



## WHO KIM JONG UN'S "WORST EVER" DECLARATION WAS AIMED AT

BY BRUCE W. BENNETT

*Bruce W. Bennett ([bennett@rand.org](mailto:bennett@rand.org)) is a senior international/defense researcher at the nonprofit, nonpartisan RAND Corporation.*

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The coronavirus has been a disaster for [North Korea](#). Last week Kim Jong Un [warned](#) that his country faces the “worst-ever” situation. He said this situation was creating conditions like the “Arduous March” North Korea faced with the famine of the late-1990s, this time because of the [coronavirus](#), United Nations and US sanctions, and bad weather. In the late-1990s, “millions of North Koreans [reportedly died](#) from widespread hunger.”

It was surprising that the leader of [North Korea](#) would admit such dire circumstances, circumstances which at face value suggest major failures on his part. But [Kim](#) is once again refusing to accept responsibility for his bad choices, and making the results seem [more dire](#) than they are in reality. Yes, the situation may be terrible in North Korea but there is “no evidence to suggest that [North Korea's economic situation](#) is nearly as dire as the Arduous March of the 1990s.”

For some time now, Kim has denied that he has a [coronavirus](#) problem. But there was considerable evidence that this North Korean claim [was not true](#) even a year ago. They could not afford to have a major spread of the coronavirus because the [decrepit North Korean health care system](#) was unable to handle it. So Kim closed North Korea's borders, blocking trade that would normally provide badly needed food, energy, funds, and other goods.

While the sanctions on North Korea cut its exports significantly, it was the North Korean border closure which cut needed North Korean imports, [especially from China](#), and had a greater overall impact than the sanctions. And despite the bad weather, the North's food harvest was [only down 5%](#) in 2020. In his January Workers Party Congress, Kim admitted the failures of the North Korean economy but turned to his [normal scapegoating](#) of other parties and situations, blaming them for the North's problems.

But the North's economic problems rest squarely on Kim. After all, the UN and US sanctions have been applied to North Korea because the North has defied the United Nations and the United States, continuing and [even expanding](#) its nuclear weapon and [ballistic missile programs](#) when the international community has told the North not to continue destabilizing peace in Northeast Asia.

Kim has spent his country's scarce resources on nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, going [well beyond](#) the military capabilities he needs to deter outside intervention in North Korea. He has done this rather than providing food for his people or improved health care. He is [not even telling](#) his people that coronavirus vaccines have been developed, offering both South Korea and the United States a powerful information operation opportunity. And even though his country periodically experiences heavy rains, he has not built the infrastructure required to protect his people against these predictable events. Anxious to maximize his control of his people, he has also experimented with closing the markets in North Korea, only to be then [forced to back off](#) or face even more dire economic consequences. Kim knows that a major problem in North Korea is [official corruption and mismanagement](#), and yet he has not addressed the conditions underlying this corruption.

So why is Kim admitting that dire circumstances are developing in the North? We do not know for sure. But it appears that he is hopeful he can convince the [Chinese](#) and the Russians that North Korea is becoming increasingly unstable and thus dangerous. China has historically moderated its demands on North Korea despite providing it major subsidies, fearing that North Korean instability could [create a](#)

[major threat to Chinese security](#). Kim appears to be hoping that China will accept Kim's alarmist declaration and provide North Korea increased sanctions relief. Kim likely also wants China to focus on the North Korean economic difficulties and not on the growing North Korean [nuclear weapon threat](#), which increasingly is also a threat to China.

At some point, the international community may need to induce Kim to face responsibility for his choices. Kim could fix his problems by freezing his nuclear weapon production as a first step toward his promised denuclearization. Such an action could gain him significant sanctions relief and shift the resources being wasted on nuclear weapons to taking care of the North Korean people.

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