

North Korea warns of natural disaster as heatwave sears crops

Monday 27 August 2018, by [HAAS Benjamin](#) (Date first published: 3 August 2018).

Citizens urged to wage all-out battle to preserve food stocks amid ‘unprecedented’ drought



Temperatures have reached more than 40C in some regions of North Korea since late July.
Photograph: Kim Kwang Hyon/AP

The North Korean government has called on its people to wage an “all-out battle” against a record heatwave as the country’s already fragile crops face drought and the authorities struggle to respond.

The drought represented an “unprecedented natural disaster”, reported the [Rodong Sinmun](#) newspaper, the mouthpiece of the ruling Workers’ party. It urged citizens to “join the struggle” to save food production in a country that is no stranger to famine. Temperatures have reached more than 40C (104F) in some regions since late July and there have been sporadic reports of deaths from the heat.

“This high-temperature phenomenon is the largest, unprecedented natural disaster, but not an obstacle we cannot overcome,” a commentary in Rodong Sinmun said. “Extreme high temperatures and droughts have begun affecting farming crops, including rice and corn. We should muster all our power and capacity to fight high temperatures and droughts.”

North Korea’s state-run media published several articles this weeksuggesting precautions in a country where air conditioning is almost non-existent. Government television said the heat was taking a toll on the economy, which is already subject to [a tight international sanctions regime](#) imposed over the country’s nuclear programme.

“This weather will certainly influence food production and right now is a critical time especially for rice crops,” said Hiroyuki Konuma, a former Asia representative at the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). “All the farmers have to listen to government directives and the decisions made now will be very important. If this weather and drought continues for another week or two we should be very worried about North Korea’s food production.”

The government has been working in recent years to boost production, but the system remains highly susceptible to weather extremes, he said.

A cry for help?

The North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, said in April that his government was shifting its focus from producing nuclear weapons to improving the economy, but the country remains under UN sanctions that have brought most trade to a standstill. Food, medicine and other humanitarian aid are exempt, and experts suggested state media attention on the problem may be a cry for help.

North Korea experienced [a devastating famine](#) in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the aid it provided. Some researchers suggest as many as a million people died.



State-run media called on North Koreans to ‘display their patriotic zeal’ in the fight against drought. Photograph: Wong Maye-E/AP

The government newspaper told North Koreans to “display their patriotic zeal” and “save every single droplet of water” to combat the current drought.

“There is no tomorrow when it comes to fighting against high temperatures and droughts,” the Rodong Sinmun comment said, according to a translation by South Korea’s Yonhap news agency. “If we just hope for luck and squander our time, it would cause irreversible consequences.”

In a separate article, the Pyongyang University of Medical Sciences told people to wear large hats and limit the time they spent working outdoors to avoid heatstroke. [North Korea](#) does not have enough electricity to power most homes throughout the day, meaning that families who do have fans may not be able to power them continuously.

An unnamed source [quoted by Daily NK](#), a Seoul-based news service, said: “North Koreans are expressing a great deal of concern because people are suffering from life-threatening heat and crops that are drying out.”

People have collapsed in the street due to the heat, the report said, and farmers are struggling to follow government orders to water fields by hand because of water shortages and extreme working conditions.

The FAO warned last year of the worst drought in 16 years, saying a prolonged dry season threatened food security for a large part of its population.

In South Korea, far wealthier than its northern neighbour, there have been at least 29 deaths caused by the heat and [more than 3 million head of livestock have been killed](#).

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