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Subject: US: More talks needed with NKorea on food aid (AP)

WASHINGTON - (AP) Humanitarian groups expressed misgivings Tuesday that the suffering of malnourished North Koreans would deepen as the U.S. pushed back its long-awaited decision on providing food aid following the death of Kim Jong Il.

Despite constructive talks between U.S. and North Korean officials in Beijing last week, the State Department said further discussions were needed to assess food needs and on monitoring aid, which would be possible only after the 11-day official mourning period for Kim ends.

"We're going to have to keep talking about this, and given the mourning period, frankly, we don't think we'll be able to have much more clarity and resolve these issues before the New Year," spokeswoman Victoria Nuland told reporters.

North Korea first requested the aid in January. Negotiations on providing the food have become intertwined with those on Pyongyang's nuclear program. The U.S. appears close to offering 240,000 tons of protein-rich food to pave the way for an agreement by North Korea to freeze its controversial uranium enrichment program.

It remains unclear how longtime ruler Kim's death on Saturday and the transition of power to his son and untested heir-apparent, Kim Jong Un, will affect those negotiations.

"We are concerned. Time is of the essence," said Ken Isaacs of Samaritan's Purse, one of five U.S.-based charities that helped distribute the last American food aid in North Korea, nearly three years ago. "Whatever was agreed may have to go back to the drawing board in different capitals. Who knows how all that will pan out."

David Austin, North Korea program director for Mercy Corps, said during their last trip to flood-hit regions of the country in September they saw children starving.

"The longer you delay this decision, the more suffering there's going to be," he said, noting that it would take between six weeks and three months to set up new food deliveries.

Despite a U.N. assessment in March that a quarter of its 24 million people needed emergency food aid, international donors have been reluctant to help, wary of assisting an oppressive regime that has developed nuclear weapons but failed to modernize farming. A U.N. program of food distributions this year has only been 30 percent funded.

The United States is demanding stringent safeguards on the distribution of aid, such as the presence of more Korean-speaking monitors to prevent food being siphoned off by the North Korean military and officials.

While North Korea is yet to descend to the depths of famine that killed an estimated 5 percent to 10 percent of its people in the mid- and late-1990s, hunger has worsened through the year.

A recent food security and crop assessment by experts from the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization and World Food Program said health officials reported a 50 percent to 100 percent increase this year in hospital admissions of malnourished children. The experts saw cases of edema _ an extreme manifestation of malnutrition that causes an accumulation of fluid beneath the skin.

Their report said much of the North Korean population suffered "prolonged food deprivation" in 2011 as the public distribution system that most rely on was reduced to 7 ounces or less a day, providing only one-third the

minimum daily energy requirement. Almost all households surveyed indicated they added water to food to increase its volume, it said.

The U.S. government sent its own assessment team in May. According to Stephen Bosworth, the former U.S. envoy for North Korea, that team also concluded food aid was needed.

"There are clear segments of the population, particularly outside the major cities, particularly elderly people and children for whom increased food aid would be very, very appropriate. My sense is that malnutrition remains at an alarmingly high level," he said.

The U.S. always has maintained that aid for North Korea was not linked to the nuclear issue. Negotiations on monitoring of such aid that began in a very preliminary fashion in May, resumed only last week in Beijing. That followed two rounds of exploratory talks on the possibility of resuming six-nation disarmament negotiations that Pyongyang pulled out of in 2009.

Bosworth acknowledged that the food aid offer now taking shape would serve to demonstrate to North Korea "that they are getting something in return for the freeze in their nuclear activities."

The U.N. food assessment released in November said that North Korea's harvest had increased by 8 percent this year, despite a harsh winter and summer floods. But it said North Korea was still set to face a food deficit of some 414,000 tons.

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