inconsistencies in their argument. They fail to acknowledge important external factors. And they sometimes put faith in data as wobbly as the statistical information they criticize others for naively accepting.

The inconsistencies of *Famine in North Korea* betray a tension between the descriptive and the normative. So, for instance, the authors criticize the North Korean government for not responding early enough to the warning signs. Yet they acknowledge that before the heavy rains in summer 1995, which marked the official beginning of the

Mr. Feffer is co-director of Foreign Policy in Focus, and the director of global affairs at the International Relations Center in Silver City, New Mexico.

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food crisis, Pyongyang appealed for World Food Program aid in the early 1990s, to South Korea and Japan shortly thereafter, and also as part of the post-Agreed Framework talks in 1994. They criticize the government for not moving more quickly with economic reforms. Yet they point out that the government indeed loosened its restrictions on private plots and farmers' markets in 1993. They declare the central government culpable of the misallocation of resources. Yet they recognize that central authority broke down during the famine, leaving local officials, military commanders, factory managers and entire regions to fend for themselves.

As social scientists, the authors include the requisite countervailing evidence. But as advocates building the larger case of the system's criminal negligence—which goes beyond their central thesis of policy blunders—they disregard this evidence in their eagerness to indict. The distinction is critical. According to a 1999 interpretation of the right to food by the U.N. Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, “It is important to distinguish the inability from the unwillingness of a state party to comply.” Therein lies the key to determining culpability.

Perhaps the most controversial section of *Famine in North Korea* deals with the question of diversion. Messrs. Noland and Haggard patiently lay out the case that the North Korean government took food aid in-

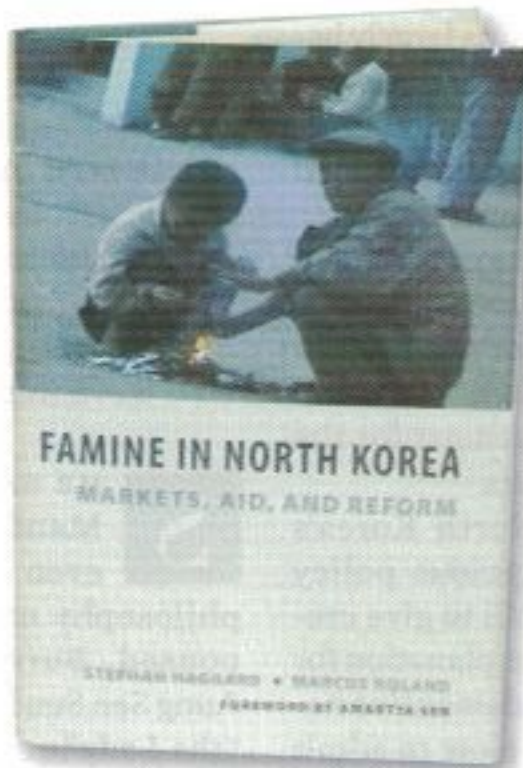
tended for at-risk populations and directed it instead to the military and the political elite. They cite a range for the diversion rate of between 10% and 50%, settling on an intermediate value of 30% as most likely. They introduce anecdotal evidence:

several defector reports, a can of food aid found on a North Korean submarine run aground. They enlist survey data from North Korean refugees in China to suggest that a majority knew nothing of the existence of food aid. They quote a South Korean NGO's estimate of a 50% diversion rate based on insider information. And there is video footage of sales of food aid in North Korean markets and interview data that indicate that much of the population has relied on these markets for

an increasing amount of their food needs.

This discussion of diversion, though detailed and informative, suffers from the authors' understandable impulse to give hard numbers and assign blame. North Korea no doubt experienced “spillage,” the aid community's term for diversion. Was it greater than in other humanitarian disasters? Perhaps. Was it stage-managed by the central government? Even the authors are skeptical. So, with donor fatigue affecting the international community, North Koreans again facing hard times, and hard evidence still unavailable, assigning a percentage seems premature and counterproductive.

Clearly the North Korean government made disastrous policy decisions from the 1970s onward. The famine of the 1990s can-



not be attributed, as Pyongyang has said, to natural disasters alone. Yet in their eagerness to show how the North Korean model, like a faulty machine, inevitably ground to a halt, Messrs. Haggard and Noland diminish the importance of key exogenous factors: the rising cost of energy that made the country's mechanized agriculture prohibitively expensive, declining soil fertility because of one of the highest rates of fertilizer application in the world, and a significant drop in food imports from China largely because of a poor harvest in 1993. Even before the heavy rains hit, then, North Korean officials were operating in a very constrained policy space. Nevertheless, as Messrs. Haggard and Noland point out, the government should have imported more food on a commercial basis to make up for the drop in Chinese deliveries and should have permitted greater freedom of movement for the population earlier in the crisis.

In trying to explain North Korea's "perplexing" and "inauspicious policy making," the authors also fail to give credence to a key non-rational explanation for North Korean conduct: its adamant nationalism. Pyongyang was slow to admit the failures of its economic model (and reveal weakness), reluctant to accept international handouts (and undermine its ideology of self-sufficiency), and unwilling to allow international monitors unfettered access throughout the country (given fears that these foreigners were either spies or some variety of missionary). North Korea is certainly not alone among countries in prioritizing national security over rational economic choice. Its "perplexing" decisions become all the more comprehensible when placed alongside its fears of outside intervention.

The authors seem to be struggling with two different interpretations, one that analyzes the food crisis in development terms, the other that employs a human-rights framework. In the first, the North

Korean government is guilty of grievous policy errors. In the second, the central government's role in the famine constitutes what they call "a crime against humanity." This latter claim has the ring of moral clarity. But although *Famine in North Korea* indeed illuminates a murky subject and gives ample evidence of policy blunders, it ultimately fails to support this stark verdict.

PERFECT HOSTAGE:

A LIFE OF AUNG SAN SUU KYI

by Justin Wintle

Hutchinson and Random House,

450 pages, £11.99

Reviewed by BERTIL LINTNER

SHE HAS BEEN likened to Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, even Mahatma Gandhi, whose philosophy of nonviolence she has espoused. Burma's pro-democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi—often referred to just as "the Lady"—may be incarcerated but she remains a symbol of defiance and moral strength, and as such has attracted sympathy and support not only inside her country but from all over the world. The world's most famous political prisoner, in 1991 she received the Nobel Peace Prize.

She has received myriad additional recognition: In 1992, Unesco awarded her the International Simón Bolívar Prize. The following year, the Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law in Los Angeles named her the recipient of its Victor Jara International Human Rights award, and, in December 1994, the Forum of Democratic Leaders in the Asia Pacific made her an

~ Mr. Lintner is a journalist based in Thailand. An excerpt of this book is online at www.feer.com/perfecthostage.