

PRICES, DEATHS RISE AS GRAIN STORES RUN LOW

As the international community's food aid to North Korea falls short of North Korean citizens' expectations, previously falling rice prices have begun to rise again in August, according to 'Good Friends', a South Korean organization working for human rights in the DPRK.

In a recent issue (no. 189) of the group's newsletter, "North Korea Today", it was reported that "the amount of outside food [North Korean] authorities had promised did not come in, and at the same time, the rumor that not even smuggled rice from China had been able to come in since August spread among traders, raising the price 200-300 [DPRK] Won per day" for a kilogram of rice.

Last May, the price of rice had risen to 4000 won per kilogram, but began to fall as news of food aid from the United States emerged, bottoming out at 2300-2400 won last month. It has now risen back to between 2900-3050 won.

The newsletter reports that the reason prices are climbing is that in June, North Korean authorities were spreading the word that plenty of food would be coming in from the United States and other overseas donors, but in July, when expectations were not met, concern grew that supplies would run out. This led traders to hoard stocks, driving prices up.

According to a North Korean document acquired by 'Good Friends' titled "Statistics on 2008 Lean Season Farmer Starvation", as many as twenty to thirty people per farm died of hunger during the spring lean season (April-June). The document listed the cause of death simply

‘death from disease’, with no reference to what particular disease had befallen the victims, but ‘Good Friends’ reports that North Korean medical officials are saying the cause of death was malnutrition.

It also reports that at the Taesungri Farm, visited on several occasions by both Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, poor harvests last year meant that the government was only able to provide two months worth of rations, leading to an increase in deaths during the lean season. In July, as small amounts of the year’s first crop began to be distributed, there were no deaths, but as August rolled around, people again began to die one or two at a time.