

## Field notes

# Feeding North Korean kids, one bakery at a time

British pastor, whose charity runs six bakeries in North Korea feeding 18,000 children, wants to expand his bread project



Chang May Choon

South Korea Correspondent In Seoul

Growing up as the son of a North Korean who escaped to the South during the Korean War, pastor George Rhee was fascinated with stories told by his father of the giant apple farm and 99-room house owned by his wealthy landlord grandfather.

When he finally got to visit North Korea in 2002, he was struck by the poverty and the number of malnourished children roaming the streets, and he decided to help.

"I thought of starting an orphanage for the kids, but North Korea did not allow it. They said there are no orphans in North Korea, that all of them are Kim Jong Il's children," Reverend Rhee said, referring to the former leader of North Korea.

"Then I changed my mind (and decided) to start bakeries instead." With the financial backing of churches and permission from the North Korean authorities during an era of friendly inter-Korea ties, the big-hearted man started a non-governmental group with the aim of setting up 26 bakeries – one in every main city, including his father's home town – to feed needy children in North Korea.

But Rev Rhee had started only six bakeries by 2014 when rampant missile and nuclear tests under the stewardship of current North Korean leader Kim Jong Un resulted in crushing sanctions by the United Nations and all but cut off donations to start new operations.

Rev Rhee, a British citizen, now hopes that the stalled nuclear talks between Mr Kim and United States President Donald Trump will resume as soon as possible, so that sanctions can be eased to allow him to continue raising funds for his bread project.

"People don't want to support North Korea because of all the political issues, and some even say I'm doing the wrong thing," the 61-year-old told The Straits Times recently when he was visiting Seoul. "But this is not about politics. We are just trying to help hungry children."

## HUNGER CRISIS LOOMS

Hunger continues to haunt the people of North Korea, even as the Kim regime spends millions of dollars building its nuclear arsenal.

The UN warned in May that 40 per cent of North Korea's 25 million population are facing a "deep hunger crisis" after the worst harvest in 10 years.

Bad weather such as dry spells, heatwaves and flooding left the country with a food deficit of 1.36 million tonnes, and there is concern that damage to crops caused by a recent typhoon would worsen the situation.

Nearly half of the population suffer from undernourishment, and food rations have been cut to 300g a person a day.

The situation may seem dire, but critics say North Korea is capable of feeding its own people if it chooses to spend less on nuclear weapons.

The country has also received food aid from neighbouring China and Russia, as well as from humanitarian agencies, including the UN World Food Programme and Denmark-based Mission East.

At each of the bakeries run by Rev Rhee's organisation Love North Korean Children (LNKC), 15 local workers are hired to produce fresh bread to feed 3,000 children attending kindergarten and primary school, from Mondays to Saturdays. The baked or steamed goods are delivered to the schools.

The pupils look very happy to each get a 100g bun and a cup of soya milk, said the pastor, who visits North Korea three to four times a year. He added that most of the bread is steamed by burning coal, except in Pyongyang where there is enough electricity to power up an oven for baking.

"When I ask, the kids always say the bread tastes very good and they like it very much," he said, adding that most of the children would have



Reverend George Rhee, who started Love North Korean Children, visiting its bakery in Hyangsan in North Pyongan province last year. In the north-eastern port city of Rason (below), where the group opened its first bakery in 2006, workers load fresh bread onto a lorry to be transported to schools to feed the children.



gone hungry during lunch time as meals are not provided by the state.

The first LNKC bakery was opened in 2006 in north-eastern port city Rason, a free economic zone. It was the first place in North Korea that the authorities allowed Rev Rhee to visit in 2002 after he got his British citizenship – a decade after emigrating there with his family. He would not have been able to do so if he had remained a South Korean citizen, as people

from the South are banned from entering the North.

His father had just died then, and his desire to visit his father's home town along the western coast – Gwailoon, which literally means fruits county – grew stronger.

His dream came true in 2014, when the sixth LNKC bakery was opened there. It followed the launch of bakeries in Pyongyang in 2008, Hyangsan in 2010, Sariwon in 2012 and Nampo in 2013.

## HELPING THE CHILDREN

I thought of starting an orphanage for the kids, but North Korea did not allow it. They said there are no orphans in North Korea, that all of them are Kim Jong Il's children. Then I changed my mind (and decided) to start bakeries instead.



REVEREND GEORGE RHEE, who was struck by the poverty and the number of malnourished children roaming the streets when he first visited North Korea in 2002.

"Gwailoon is such a beautiful area, surrounded by mountains and seas," he recalled fondly. "The winds from the sea are very good for apple growing, but everything there belongs to the government now."

## DONATIONS HARD TO COME BY

Rev Rhee said he feels a strong connection to the people of North Korea. "North Korean people have very pure hearts. They have the same face as South Koreans, but

their skin is darker because they work under the sun, and their hands are very rough. My heart is moved by how hard they work, even though they live a difficult life," he said.

Citing a Bible verse about loving your enemies, he said he hopes to do more to help those in need, but lamented that donations are hard to come by these days.

Those who reject him tend to cite the UN sanctions, even though he would tell them there is a clause allowing humanitarian aid.

To start another bakery, he will need to raise US\$20,000 (S\$27,500) to buy equipment and materials, and another US\$3,000 a month to keep the operations going. Local workers do not get any salary; they get one or two bags of flour instead.

Even a small donation of US\$10 can feed a child for a month. "It'd be great if Singaporeans can contribute to my bread project. I will really appreciate it," said Rev Rhee.

He added that the North Koreans had asked him last October to open two bakeries in March this year, but he was unable to do so because of a lack of funding.

Medical researcher Jana Kovar from the Czech Republic, who helped to raise funds for LNKC when she was living in Seoul from 2013 to 2017, also urged more people to do their part.

Recalling her visit to North Korea in 2015, she said the bakeries can "feed an impressive number of children when operating at full capacity" and it was extremely satisfying to see children getting their daily supply of bread.

But the bakeries continue to face challenges such as electricity disruptions and limited access to ingredients, she said.

"I would urge people to look at the problem from a humanitarian point of view rather than a political point of view," she said. "There are many reputable global aid agencies doing very good work in North Korea and LNKC is another way to help quite directly."

changmc@sph.com.sg

• Love North Korean Children accepts donations on its website [www.lovenkchildren.org](http://www.lovenkchildren.org)

## Tough times for aid agencies helping malnourished citizens

SEOUL • With foodstuff ranging from rice and corn to bread and crackers, international aid agencies have been working to provide food and improve nutrition for malnourished North Koreans.

But tightened United Nations sanctions and growing public scepticism due to Pyongyang's repeated missile testing have made it harder for these groups to continue their work in the North.

Finnish non-governmental organisation (NGO) Fida International pulled out of North Korea in June after working there for over 20 years, blaming United States sanctions for making its operations impossible.

That ended its food security and healthcare project, which had been

helping 2.5 million people at a cost of €414,000 (S\$629,000) a year.

NGOs based in South Korea have also had difficulty reaching out to the North, as inter-Korea ties, which had been warming, stalled over deadlocked nuclear talks between Pyongyang and Washington.

The Korea Sharing Movement sent just one billion won (S\$1.2 million) worth of aid to the North last year – a fraction of the annual seven billion won to eight billion won sent during the 2000s, an era of friendly ties.

Denmark-based NGO Mission East, which just sent 636 tonnes of corn and beans worth 280 million won to North Korea, said sanctions are still a barrier to humanitarian assistance for the country.



A worker in a greenhouse provided under a livelihoods and basic needs scheme in North Korea. PHOTO: INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES

But it added that there are regulations that allow NGOs to get exemptions to provide life-saving and life-sustaining goods and materials to the North.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies said some of its projects were delayed last year owing to lengthy application and approval processes,

but that it hopes to avoid the same situation this year. It is appealing for 1.97 million Swiss francs (S\$2.7 million) to fund its livelihoods and basic needs programme, aimed at helping families with young children, pregnant women and people with disabilities.

Its disaster risk management delegate Daniel Wallinder said it provides greenhouses for villagers to grow vegetables such as eggplant and soya bean for consumption.

A minor share of produce is sold to maintain the greenhouses and to keep them sustainable, he added.

He said sanctions ban the import of metals to North Korea, but the group received an exemption to bring in certain metal items for humanitarian reasons.

Addressing concern that humanitarian aid can be abused or diverted to building missiles, he said the group will monitor its projects and make regular household visits to ensure that "our support is making a difference for those most in need".

Mr Greg Scarlatou, executive director of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, blames the country's perennial food issues on policies that divert scarce resources away from the people towards regime survival, such as for developing missiles.

"North Korea's food insecurity is not caused by UN or US sanctions, but by the regime's utter refusal to open up and reform," he said.

Chang May Choon