

IAPP USA Webinar: Humanitarian Aid: Building Trust with North Korea

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April 13, 2021



United States -- Over 500 people (120 on Zoom; 474 on Facebook Live) were in attendance for the April 13, 2021, webinar sponsored by the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace (IAPP) on the topic "Humanitarian Aid: Building Trust with North Korea." The panelists were leaders of non-governmental organizations with experience working in North Korea. The moderator was Dr. Michael Jenkins, chairman of UPF-North America and president of the Washington Times Foundation.

Political volatility, sanctions, the travel ban, the North's extreme secrecy: All these factors and more restrict opportunities for humanitarians to aid North Korean citizens. Nuclear tests and threats to other countries make North Koreans appear less than sympathetic to potential donors.



How can these obstacles be surmounted to alleviate the suffering of millions of North Koreans? Could it be that providing such assistance could help to build trust and to break down barriers in ways that political negotiations and military posturing cannot?

The first panelist, Dr. James W. Jackson (Author, Founder and Chairman Emeritus, Project CURE), the founder of world's largest distributor of donated medical equipment and supplies to resource-limited communities across the globe, spoke about his experience of attending the 81st birthday celebration of Kim Il Sung in 1993. Through his discussions with North Korean leaders on this occasion, he was able to build trust and gain access to the country in order to provide medical relief.

He reflected on his experience, "Nothing is going to happen except what is built on relationships. They are a hurting country. We worked there for 10 years, refurbishing 4,000 rural hospitals. It has been a wonderful thing. My word of encouragement is to make good relationships."

Dr. Jackson also lamented the underutilization of resources in north Korea: "They have very brilliant scientists and engineers, but they don't have brilliant economists. They have boxed themselves into a position of not looking outside the box. DPRK is rich in minerals. They are overlooking so many of their natural resources and what they could be doing to utilize them. It is just bad economics."



The second panelist, Professor Hazel Smith (Professorial Research Associate, Centre of Korean Studies, SOAS University of London) worked and lived in North Korea for four years from 1998 to 2001 while working with the UN World Food Programme and UNICEF. She worked in every province of North Korea.

Dr. Smith emphasized the devastating impacts of oil sanctions imposed by the United Nations in 2017 on North Korean food production:

In a nutshell, in 2021 we are seeing the resurgence of starvation which could be on a massive scale. The famine in the 1990s was a result of the Soviet Union and China withdrawing subsidized sales of oil to North Korea. North Korea does not produce natural gas or oil. All agriculture is dependent on oil, and North Korea's food self-sufficiency depends on oil. The UN sanctions in December 2017 halted all natural gas exports to North Korea and severely curtailed oil imports. The food production was bound to fall. Humanitarian aid cannot respond to the current scale of aid required. Fertilizer, pesticides and oil would need to go in.

A humble request from a foreigner: Please think of the issue of the December 2017 oil sanctions, which are unprecedented. When we think of oil sanctions, we think of sanctions on Russia, Iraq, and Iran. These were oil-producing nations. Oil sanctions in most people's minds means stopping bad governments from earning money. These are so-called oil sanctions, but they are about actually starving people. The direct consequence is stopping food growing. So, I would plead with my American colleagues to have a look at the impact on agriculture and see what you think.

The webinar provided valuable information from nonprofit leaders who had actual experience on the ground working within the DPRK. Much was learned about the situation related to food production and the most effective methods of building trust with North Korean officials. We look forward to hearing more from our panelists in the future.