

FAQs

H.R. 1504/S.690 Enhancing North Korea Humanitarian Assistance Act

What does the Enhancing North Korea Humanitarian Assistance Act (ENKHA) do?

If enacted, ENKHA would restore humanitarian exemptions for aid workers and humanitarian shipments. Due to certain clauses outlined in the [NGO General License](#), virtually every shipment to North Korea and cooperative activity with North Koreans requires special permission from the Treasury Department (given in the form of a “specific license”). These procedures can take anywhere between six months to two years and could significantly delay the humanitarian response to the situation in North Korea.

Additionally, ENKHA would ease travel procedures for aid workers who hold U.S. passports. Currently, all U.S. passport holders traveling to North Korea must obtain approval from the State Department (in the form of a “special validation passport”). These procedures are an additional hurdle for already resource-constrained nonprofit groups.

The changes to travel procedures would also apply to those seeking to reunite with family members as well as those traveling to repatriate the remains of U.S. servicemembers.

What is the current humanitarian situation in North Korea?

The North Korean government recently disclosed a major surge of COVID-19 and “fever” (thought to be the Omicron variant) in the country. According to North Korea’s data, cases rose from 350,000 to more than 3.8 million in the first three weeks of the outbreak. While the data shows a decrease in cases requiring treatment and the North Korean government is [declaring](#) that they are “successfully overcoming” the outbreak through lockdown measures, the risk remains high that a serious humanitarian crisis could arise.

For the most recent data on the COVID outbreak, see [38 North - North Korean COVID-19/Fever Data Tracker](#).

Basic supplies are running low in the country and the government [has admitted](#) food shortages in the wake of typhoons. According to UN [estimates](#), 41% of the population is food insecure, and 71% of children under the age of two are not receiving minimum nutrition standards. Compounding matters, North Korea's health infrastructure - ranked 193 out of 195 in the world - is not equipped to handle such an outbreak. These conditions make the population extremely vulnerable to a humanitarian crisis and the situation creates [ample opportunities](#) for COVID to spread and mutate.

What aid is going to North Korea currently?

Shortly after the outbreak of COVID-19 in China, North Korea closed its borders to incoming travel and most cargo. In 2022, some shipments of [aid](#) and [cargo](#) arrived in North Korea; however, these represent a fraction of previous inflows. North Korea may decide to open its borders to aid shipments in the future due to the recent surge in the country. Aid groups are now preparing to respond to major humanitarian needs if/when the borders open.

Is North Korea currently accepting COVID aid?

As of early June 2022, North Korea has declined offers of assistance and COVID vaccines from the United States, South Korea, COVAX, and other multilateral institutions. However, this may not be a tenable solution for the country given its weak health infrastructure. Aid experts are asking the international community to prepare for a possible re-opening, which could come at any point.

Does aid to North Korea – as outlined in the ENKHA - use U.S. government money?

No. The provisions outlined in ENKHA pertain only to nongovernmental organizations, which raise private funds for their work in North Korea. Currently, only about a dozen U.S. NGOs carry out this work. These organizations have been operational for many years, [some going as far back as 1980](#). Most private U.S. aid groups are faith-based and carry out this work as an expression of their religious principles and values.

North Korea continues its missile testing. Will aid free up resources for North Korea's weapons development? Are there issues with aid diversion?

North Korea has been under a self-imposed embargo throughout the pandemic, yet its missile and weapons programs continue unabated. The pandemic years have shown that aid has no direct relationship to North Korea's ability to test or manufacture missiles.

Before the pandemic, [studies](#) revealed that 90% of humanitarian funds for North Korea were used to procure goods outside of North Korea, while 10% of the funds were used by agencies inside the country to maintain operational costs such as staff salaries, rent, transportation, etc. Thus, given that procurement happens outside of North Korea, large-scale direct monetary siphoning is not possible.

Additionally, total humanitarian spending only equates to about 0.4% of the North Korean military budget. Humanitarian funds, then, pale in comparison to military expenditures and could not contribute much to their missile programs even if major diversions were possible.

There are no indications of widespread, systematic diversion of goods either as evidenced by significant improvements in sectors where aid was prevalent prior to the pandemic. For example, indicators such as increased food production, improved nutrition rates, decreasing child mortality rates, and other key health indicators were showing [positive trends](#) before the 2017 UN and US sanctions as well as US travel regulations which obstructed aid operations. These trends would not have been possible if aid diversion were a serious issue.

Aid is also strictly monitored by humanitarian groups, which have decades of experience operating in North Korea. If you or your office would like to know more about these monitoring procedures, please contact:

- Daniel Jasper, American Friends Service Committee: djasper@afsc.org, and/or
- Kate Parsons, Mennonite Central Committee: katerinaparsons@mcc.org.

Does the U.S. public support aid activities?

Yes. In 2021, the American Friends Service Committee worked with Ipsos to conduct a [public opinion poll](#) on these and similar issues. The poll found that 56% of voting-aged adults in the U.S. agreed that the U.S. government should allow privately funded charities to deliver humanitarian assistance to the people of North Korea.

Notably, Midwestern respondents showed higher than average levels of support for private aid operations as 61% of midwestern adults agreed the U.S. should allow these operations. Other regions were more or less consistent: 54% of Northeastern respondents, 53% of those in the South, and 56% of those in the West supported these initiatives.