

THE GREAT NORTH KOREAN FAMINE

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The views expressed in this book are those of the author alone. They do not necessarily reflect views of the United States Institute of Peace.

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*For my wife,
Elizabeth,
and our children,
Emily, Alexander, and Philip*

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The Great North Korean Famine is a powerfully argued account of perhaps the greatest humanitarian disaster of the 1990s, one that took the lives of millions and blighted the lives of millions more. Andrew Natsios has written a provocative analysis of international reaction to the North Korean famine, reflecting the author's own involvement in the events he describes: as vice president of World Vision, one of the largest nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the field of international disaster assistance, Natsios played a prominent role in persuading a skeptical world that the famine was real and in trying to prompt governments and NGOs to launch a timely and adequate humanitarian response.

Natsios's narrative is in many ways a personal account, illuminated and animated by the author's firsthand experiences and recollections. It draws together a considerable body of evidence and argues its case with scholarly care. While some may disagree with his assessment of the extent of the famine and of what the West should or could have done about it, no observer of North Korea or analyst of the humanitarian relief community can lightly dismiss its conclusions or ignore the impressive source material that Natsios has marshaled.

Moreover, this book also raises issues pertinent to other humanitarian crises. Natsios's approach stresses the importance of seeing such disasters from multiple perspectives—political, economic, diplomatic, international, governmental, and nongovernmental—and from the “bottom up” as well as the “top down.” This approach allows him to identify interconnections between often-conflicting perspectives and to retrace the steps that led to calamity. For instance, while bad weather, poor agricultural

practices, and a precipitous decline in food subsidies from the Soviet Union and China were among the most immediate causes of the North Korean famine, the chief culprit, argues Natsios, was the country's political system. Dictatorial and omnipresent, the regime held rigidly to a self-destructive agricultural system and impoverishing industrial policies while walling itself off from the rest of the world. When its food supply failed, it had no foreign exchange with which to buy food and no friends from whom to ask for food. The regime then made the situation far worse by deciding for political reasons to triage one area of the country and to reduce rations to farmers nationwide. "Most analyses of the North Korean famine," writes Natsios, "have been conducted using the disciplines of public health, nutrition, national agricultural production, and food aid distribution. But famines at their core are principally economic and political phenomena with public health and nutritional consequences, not vice versa."

The most controversial question this volume asks, however, is not "Who or what caused the famine?" but "Who failed to stop it?" In answering this latter question, Natsios criticizes humanitarian aid officials and agencies who failed to act upon the evidence of starvation that even the obsessively secretive North Korean regime could not entirely disguise. He censures, too, the governments of South Korea and Japan, which could have done much more to help their impoverished neighbor. Finally, he condemns American policymakers, who first denied the existence of a North Korean famine and then responded inadequately, Natsios argues, possibly at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives. In so acting, the Clinton administration was responding to pressure from a powerful chorus of interest groups and politicians who were demanding that no U.S. food aid be sent until North Korea agreed to behave more responsibly on the international stage and until the regime could demonstrate that the aid would not be diverted from starving citizens to its military. Even so, says Natsios, the administration should have put political and strategic considerations aside in favor of the moral obligation to feed the hungry. Natsios cites the doctrine adopted by Ronald Reagan midway through his tenure as president that "a hungry child knows no politics," a policy that continued under the administration of George Bush senior, of which the author was a part, serving as director of the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance.

Natsios wrote this book while he was a senior fellow at the United States Institute of Peace in 1998–99, immediately after leaving World Vision. He is now again in government, serving as administrator of the United States Agency for International Development under George W. Bush. An appointee under Republican administrations and formerly a longtime Republican member of the Massachusetts legislature, Natsios is highly critical of decision making within the Clinton administration, but he is also critical of people of all political standpoints who opposed sending aid to North Korea.

This volume confronts the reader with the rending question of how to balance moral values against political, diplomatic, and geostrategic interests. This is an issue that any president or prime minister confronts in deciding whether to send food to the hungry people of a hostile state, to deploy troops to halt genocide or ethnic cleansing in an unstable and dangerous region, or to dispatch diplomats to negotiate a peace settlement with war criminals. It is also a question that is of great concern to the United States Institute of Peace, whose congressional mandate is to explore the causes of international conflict and the means by which such conflict can be prevented, managed, or resolved. Directly or indirectly, much of the work supported by the Institute addresses this tension between the schools of realism and idealism, and assesses the complex relationships between morality, expediency, and effectiveness. What may seem to be the most economically or politically expedient policy, for example, may turn out to be a singularly ineffective or counterproductive way of pursuing national interests. And what may seem to be the correct moral course may in fact lead one into deeper and darker moral dilemmas while achieving little or nothing of substance.

Many aspects of this book resonate with other Institute-funded research. To take just a few examples from work published by the Institute in the past two years: *The Great North Korean Famine* complements Scott Snyder's study of North Korean negotiating behavior, *Negotiating on the Edge*, which also offers insights into the North Korean worldview and the idiosyncratic ways that the leaders of the "Hermit Kingdom" deal with what they see as a threatening international environment. Some of the same broad questions about foreign aid raised here by Andrew Natsios are addressed in Rex Brynen's book, *A Very Political Economy: Peacebuilding and Foreign Aid in the West Bank and Gaza*. The relationship between

NGOs, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and governments, which is central to *The Great North Korean Famine*, is likewise the focus of the *Guide to IGOs, NGOs, and the Military in Peace and Relief Operations*, a handbook written by Pamela Aall, Lt. Col. Daniel Miltenberger, and Thomas G. Weiss. The multiauthor volume *Turbulent Peace: The Challenges of Managing International Conflict*, edited by Chester Crocker, Fen Hampson, and Pamela Aall, offers numerous perspectives not only on the role of NGOs and IGOs in international humanitarian operations but also on the wisdom or otherwise of subordinating moral to political considerations in the making and conduct of foreign policy.

In short, *The Great North Korean Famine* furthers the Institute's goal of providing policymakers, practitioners, and other concerned citizens with informative, carefully argued, and thought-provoking analyses of issues critical to international peacemaking and stability. Andrew Natsios's passionate volume is sure to enhance our knowledge of North Korea—which may again be facing a food crisis—and of the dynamics of famine and disaster relief while stimulating debate on issues central to the making of foreign policy within a democracy.

RICHARD H. SOLOMON, PRESIDENT
UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE