



Online Series

2020. 02. 04. | CO 20-03

Inter-Korean Cooperation and Collaborative Action for the Prevention of Epidemic Proliferation

Lee, Kyu-Chang

(Director, Humanitarianism and Cooperation Research Division)

The proliferation of the novel coronavirus (2019-NCov) from China is affecting inter-Korean relations and, especially, the two Koreas' cooperative measures on tourism. Preventing the proliferation of the epidemic or minimizing the harm from its inflow requires inter-Korean cooperation. Along with efforts to draw approval from UN Security Council Sanctions Committee on North Korea's humanitarian exemption, South and North Korea need to cooperate more actively on preventing the proliferation of the epidemic. First, the two Koreas need to set priorities on disaster cooperation. They ought to prioritize cooperating on 1) preventing the spread of the epidemic in border areas, 2) peacefully utilizing joint rivers near border areas to prevent unauthorized discharge, and 3) extinguishing potential forest fires in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) if such an event were to occur. Second, the two need to seek measures to elicit standing humanitarian exemptions rather than case-by-case exemptions. Third, the South and the North need to institutionalize their collaborative action plans, both in regard to natural and social disasters. East and West Germany, for instance, signed the Joint Disaster Response Agreement in 1973.

The Effects of Proliferation of the Epidemic on Inter-Korean Relations and Cooperative Measures on Tourism

The novel coronavirus (2019-NCoV) from China is spreading rapidly. On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) has declared the coronavirus outbreak a public health emergency of international concern. Meanwhile, North Korea has been committed to preventing the virus inflow to its territories. Its ad-hoc Central People's Health Supervisory Committee has declared a state of emergency in regard to the infection prevention system until the threat of the 2019-NCoV has dissipated.¹⁾ It has gone as far as to close its borders and suspend trade with China, who makes up the majority of its trade volume. As a result, North Korea's preventive measures are likely to inflict sizable effect on its tourism industry. The country began operating the Yangdok Hot Spring Cultural Recreation Center on January 14, 2020.²⁾ Also, it is seeking to develop the Wonsan-Kalma Coastal Tourist Area and transform Samjiyon county into an international tourist zone. Amid these plans, the North is taking the coronavirus as more than a mere health problem and as an existential threat to the state. In fact, on January 29, 2020, Rodong Sinmun emphasized the anti-proliferation measures against the coronavirus as a pivotal political issue connected to the survival of the state.

The proliferation of the coronavirus is also affecting inter-Korean relations and their cooperative measures on tourism. Individual tourism policies pursued by the South Korean government inevitably face a grim outlook as North Korean authorities are putting all their efforts into preventing the inflow of the epidemic. Also, on January 30, the two governments agreed at the inter-Korean joint liaison office in Gaesong to temporarily close the inter-Korean liaison office until the threat from the epidemic has withered completely. Nonetheless, the two Koreas agreed to continue liaising by setting up a separate Seoul-Pyongyang telephone line and fax line. The shutdown of the office, while temporary, is an exemplar case of how the epidemic can affect inter-Korean relations.

1) The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), January 30, 2020.

2) The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), January 14, 2020.

Precedents of Inter-Korean Cooperation on the Prevention of the Proliferation of Infectious Diseases and Their Implications

Preventing the spread of, or minimizing the harm of, epidemics requires inter-Korean cooperation. In fact, there are precedents.³⁾ Throughout the 2000s, South Korea, though indirectly through international organizations, aided North Korea for the prevention of infection in malaria, foot-and-mouth disease, swine flu and others. Also, local governments of South Korea have cooperated in forest pest control and support for flood damages with North Korea. For cooperation in this field, the South and the North signed the following agreements: 1) the Agreement at the First Meeting of the Inter-Korean Agricultural Cooperation Committee in August 2005, 2) the October 2007 Declaration on the Advancement of South-North Korean Relations, Peace, and Prosperity, or the 10.4 Declaration, 3) the Agreement at the First Prime Ministerial Talks on the 10.4 Declaration, 4) the Agreement at the First Meeting of the Joint Committee for Inter-Korean Economic Cooperation, and 5) the Agreement at the First Meeting of the Subcommittee for Cooperation on Public Health, Medicine and Environmental Protection. Government-led preventive support from 2000 to 2010 has cost the Republic of Korea (ROK) 39.6 billion won.

However, support for epidemics, forest pest controls, and flood damages all came to a halt since 2010 when the inter-Korean relations started to strain. Other aid programs for natural disasters also lasted during the 2000s but stopped after 2010. Even now, inter-Korean healthcare cooperation is in rough waters under the Moon Jae-in government. The incumbent government sought to aid North Korea with Tamiflu as part of the healthcare cooperation scheme, but the effort failed to see the light of day due to delays caused by sanctions imposed on North Korea. Also, the ROK government sought North Korea's cooperation on quarantine measures against African Swine Fever on numerous occasions since May 2019, but it gained little success.

In the private sector, on the other hand, inter-Korean cooperation regarding infectious diseases has continued through nongovernmental organizations since the

3) Yejoon Lim and Kyu-Chang Lee, *Improving Disaster Cooperation for North Korea* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2017), pp. 124-125 (in Korean).

beginning of the Moon Jae-in government. The Eugene Bell Foundation visited 12 North Korean multiple drug resistance TB centers in May 2017, registering more than 400 patients. Also, North Korea allowed the Eugene Bell Foundation to visit the country twice in 2019 (April 23 – May 14 and September 2 – 24). Prior to the visits, UN Security Council Sanctions Committee on North Korea approved the Eugene Bell Foundation's request for exemption on anti-TB drugs and medical equipment.

In short, when it comes to cooperation on epidemics, North Korea is selectively accepting ROK government's cooperative measures according to its national interest or political circumstances. This implies the dual possibility that North Korean authorities may reject South Korean government's proposal to cooperate on the prevention of the coronavirus or accept it depending on domestic political circumstances. Along with efforts to receive exemption from UN Security Council Sanctions Committee on North Korea, the two Koreas ought to cooperate more actively in preventing the proliferation of the infectious disease. The ROK government ought to let the North know the intention to offer a helping hand, and North Korea ought to respond to it.

The Necessity of Devising a Joint Action Plan for Disasters

The proliferation of epidemics goes beyond threatening the life and safety of individuals and puts the preservation of the community in jeopardy. In this sense, governments usually consider the proliferation of epidemics as a disaster or an emergency. South Korean law prescribes the damages caused by the spread of infectious diseases (under the Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Act) and by contagious animal diseases (under the Act on the Prevention of Contagious Animal Diseases) as forms of disaster as stipulated in Paragraph 1.b, Article 3, Framework Act on the Management of Disasters and Safety. In fact, Article 2 of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on Disaster Prevention, Relief and Recovery also states that the damage from the proliferation of epidemics is included in the range of damage from disasters.

Disasters are not simply limited to damages from the proliferation of epidemics. Generally, disasters are distinguished between natural and social

disasters. Damages from the proliferation of epidemics fall under the category of social disasters. Damages from typhoons, floods, droughts, earthquakes, and volcanic activities belong to natural disasters. The movie “Baekdusan,” while a fiction, depicts the unimaginable scale of damage a natural disaster can cause. Some disasters exist in the form of a hybrid of natural and social disaster. Effects of global warming are archetypal examples of this form of disaster.

Both the size and frequency of disasters are increasing due to the complexity of related factors. Due to geographical proximity, the two Koreas are not free from the effects of disasters erupting in each other’s territories. Especially, disasters occurring at the DMZ are big concerns. For example, forest fires are occurring in the DMZ. Malaria that crossed borders from North Korea had inflicted damage on South Korean citizens and its military personnel. In this context, President Moon Jae-in declared that the two Koreas ought to cooperate on joint actions against infectious diseases, forest pests, and forest fires. North Korea is also increasingly aware of the need to take action against disasters. It devised the law of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea on Disaster Prevention, Relief and Recovery on June 27, 2014 and, unprecedentedly, discussed action plans against natural disasters during the 5th Plenary Meeting of 7th Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea in December 2019.⁴⁾ This implies that the two Koreas can find consensus on the issue of disaster cooperation. The outbreak of the coronavirus should alarm the need to holistically inspect the response system against disasters occurring in North Korea and the DMZ. Policy suggestions are as follows.

First, priorities must be set on disaster cooperation since natural, social, and hybrid disasters are occurring at multiple locations in North Korea. The highest priority should be given to cooperative measures on preventing the proliferation of epidemics. Such measures are not only of humanitarian nature but also essential for securing the rights to life and to health of the people of both South and North Korea. The next priority should be given to peacefully utilizing joint rivers near border areas in order to prevent unauthorized discharges and to extinguishing potential forest fires in the DMZ if such an event were to occur. Successful disaster

4) The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), January 1, 2020.

cooperation can help resume tourist activities, vitalize North Korea's tourism industry, and induce international support for transforming the DMZ into an International Peace Zone.

Second, standing exemption or comprehensive exemption should actively be sought by drawing international consensus on exemption of sanctions imposed on North Korea. While humanitarian exemptions have been approved on a case-by-case basis, such a process has been criticized for substantially delaying humanitarian activities. In this light, standing humanitarian exemptions have taken the place of case-by-case exemptions.⁵⁾

Third, inter-Korean disaster cooperation requires institutionalization. While there has been intermittent cooperation on dealing with forest pests, flood damages, and healthcare, systematic and comprehensive response to natural and social disasters requires institutionalization. East and West Germany signed the Joint Disaster Response Agreement in 1973. This agreement defines protocols on how to respond to natural and social disasters such as flooding in joint rivers, closing of sewages, the outbreak of epidemics, and explosions. It also provides rules on how to jointly respond when a disaster crosses borders.⁶⁾ ©KINU 2020

※ The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).

5) Kyung-ok Do and Sangme Baek, *The Impact of Sanctions on the Enjoyment of Human Rights* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2018), pp. 135-136 (in Korean).

6) Yejoon Lim and Kyu-Chang Lee, *Improving Disaster Cooperation for North Korea*, pp. 126-128 (in Korean).