REPORT EXPLORATORY MISSION TO DPRK
Democratic People's Republic of Korea

30 April - 22 May 1996

(final version)

MSF international mission

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Introduction
In April 1996 the government of the DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) invited MSF via their representative in Paris, Mr Kim, to visit the DPRK again. On April 30 an international MSF mission arrived in Pyongyang. The objectives were:
- to continue the discussion with the government about possible interventions by MSF based on the MSF report after the previous mission.
- to target the most vulnerable groups regarding nutritional status, presumed to be the children under five, especially those who are not attending nurseries;
- to come to a programme proposal and agreement with the government and to start up this assistance programme when possible.

Several meetings were held with the Committee of Rehabilitation after the Flood Damage (CRFD), with different UN departments present in the DPRK (WFP, UNDP, UNICEF) and one visit was made to Huichon city, (meeting with the Vice Chairman of the County, Director of Public Health of the county and the Director of Huichon City Hospital). There have been no meetings with paediatricians or family doctors. Also meeting the Ministry of Public Health in Pyongyang was not possible.

Results of explo-mission
- from information of the government and the UN it became clear that the nutritional situation in the country is bad, that it will get worse in the coming months because the government is not able to provide enough food to the Public Distribution System, the pipeline of food assistance by donors is becoming dry and the harvest is delayed because of the late spring time. The nutritional condition of the population will seriously deteriorate to an alarming level if the situation continues as it is now.
- general food assistance is needed to supply the Public Distribution System.
- it was not possible to do any kind of nutritional survey, so vulnerable groups are not targeted.
- during the field visit to Huichon the idea came up that MSF could start an assistance programme of food distribution to hospitalised patients, in combination with supplying essential drugs and giving support to the nutritional and epidemiological surveillance system.

See for report exploratory mission and programme proposal, annex 1.

MOU
After discussions with MSF headquarters in Europe the proposal was laid down in a new Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which was offered to the Chairman of CRFD, Mr. Jong Yun Hyong, being the representative of the government for negotiations with MSF.

Basically the programme proposal concerns:
- Nutritional and medical assistance to health facilities in Huichon and Pakchon county.
- Food distribution to another 8000 hospitalised patients in different hospitals in the country, preferably in the vulnerable areas, meaning North Pyongan and Chagang province along the Chinese border.
- Co-operation between local health workers and MSF expats (1 nutritionist, 1 medical doctor and 1 logistician administrator on capital level) to support the nutritional and medical surveillance system and exchange knowledge with Korean doctors.

See for details the Memorandum Of Understanding, annex 2.

The food distribution to hospitalised patients would consist of:

* rice: 400 g / person / day
* vegetable oil: 25 g / person / day
* Soya beans: 100 g / person / day (delivered in beans or flower?)

This amounts for approximately 2000 kcal per person per day.

For six months and for 10,000 hospitalised patients the total amount of required food would be:

* rice: 720 T
* vegetable oil: 45 T
* Soya beans/flower: 180/270 T
Negotiations
Negotiations with Mr. Jong of the CRFD and Mr. Jong, the MSF counterpart, about the MOU were held during two meetings on May 17 and 21.

* Office in the country
The main point of discussion was the difficulty the government has with the condition included in the MOU that MSF wants to have an office in the country, in Pyongyang. Because the presence of NGOs in the DPRK is not included in any law this condition is unacceptable. Although the government recognises the needs of its population and is grateful to the offer of assistance that MSF is willing to give, they are very reserved to permit organisations being in the country and having many foreigners on a permanent base. They explained that they are proud people who rather refuse assistance than breaking their rules and regulations. The government prefers MSF to open an office somewhere else, for example in Beijing, and to come for regular visits to monitor the programme (like Caritas is doing). This is also based on their bad experience with some organisations that visited the country during the past months who collected all kind of sensitive information. According to Mr. Jong the political situation in the country is very sensitive and tense at the moment regarding the continuous attacks by South Korea and the US on North Korea, so they cannot afford to have more spies in the country. Although they understand very well that this is not the case with MSF, they are afraid that if they allow MSF to stay permanently in the country that they cannot refuse that to less reliable organisations, despite their good experiences with MSF.
Beside of that the decision about an NGO having a base/office in Pyongyang is not taken by the CRFD but has to be made on a higher level in the government, which takes more time.
A period of six months is very long to issue visa for expats. They would consider the possibility of visa for one month each time, which could be extended every month but they cannot guarantee this extension beforehand.

Other points of discussion:
* budget
- the extend of the proposed budget (1,000,000 USD): they asked if there would be a possibility to extend the budget, it’s not big enough. They asked if this was a pilot-project and mentioned that other NGOs were offering much bigger amounts. This could be influenced by the current visit of the DHA delegation, who is preparing for a second consolidated UN appeal concerning many millions, which will be launched by the end of June.

* expats
- number of expats: the CRFD experienced the number of expats in the previous MSF mission, ten in total, as overwhelming. It has given them a lot of headache to follow, organise and control such a big team. This was aggravated by the problems in co-operation with the MSF team in Unpa. They mentioned several times the fact that this team visited Ri-clinics without permission and it was also not laid down in the previous MOU.

* access to health facilities
- access to the health facilities: if there would be an agreement upon the first point of discussion, the presence of NGO/MSF in the country, there could be further discussion about the extend of access to health facilities. But the first proposal of the CRFD is that there would be one field visit per week, being one or two days. visiting one week Huichon and the other week Pakchon. In general they discussed and ventilated their doubts about the need of expats being in the field. They said that their doctors are well educated and don’t need supervision, control or what so ever and that the doctors are not really waiting for that. It is also not necessary for MSF to collect data for surveillance because their surveillance system, as well nutritional as epidemiological monitoring, is functioning perfectly well and MSF can use the collected data in the capital.

Basically the following answers were given from the side of MSF:
* MSF thinks an office in the country is necessary as to be able to closely monitor the ongoing programme and to go to the field as often as possible to establish a well functioning co-operation with the health workers. For MSF it is compulsory to have expats present in the country. It is not considered at all to open an office in Beijing. It is possible not to talk about office but about accommodation but
still this should be on a permanent base. MSF is not willing to start a programme on base of infrequent visits from abroad.

Visa could be issued per month but with a programme for six months some kind of guarantee should be given about extension of the visa. What to do if after the first month, when many relief goods have arrived, the visa would not be extended?

An intervention of (at least) six months is proposed regarding the alarming nutritional situation of the population which will deteriorate in the coming months and even continue after the harvest. The harvest is delayed and expected in October. That is five months from the beginning of June, so six months of assistance could be a start to cover this vulnerable period.

* It is explained to the CRFD that within MSF first a programme proposal is made before a budget is fixed. Regarding all the points in a proposal an estimation about the costs is made from which a budget follows and not the other way around. If an extension of the programme would be considered, an extension of the budget would be necessary but in that case MSF wants to know beforehand which population or area to target, so MSF want to be able to visit health facilities before extension is implemented. MSF doesn’t give “blind” donations. That is what the government of the DPRK would prefer as assistance.

* The mission for this proposal would consist of three expats and would of course try to keep to the given rules of the DPRK and not undertake any action which is not written down in the MOU. It is also guaranteed that MSF as an independent, neutral humanitarian organisation will not give any information to others (journalists etc.), has not any interest in espionage and is only here to give relief assistance to the population. It is stressed that MSF as experienced and respected NGO has another and complementary role to play in mobilisation of the international community for food assistance. MSF is in this regard different than the UN system and has possibilities to lobby on a different level. As there is no NGO so far in the DPRK it could be a very good opportunity to mobilise resources if MSF were allowed to have a programme here.

* As MSF wants to implement their programme with and for the population by co-operating on “grass root level” it is very important to have unlimited access to the health facilities. One or two days per week is a bit too restricted, but this could be discussed in a later stage and maybe extended as soon as an MSF office is established in the country.

Remarks
* After having been some time in the DPRK, having heard the experiences and anecdotes of other foreigners in the country and having felt the atmosphere, the problems of the government of accepting NGOs in the country seemed quite acceptable. Although there has been a previous mission of MSF, this has given constraints. The other organisations (WFP, UNDP, UNICEF) all operate on capital level and thus are controllable. After the floods of last year many delegations visited the country, and though the government doesn’t always like that, they need to ask assistance, but still within their limits. The door to the country seems to open up a little bit, but we had the impression that it is just a bit too early for NGOs to establish in Pyongyang and to be seen as partner. On the other hand there is not a definite no to MSF and we have to wait for further reactions from the government. If MSF will be invited to come again it is very important that before leaving it is clear what MSF is going to do, where they want to visit, whom they want to talk to and what kind of programme will be implemented. According to the system of the DPRK this should be announced in detail before arriving, otherwise it will not be possible to do anything. We experienced that in this expol- mission and that should not be repeated. It is advisable to send a detailed schedule to the government beforehand and to ask for approval.

* It is likely that the nutritional situation will deteriorate fast in the coming months which is of big concern to the government and the organisations present in the country. The impression exists that maybe adults are very vulnerable because children get food first, they are well looked after by the system and by the family. But still we don’t have any idea how the children are managing that are not attending in nurseries, an estimated 25%! Malnutrition is not very obvious but it can be understood that the nutritional status of the population is slowly deteriorating and it is just the question how much
further this can go? There must be also some micronutrient deficiencies at the moment, but so far nobody has been able to record that, everybody going on field trips had "the impression".

* It has not been achieved to meet the Ministry of Public Health in Pyongyang. All the contacts and appointments were arranged by Mr. Jong, our counterpart of the CRFD and it is not possible to take contact with anybody directly. The information we asked Mr. Jong to give us about the number of hospitals and the number of hospitalised patients in these hospitals, preferably of the provinces in the North of the country as to decide where food assistance to 8000 patients could be directed to, has not been given. This in spite the fact that we asked several times, that it was promised every day and that we waited for more than ten days.

There have also been no meetings with paediatricians, family doctors or any other health worker on county level except the Director of the City hospital in Huichon. As we had been instructed not to ask for any data, we didn't obtain information or even got an impression about the current morbidity and mortality figures in health care. As nutrition and infectious diseases are closely linked and as MSF is a medical organisation aiming also at implementing partly a medical assistance programme, it should be made possible the next time to get more information on this subject.

* The nutritional report of the WFP by Lola Nathaniel must be ready by now but was not yet available in Pyongyang. It should be followed up to obtain this report straight from Lola's office in the UK. Any recommendations given could be included in further considerations. So far this is the only survey that has been possible in the DPRK and it is very difficult to do other surveys. All the gathered information, also by other organisations, has to be used completely.

If an intervention of MSF would be possible in the near future and if it would include food assistance it is strongly advisable to take contact with Trevor Page, Country Director of WFP in Pyongyang, to discuss the means of importing food into the country, the constraints and to have his advises on this. He is concerned with all food aid that is entering the country, has a lot of experience and is very well informed. It is a missed opportunity not to co-operate with him and to find out the wheel again. Therefore this country is too complicated and energy is easily spoiled by repeating mistakes.

* On May 22 the mission left for Beijing/Paris after informing UNDP/UNICEF/WFP. They received a copy of the MOU.

Conclusions
- For the moment no agreement about a MSF-assistance programme has been reached with the government of the DPRK.
- The CRFD will discuss the possibility of MSF opening an office in Pyongyang (= a NGO being present in the country on a permanent base) on a higher level in the government. It could take longer time for the government to take such a decision. The results will be submitted to the representative of the DPRK in Paris. Mr. Kim and further contacts with MSF will follow in Paris.
- Concerning the contents of the programme proposal nothing has changed so the current MOU could function as base for further MSF activities.

Recommendations
- To be prepared for a positive reaction from the government and for starting a programme.
- To have an internal MSF discussion with the different sections to reconsider the position of MSF as an NGO in the DPRK and to define the objectives of a possible assistance programme. In other words to consider if it is the right time for MSF to have another attempt or that maybe it should be delayed till a more favourable time regarding the political climate in the DPRK.
- For a next visit: to discuss and write down in detail beforehand the programme-schedule of MSF and to insist on approval for this schedule before leaving Europe.
- To revise the MOU when thought necessary and to indicate more detailed the hospitals where to distribute food beside of Huichon and Pakchon. It is needed to obtain the figures about the number of hospitals and the number of hospitalised patients in the different counties (preferably in the North, being the most vulnerable areas after the floods and regarding accessibility.)
- To read the WFP report of Lola Nathaniel and to have contact with Trevor Page.
Other organisations in Pyongyang/DPRK

Present in Pyongyang: UNDP, WFP, UNICEF
Assistance programme: UNDHA, CARITAS, WHO, World vision, IFRC, EBCF
Inter agency meeting: every Wednesday 10.00 a.m. in the UNDP office (diplomatic area)

All the relevant information and reports of other organisations are left in the file in Pyongyang

Current activities

WFP: 1. Food assistance to the government to support the Public Distribution System.
      2. Emergency food aid meaning rice distribution to 500,000 flood victims
      3. Food distribution to nurseries (children under five)

      Regular updates are issued by WFP about the quantities of food for assistance that is entering
      the country. WFP is co-ordinating and monitoring the arrival and distribution of all the food
      that arrives in DPRK as donation.
      On May 13 a combined WFP/FAO Special Alert is issued concerning the faster than expected
      deterioration of the nutritional situation in the DPRK.
      The nutritional report by Lola Nathaniel containing results of the nutritional assessment done
      in April 1996 must be available by May 24.

UNICEF: 1. Measles vaccination for all children under five in the country + Vit. A distribution. So far
       600,000 children have been vaccinated
       2. Rehabilitation of ORS factory in Pyongyang. Until the factory is restored, ORS is imported.
       3. Distribution of CSB to nurseries in several counties. (150 g/child/day)
       4. New plan: Child growth monitoring by measuring weight/height in 100 nurseries spread
          over the country. Staff has to be trained for this. UNICEF will provide scales and height boards.
          Not yet operational.

UNDP: 1. Agricultural rehabilitation projects
       2. Distribution of non-food items (blankets, clothes, shoes etc.) in co-operation with UNDHA
       3. Co-ordination of inter agency meetings (should be kept informed)

UNDHA 1. Preparing the second consolidated UN appeal for international assistance to the DPRK.
       This appeal is planned to be launched in June '96.
       2. Distributed non-food items in January-February 1996
       3. In co-operation with UNDP trying to compose an overview what all the organisations are
          doing, in order to prevent overlapping. (including the activities of the NGOs.)

Caritas: 1. Distribution of rice and CSB, via WFP, to nurseries in different counties.
         2. Provision of plastic sheeting for agricultural purposes.

Worldvision/IFRC/EBCF: Donations of food via WFP.

WHO: Proposal is launched for medical relief programme (medical supplies and equipment, 
      emergency health kits, chlorine powder, vitamins, epidemiological surveillance system) in
      Ulju, Pakchon, Sakju, Unpa, Rinsan. Not clear if this proposal is approved, nobody of WHO
      present in Pyongyang in May '96
Some practical issues

Contacts in DPRK
Paris: délégation DPRK
Mr KIM HAWON - Deputy representative
tel: 45 53 49 71
fax: 45 53 50 36

UNDP
G. FARUQ ACHIKZAD - Resident representative
WILLY SCHOLL- Resident Deputy Representative
BILL PATON
tel sat: (872)150 74 50
fax sat: (872)150 74 51

UNDHA (UN New York)
GREGOIRE DE BRANCOVAN - Senior Humanitarian Affairs Officer
tel: (212) 963 2629
fax: (212) 963 1312

UNICEF
RUNAR SOERENSEN - Project Officer
tel: (850-2) 381 7566 or 381 7571
fax: (850-2) 381 7603
fax sat: 872 150 7451

WFP
TREVOR PAGE

Korean Authorities
Mr CHONG YUN HYONG - Deputy Representative of Committee for Rehabilitation after the Flood Damage

Daily life in Pyongyang
Due to a completely artificial exchange rate, life is very expensive in hotels (minimum 120 US$/night). An agreement for accommodation price should be discussed before any departure of a team. A fee of 300$/month for nights in an hotel for a team of three people, or 700$ for a flat including staff for kitchen, laundry, cleaning, should be acceptable for the authorities.

Voltage of 220v is available but not so reliable.
Heating is an important problem in winter in many places, and temperature is -20°C in January.
There are some mosquitoes in summer. Bring repellent and insecticide.
Japanese encephalitis seems to be common in the country → to be vaccinated for summer stay.
Western products are not available at all in the country. Excepted Nescafé and some American cigarettes (mainly Dunhill).
Take with you some books, CD player, games… You won’t be able to work every day.
Don’t give your books or newspapers to Korean citizens. The authorities explained us that some foreigners had done that, and it was quite clear that this behaviour was not very welcomed.

Unlike the previous mission, we have been able to walk in the city and along the river without asking authorisation before. We don’t now if we were not followed but this is not the problem. Our presence is a very sensitive matter: they are paranoiac with spies. Be the most transparent as possible, inform your counterpart, whenever you see him, about your plans (ex: “we will go there this afternoon”).
Microphones are everywhere. A UN member (diplomatic status!) detected 6 of them in his sleeping room. Then don't hesitate to explain in details the contents of your meetings.

In the same way, give details of your phone calls and faxes. They know it already and will appreciate. The best way for changing the routine is to ask your counterpart to drive you to a local restaurant, some acrobatic demonstrations, or Opera. There are some supermarkets where you can buy paper, pens or shoes... (Korean quality guaranteed for everything).

Ask before using your camera.

The people are not allowed to have contacts with foreigners and they usually don't speak English. Don't try to speak with peoples in the streets, you will not get any problem, but they will.

Left in Pyongyang on 21st/05/96

- 2 printers BJ-200ex with connecting wires for PC
- 4 ink cartridges for BJ-200
- photocopier Canon FC330
- printing calculator
- 10 empty diskettes + box
- white paper, more than 500 sheets
- paper with MSF logo, 500 sheets
- files, envelopes, pens, etc... (enough to start)
- lack of a puncher to use the files
- stapler + staples
- several voltage stabilisers (at least 2 are working)
- wires with multi-plugs
- operational library including:
  - Aide à L'organisation d'une Mission - 2ème édition 1994 - French
  - Books Windows, Word, Excel in French
  - Balzacs (accounting MSF/F)
  - Coffee machine (bring some filters)
- 3 pharmacy boxes for expats
- fax + sitreps file. Mission end 95 and exploratory mission may 96

- not used miscellaneous stuff, as house hardware, winter clothes, etc...

All this stuff is in the WFP apartment and take some place. If we don't come this year, see what must be carried to Beijing or handed over to WFP.

Beijing Airport

For transit between Europe and Pyongyang, don't queue for customs clearance. Go directly to gate n°1 and ask for "transit". This is the only word they understand in English. They will take your passport, you go to the first floor to the international flight area (don't enter the domestic flight area), here they will give you your passport back.

Stay in Beijing

MSF Beijing
Friendship Hotel # 61814
100873 Beijing
P. R. CHINA
Office Phone: (86.10) 849 8511 or (86.10) 849 8888 ext.61814
Olivier BONNET: (86.10) 849 8888 ext.64844
Marcel ROUX: (86.10) 849 8888 ext.60821

From Beijing phone numbers are 6849 xxxx
Air France World Trade Center (KuoMao in Chinese)
tel: 6505 1430 or 6505 1818
They speak French and English.

Beijing is a huge city, we recommend to stay in the centre, which is large enough for a good walker.

Take a taxi at the airport, and ask for example:
CHONG WEN MEN Hotel
Room charge: between 300 and 460 Yuan (8.1 Yuan = 1$), according to the season.
Ask for a discount (10% in peak season, 30% in low season)

Almost nobody is speaking English except at the desk of the hotels.