

# On frozen fields, N. Korean farmers prep for battle ahead

By Eric Talmadge  
The Associated Press

**P**YONGYANG, North Korea — Plug your noses and ready your “Juche fertilizer.” It’s time to prep the frozen fields in North Korea.

North Korea relies on its farmers to squeeze absolutely all they can out of every harvest. It’s a tall order in a country with 25 million mouths to feed that is mostly mountains, hamstrung by international trade sanctions, and, beyond a handful of showcase cooperatives, hard-pressed to modernize its agricultural sector.

Without a doubt, life as a farmer in North Korea is harsh. But there are some signs of change in how North Korea is treating its fields and its farmers.

In typically propagandist fashion, the North’s state media are already reporting that workers inspired by leader Kim Jong Un’s New Year’s address are heroically churning out “117 percent” of their production quotas of what they call “Juche fertilizer.”

A grain of salt is certainly in order. What exactly the patriotic-sounding Juche fertilizer is isn’t all that clear, though it’s likely a mix of largely organic components augmented with some chemicals. Because of the general lack of livestock, human feces are a key ingredient. Juche refers to the North’s longstanding but mostly aspirational policy of self-reliance.

The battle in the fields, however, has certainly begun.

With the ground still frozen as the North waits out its notoriously cold winter, farmers, joined by workers and students mobilized from the cities, are in the process of transporting truckloads of the pungent fertilizer to fields across the country for the planting season ahead.

Kim Song Ryong, head technician at the Migok Cooperative Farm in Sariwon, south of Pyongyang, said it takes about 20



**FERTILIZING FROZEN FIELDS.** Female farm workers shovel locally produced “Juche fertilizer” at Migok Cooperative Farm near Sariwon, North Hwanghae province, North Korea. With the ground still frozen while the North waits out its notoriously cold winter, farmers, joined by workers and students mobilized from the cities, are in the process of transporting truckloads of the pungent fertilizer to fields across the country for the planting season. (AP Photo)

fertilizer difficult. But he said the push in the North for composting, while poorly designed at first, has gradually improved so farms have started to produce fertilizer using local, low-energy methods.

“Buying more would be the easy, if not environmentally or economically sustainable, way to boost farm production,” Ireson said. “Lacking that resource, the push has been to find local resources, which I think is quite appropriate.”

More importantly, policy revisions under Kim Jong Un have since 2012 given farmers more incentive to produce above the state quota and to take more of a personal stake in field outcomes. Though details are scant, farmers can sell excess produce for a profit and smaller, essentially family-sized, work units have been established to make the rewards more direct.

Outside experts generally agree the changes are a step in the right direction — China and Vietnam had success with similar agricultural reforms.

But they also quickly warn it remains unclear how widely and fully implemented the revisions have been.

“It’s always hard to know what the ag situation really is,” said Ireson. “There’s a tendency to concentrate on technical aspects of farming (in the North), but the farmers are pretty clever and know how to do things. The main constraint is limited resources and, at least until recently, little personal incentive to produce beyond the quota.”

to 25 days to distribute the compost. In March, it will be spread over the fields in an even layer and then plowed in below the surface.

“Our respected supreme leader comrade Kim Jong Un instructed us that agriculture is the main approach to building a strong economy and country,” he said in an interview with AP Television News. “To get the best harvest with scientific farming, all our farmers and workers are out in the fields to improve the quality of the soil.”

In the past, the country’s over-reliance on scientific magic bullets has had tragic results.

Overuse of chemical fertilizers that began in the 1950s devastated the natural microbiotic soil environment and fuelled a cycle in which its fields grew increasingly dependent on ever-more-artificial fertilization. In the 1990s, the fall of the Soviet Union and Pyongyang’s other communist benefactors disrupted the supply of that fertilizer — which, coupled

with other factors, led to widespread famine.

But Pyongyang appears to have learned some lessons since.

According to Randall Ireson, a private consultant and former nongovernmental program director in the North, farmers have shifted their emphasis since about 2000 to adding compost and organic fertilizers to rebuild the organic content in the soil and revivify microorganisms.

“What I’ve seen and heard of is the use of effective rapid aerobic composting of plant residue, and where available, animal and human manure, with the composted material further augmented with some chemical fertilizer,” he said. “The addition of chemical fertilizer to the mix makes it “non-organic” by a strict definition, but the other aspects are generally sound and sustainable, if managed correctly.”

Ireson noted that the depressed economy, lack of foreign exchange, and weak industrial sector combine to make the acquisition of foreign chemical

## Island kingdom of Tonga mourns the death of its queen mother

By Pesi Fonua  
The Associated Press

**N**UKU’ALOFA, Tonga — The South Pacific island kingdom of Tonga is mourning the death of its queen mother, who dedicated her time to helping the elderly and those with disabilities. Halaevalu Mata’aho died at the age of 90 in Auckland, New Zealand after travelling there for health reasons. The cause of her death has not been released by her family.

She was the mother of two kings: George Tupou V, who died in 2012, and the current monarch, King Tupou VI.

Her funeral procession was held February 28 in Tonga.

Mata’aho will be particularly missed by the Alonga Centre and the Tonga Red Cross, with leaders at the two agencies saying she worked tirelessly.

Lavinia Satini, the coordinator for the Alonga Centre, was in tears when remembering the queen mother, the news website Matangi Tonga reported.

“Her love for those who are less fortunate was evident in her leadership because she made it a point to take care of each person here,” Satini said.

She said Mata’aho would personally visit the disabled and the elderly at their homes.

“I will always remember when she visited us from the Royal Palace she was already stocked with everything that we needed from food to various household items,” Satini told the website. “She not only distributed it to us here but she also made personal trips to homes of people she knew were in need.”

Crown Prince Tupouto’a ‘Ulukalala had announced that the Tongan people could pay their respects to the queen mother at the royal palace in Nuku’alofa before her burial in the royal tombs on March 1. The crown prince said the royal family is observing 10 days of mourning following her burial.

The queen mother married Tupouto’a Tungi, the eldest son of Queen Salote Tupou III, in a royal wedding in 1947. Her husband became King Taufa’ahau Tupou IV after Queen Salote died in 1965 and reigned until his death in 2006.

As well as the king, the queen mother is survived by her daughter, Princess Salote Mafile’o Piloevu Tuita, 11 grandchildren, and several great-grandchildren.

Associated Press writer Nick Perry in Wellington, New Zealand, contributed to this report.

## Death, diplomatic spat could cost North Korea a rare friend

By Eileen Ng and Tim Sullivan  
The Associated Press

**K**UALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — North Korea doesn’t have many friends. There’s China, its closest ally, and Singapore, where the North Korean elite have long gone in search of investors and shipping contracts. There are neighbors like Russia, and other nations isolated by politics and sanctions, like Syria and Cuba.

Until recently there was also — sort of — Malaysia. While it isn’t one of Pyongyang’s key diplomatic partners, it is one of the few places in the world where North Koreans can travel without a visa. As a result, for years, it’s been a quiet destination for Northerners looking for jobs, schools, and business deals. Today, you can find North Koreans studying in Malaysian universities, working in Malaysian mines, and managing computer systems for Malaysian companies.

“North Koreans can act freely in Malaysia,” said Lee Jaehyon, an analyst with the Seoul-based Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

But for how long?

Last month a long-estranged member of the North Korean ruling family was apparently poisoned by a pair of female attackers as he walked through the budget terminal of the Kuala Lumpur airport. Kim Jong Nam, the half brother of North Korea’s ruler, died as he was taken to a hospital. A diplomatic spat flared when Malaysian officials ordered an autopsy on the body, despite demands from North Korean diplomats that the corpse immediately be turned over to them. Malaysian police arrested two people in connection with the attack and publicly announced the names of four Northerners it wants to question, but who left the country soon after the attack.

“Malaysia is very embarrassed,” Lee said. “This incident has caused significant damage to Malaysia, and its image of safety and political stability.” Malaysian officials, he said, were working to get past the incident as quickly as possible, fearing trouble for its tourism industry and its ability to attract foreign investment. Officials insist they are following normal



**DEATH & DIPLOMACY.** Kim Jong Nam, center, the exiled half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, talks to airport security and officials after he was attacked at Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Malaysia, in footage from Kuala Lumpur airport security cameras obtained by Fuji Television. Kim Jong Nam died after apparently being poisoned at the airport. (Footage from Kuala Lumpur airport security cameras obtained by Fuji TV via AP)

procedures with the investigation.

The entire investigation has been “politicized by Malaysia in collusion” with North Korea’s bitter enemy, South Korea, he said.

Malaysia responded with its own fury, with a foreign ministry statement saying the ambassador’s allegations were “culled from delusions, lies, and half-truths” and denying any collusion with Seoul.

Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak said the investigation had proceeded properly.

Malaysia has no reason to “want to do something that would paint North Koreans in a bad light,” he told reporters. “But we will be objective and we expect them to understand that we apply the rule of law in Malaysia.”

Experts remain unsure about the diplomatic fallout from the killing and the increasingly incendiary language.

In the short run things are clearly rocky. Malaysia recalled its ambassador from Pyongyang “for consultations,” and called in the North Korean ambassador to explain his comments about the investigation.

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