

6. NATIONS: North Korea faces severe climate adaptation problems -- study

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Lisa Friedman, E&E reporter

North Korean leader Kim Jong Il -- ailing, running a bankrupt state and accused of sinking a South Korean warship -- has another problem to worry about: climate change.

In a new [study](#) published in the journal *Asia Survey*, a North Korea scholar warns that famine brought about by climate change could weaken Kim's regime and chip away at the state's totalitarian institutions.

"North Korea does not have the adaptive capacity to buffer against greater food insecurity caused by exposure to climate hazards while it is simultaneously weakened by energy shortages, economic limpness, limited horizontal access to information, and its own rigid political system," warned Benjamin Habib, an international relations lecturer at La Trobe University, Albury-Wodonga, Australia.

"If the degradation of the state damages the privileged position of the elite, high-ranking officials may see the leadership as a liability and withdraw their support for the status quo. Such crises may force North Korea into systemic reform, or push the regime into collapse as the totalitarian order slides into disrepair," he wrote.

Habib noted that studying North Korea's vulnerability to climate change is "hampered by the opacity of the North Korean state." Researchers are forced to deduce information gathered by correlating secondary sources with information gathered by international aid groups and foreign visitors.

"This obstacle adds an element of imprecision to any climate vulnerability assessment," he said.

At the same time, he noted that the great famine of the 1990s, exacerbated by floods and droughts in the late part of the decade, does provide an insight into what North Korea could again face. He argued that the country's agricultural system remains beset by many of the same root causes that contributed to that famine.

Already weakened by policy failures

Using a methodology devised by a German climate impact modeler to assess North Korea's vulnerability, Habib found the country is at risk internally and externally. The country is beset with problems stemming from the regime's 1960s failed attempt to make North Korea agriculturally self-sufficient. It is isolated from the global economy, as well. Habib also pointed to the North Korean political system's "inherent structural and ideological rigidity that impedes effective long-term crisis planning and immediate emergency response."

Habib argued that the very totalitarianism of North Korea's regime discourages the development of new ideas and will make it difficult for the country to adapt to external shocks. Food production, for example, is hindered by the country's mountainous areas, harsh winters, deforestation and poor soil fertility.

He noted that the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts a 10 to 20 percent drop in rice and maize crop productivity across East Asia by the end of the century and pointed out that North Korea is susceptible to torrential flooding, typhoons, drought and acute cold weather. Higher incidence of these phenomena will accelerate a decline in agriculture production.

All that doesn't necessarily spell the social breakdown of North Korea, Habib said. But, he warned, the country right now lacks the economic resources, access to technology, infrastructure or institutions to adapt to likely climate consequences.

"North Korea's rigid political system is not equipped to deal with stress from food shortfalls, a weak economy, and energy shortages," he wrote. While the regime was able to "muddle through" the famine of the 1990s, "the consequences of climate stress could disrupt the political economy of the state to a degree that further, uncontrollable reductions in systemic complexity cannot be avoided."

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