

# U.S., North Korean officials reopen talks

## Nutrition-rich items which are less likely to be misused, are focus regarding food aid

BY WILLIAM WAN

U.S. officials have resumed talking to North Korea about providing food aid to the impoverished country, proposing that it accept nutrition-rich items — such as Plumpy Nut peanut paste — that are considered less likely to be diverted to the North Korean elite.

In lieu of foods like rice and beans that in the past have ended up in the bowls of North Korea's military, U.S. officials say they want to send vitamin supplements, high-protein biscuits and Plumpy Nut, a high-energy paste that has been widely given to malnourished children in Africa.

Breaking nearly three years of silence on the issue, U.S. officials began meetings with North Korean officials about food aid in Beijing on Thursday. State Department officials refused to disclose details about the talks, which were expected to continue Friday, but acknowledged the key issue being hammered out is the inclusion of nutritional supplies and other ways to ensure that aid goes to the North Korean public.

"When you think about food, you think about sacks of rice, cans of food, things that might easily be diverted to the wrong purpose," said State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland. By comparison, the broader term "nutritional assistance" now being used includes items aimed at "populations in need and would not find themselves on some leader's banquet table."

Chronic food shortages have been a problem in North Korea for much of the past two decades. They have been caused by natural disasters and the authoritarian government's agricultural and economic policies, which have been blamed for famines that have killed hundreds of thousands.

Trying to alleviate starvation has posed a challenge for rich nations such as the United States as well as international aid groups. As U.S. officials have pointed out repeatedly, North Korea's leaders have poured money into nuclear weapons program even as their people faced starvation.

Aid groups, however, have criticized the United States for not dealing with food shortages as a separate humanitarian issue.

"Negotiating with North Korea is like choreographing a dance with many moving pieces," said Victor Cha, a senior adviser at Center for Strategic and International Studies who was formerly the Asian affairs director for the National Security Council. "Because of that, you try to move all those pieces in the same direction at the same time."

In recent months, the United States has restarted a program to recover the remains of more than 5,000 U.S. troops in North Korea, resumed talk of food aid and raised the possible resumption of multilateral talks with respect to North Korea's nuclear disarmament.

In the past, some of the food distributed has come in the form of specialized foods called super cereals, according to a spokeswoman for the United Nations' World Food Program. Made in

North Korean factories with ingredients provided by the U.N. program, the cereals consisted of soya, beans, oil seeds, dried skimmed milk and vitamins and was believed to be less likely than rice to be diverted.

During the last round of aid sent to the county — which was ended by the North Koreans in March 2009 amid rising tensions with the United States — the food also included various blends of

Joy Portella, spokeswoman for the aid group Mercy Corps. "Our concern ever since is that the chronic food shortages are being exacerbated by flooding and cold winters."

After an assessment trip last month, the U.N. reported that North Korea's harvest was expected to increase this year by 8.5 percent, but at the same time malnutrition among children has also increased.

corn-soya, rice milk and cereal. It did not, however, include some of the items now being considered, such as Plumpy Nut and vitamin supplements.

Many aid groups say the food aid was well-monitored last time and diversion was not a problem. "There was unprecedented random access to all points in the supply chain, including dedicated warehouses, beneficiary institutions and family homes," said

In separate report, Mercy Corps workers who traveled through the country in September also noted severely malnourished children, including some who lacked the strength to stand on their feet. From such observations, they concluded that "a catastrophic situation is developing in regards to food security, severe acute malnutrition and slow starvation."

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