

commentary

from other pens...

Isolated country faces a cold, hungry winter

The onset of winter may seem an inopportune time for the United States to stop shipping sorely needed heavy oil to North Korea, where temperatures of 20 below zero are routine at this time of year.

The halt was announced just days ahead of a revised administration food aid policy for North Korea that could lead to cutbacks in 2003.

These are among signs of broad international unhappiness with North Korea lately. The country may be as isolated now as it has been at any time over the past three years.

The Bush administration, in consultation with Japan, South Korea and the European Union, ordered the oil cutoff last month in response to the North's admission that it is developing uranium-based nuclear weapons. On Tuesday, U.S. officials said a North Korean ship was intercepted in the Arabian Sea, carrying a dozen Scud-like missiles apparently intended for Yemen.

Old Pyongyang allies China and Russia share U.S. worries about the North's nuclear tinkering. Japan is cutting back on food assistance.

Europeans are feeling sandbagged by Pyongyang's policies, says Robert Einhorn of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. He lists new European aid as doubtful under present circumstances.

Besides the U.S. oil shipments, Einhorn believes that another doomed energy assistance initiative will be two light-water reactors for North Korea that are being financed mostly by Japan and South Korea.

"It is extremely unlikely that both light-water reactors will be produced," Einhorn says. Nobody will announce the actual pulling of the plug because, he says, that would only encourage a North Korean provocation in response.

The reactors and the oil assistance were promised to North Korea in 1994 in exchange for a commitment by Pyongyang to forswear nuclear weapons.

Not much has been heard from ordinary North Koreans about the recent diplomatic back and forth.

Peter Hayes, who follows North Korea at the California-based Nautilus Institute, says the North's home and workplace heating problems are such that the cutoff of U.S. oil shipments after eight years won't make much of a difference.

"The energy economy is one-tenth of what it used to be," Hayes said. "If you reduce it by 5 to 10 percent, you may get a 1 percent effect."

Even if an oil shipment initially set for next week had gone ahead as scheduled, most of the country's buildings would have remained without heat anyway, he says.

Hayes believes that North Korea will be able to evade the devastating famine that struck the country in 1996-97. But, he says, the situation remains grim, with "highly concentrated pockets of extreme malnutrition and starvation" in some areas and "generalized hunger" elsewhere. As always, food supplies in Pyongyang will be adequate, he adds.

As for U.S. food aid, American officials said last week future deliveries could hinge on access by U.N. World Food Program monitors to food distribution points and competition for food relief from other disaster areas, especially Africa. America's 2002 food donations total 155,000 metric tons.

The U.N. World Food Program targets 6.4 million vulnerable North Koreans, but WFP officials say deliveries to 3 million have been halted since September because of reduced shipments from donor countries.

Describing the food situation as severe, the officials said the country's food distribution network allocates only 270 grams per day per person, about half of the minimum need. Of particular concern, the officials said, are babies and children.

EDITOR'S NOTE — George Gedda has covered foreign affairs for The Associated Press since 1968.



Making waves in the schools



joan ryan

• commentary

On a sunny Saturday afternoon, 17-year-old Sadia Morgan hunches over a college application in a large room that had once been a PG&E office. Now the walls, like the walls in three adjoining former offices, are decorated with world maps and chemical charts and inspirational quotes. This is where Morgan and a few dozen other high school seniors come to study for finals and write term papers, marking the last few months of an educational experiment that began for them eight years ago, in fifth grade.

A privately financed group called Making Waves chose Morgan and 49 other kids from beleaguered Richmond elementary schools for a program that ought to be studied by every low-income school district in the country. As politicians talk endlessly about how to change lives through education, Making Waves is quietly doing just that, bucking every assumption about what is possible for poor and minority children.

The kids in Making Waves — 50 new fifth-graders almost every year since 1989 — show up at the tutoring center at least two days a week after school and all day Saturday — 12 months a year for eight years.

"We're asking these kids to do something pretty crazy," said Glenn Holsclaw, director since 1994.

If they keep showing up, Making Waves pays for private high school and guides their entry into

college, securing financial aid and paying for campus visits. Morgan, a senior at St. Mary's High in Berkeley, is leaning toward Hampton College in Virginia. Friends from her neighborhood long ago stopped razzing Morgan for holing herself up at the tutoring center every night and on Saturdays. "A lot of them wish they were here," Morgan says.

To watch the operation in action is to have one's hope restored in the power of hard work and a well-designed plan. The new Making Waves fifth-graders are working quietly in groups of five in 10 small rooms. A teacher or education major from a local university is teaching them multiplication and fractions, biology and literature, reinforcing, remediating and enhancing their public-school curriculum.

A 10-year-old girl named Irvalisa, puzzling through decimals, says she is here on a Saturday "so I can be somebody." Another girl, Kia, admits to whining to her mother that she wanted to stay in bed this morning. "My mom started whining with me until I stopped and then she made me come,"

she says. Family involvement is a key to the program's success.

The organization, founded by Marin businessman John Scully, believes providing children with equal access to a solid education requires private as well as public commitment. Schools can't do it alone. "Education is the biggest problem our country faces," Holsclaw says. "We've got to roll up our sleeves and fix it. And there aren't any shortcuts."

That is what sets Making Waves apart from other programs with dazzling mission statements. It isn't about making kids and wealthy benefactors feel good. It's about hard work and sacrifice, day in and day out, and not just from the kids.

Twenty-five-year-old Wesley Jacques teaches every day at Verde Elementary in North Richmond, one of the state's lowest-ranked schools. After school and on Saturdays, he works as academic coordinator at Making Waves.

"These kids are so far behind they need more than what we can do in the six hours of a school day," Jacques says.

The program isn't cheap. Including one meal a day, it costs about \$6,500 a year for each child.

"But when you see these kids," Holsclaw says, "how could you not say, 'Let's do more of this?'"

Joan Ryan is a columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle. Send comments to her e-mail at joanryan@sfnchronicle.com.

Election shows Democrats should be centrist



morton kondracke

• commentary

The 2002 election results and the likely politics of 2004 argue that the Democratic Party needs to move to the center. The question is: Can it?

Pressure from Democratic primary voters is likely to push 2004 presidential candidates to the left, where front-runner Al Gore is already heading. And House Democrats not only chose a liberal, Rep. Nancy Pelosi (Calif.), as their leader, but most are ensconced in safe seats, with more need to keep the Democratic base happy than to appeal to swing voters.

The case for centrism was starkly stated in a Nov. 26 memo written by the top two officials of the Democratic Leadership Council, who warned that, "on its current course, the Democratic Party will lose the White House in 2004 even more decisively than it lost the Congress in 2002."

That view is sharply at odds with the analysis of liberals heading the Democracy Corps, who contend that the GOP victory in November was "largely tactical" and represented "a relatively small Republican advantage in actual votes cast."

In its latest review of post-election opinion polls, the Democracy Corps contends that the political environment is "unchanged" and "should strengthen Democrats in their resolve to fight President Bush and the Republicans on fundamental issues such as tax cuts, Social Security privatization and energy independence."

The DLC's Al From and Bruce Reed contend, by contrast, that "Democrats suffered a significant defeat on Nov. 5," with the overall vote for House candidates shifting away from a 49-49 tie in 2000 to 51.8 percent for the GOP and 45.2 percent for the Democrats.

This was "almost identical to (the GOP's) 52.4 percent to 45.4 percent margin in the 1994 Republican landslide." Moreover, "Republicans scored a net gain of more than 200 state legislative contests" and hold a majority of state legislative seats for the first time since 1952.

In the absence of Election Day exit polls, From and Reed used a pre-election Gallup poll — which accurately caught the overall trend toward the GOP — to determine that Democrats lost ground among middle-class voters.

In 1996, they note, President Bill Clinton carried voters with incomes between \$50,000 and \$75,000 by 2 points. In 2002, according to Gallup, they lost this largest voting bloc by 60 percent to 38 percent.

Democrats won in the Northeast, among urban voters, younger voters and blacks — i.e., their base vote — but Republicans won in the South, Midwest and West, among suburban and rural voters; they also carried the white vote by 20 percent and all age groups over 35, including seniors.

From and Reed concluded that "unless the Democrats take swift, aggressive steps to recap-

ture the vital center of the political spectrum that we reclaimed during the 1990s, our party will return to the political wilderness and Republican gains will be far more lasting and consequential than the grim results in 2002."

My own guess is that Democrats can't recapture the White House or Congress in 2004 unless President Bush and his Republicans either fail or overreach. At the same time, though, Democrats have to put themselves in position to win by having credible alternative policies both on national security and domestic issues — alternatives that both liberals and centrists agree they lacked this year.

On national security, the best suggestion I've heard for a Democratic strategy actually comes from a conservative, the Weekly Standard's Bill Kristol, who said on a recent Fox News Sunday panel that Democrats could move to Bush's right.

Democrats, he said, could favor a bigger security force in Afghanistan, more expenditures for homeland security and defense and a harder line on Saudi Arabia and Iran.

To some extent, Democrats have taken such positions — two presidential candidates, Sens. John Kerry (Mass.) and John Edwards (N.C.), have been critical of Bush's Afghan policies, for example — but the party still comes off as force-averse on the issue of Iraq.

Most House Democrats voted against giving Bush authority to go to war to disarm Saddam Hussein. Kerry is still saying that the United States needs the "legitimacy" of the United Nations before doing so.

Gore argues that the campaign against Iraq is

detracting from the war on terrorism — as if a great power can't fight two dangerous foes at once — and Clinton has sounded a similar theme.

Clinton remains a DLC hero for his ability to hold the Democratic base and expand the party's support among swing voters, but that may be a case of nostalgia. To win future elections, Reed and From argue, Democrats need to "close the culture gap" by representing middle-class values.

However, Clinton is now regarded with disdain among middle-class voters for his ethical lapses — to the point where he mainly is invited to campaign for Democrats among minority voters.

On domestic issues, both liberals and centrists seem set on a course of fighting to delay or repeal Bush's tax cuts for high-income taxpayers and to fund a short-term tax cut for the middle class. Both groups agree that the absence of a coherent economic strategy was one of the main reasons — along with Bush's popularity — that Democrats lost this year.

The Democrats' first task, though, will be to form a unified front against Bush's proposed permanent extension of the tax cuts and an argument to protect themselves against charges that they are the "tax-and-spend party."

Morton Kondracke is executive editor of Roll Call, the newspaper of Capitol Hill.

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