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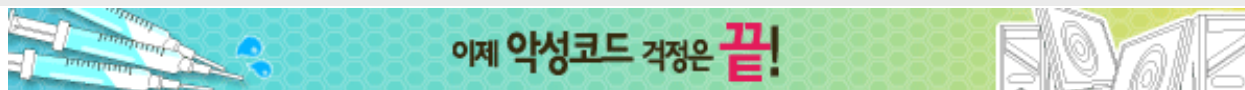
Sports

Opinion

Special

English Cafe

Airline News | Times Interview | Campus Life | North Korea Today | Obituary



Hankooki.com > The Korea Times > Nation

USAID Chief Says He Witnessed Mass Burial in NK

WASHINGTON (Yonhap) -- A chief U.S. administrator on international aid, while criticizing red tape on U.S. provision of food assistance, said he witnessed a mass burial of North Koreans dead from hunger and knows what famine can do.

In a speech Friday at a forum sponsored by the Center for Global Development, whose text was made available over the weekend, Andrew Natsios said there can't be a mistake when it comes to emergency food relief.

"We are not talking here about a development program (where) if you make a mistake you waste a little money, you might have a little failure," he said.

"Famine relief means, if you succeed, you save people's lives. If you fail, lots of people die."

He recounted how in 1998 he saw from the Chinese side of the border between North Korea and China the mass burial of North Koreans who died of hunger.

"I've been to famines before. I've watched mass burial in North Korea on Tumen River... went up undercover in October, November of 1998" when he was across the river with his South Korean friend, Ven. Beopryun, he said.

"We were in China, and we had telescopes, and they dumped 29 bodies in a big pit, and they covered over the bodies. It was a famine, and a lot of people refused to recognize it at the time," said Natsios.

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"They are terrible events, only comparable in my view to genocide."

His speech was highly critical of the bureaucratic and lobbyist constraints on his agency's work.

"Accounts and structure of foreign assistance are constrained by interest groups, budget in donor agencies, congressional and parliamentary interests," he said.

"Everything is frozen into stone, and we can't take the lessons we've learned and transfer them into the field and change practice."

Natsios, who heads the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) but steps down next month, vowed the ongoing debate about the methods of delivering food aid will continue.

"It will be changed," he said.

Speaking separately to Yonhap on Friday about North Korea, he reiterated the U.S. demand that the U.N. World Food Program (WFP) be allowed to continue its food distribution operation in the country, or else USAID would have to suspend its food aid to Pyongyang.

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