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Heavy rains pound North Korea, damage farmland-media

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SEOUL, Aug 5 (Reuters) - Heavy rains caused "considerable" damage to farmland in parts of North Korea last weekend, the impoverished communist state's official news agency reported on Tuesday.

North Korea can barely feed its 23 million people even with a good harvest, and a U.N. agency said last week parts of the country were experiencing their worst levels of hunger in nearly a decade, bringing it to the brink of a humanitarian crisis.

"The heavy rains this time left damage to the agricultural sector in the affected areas and to many sectors in the economy and the people's lives," the North's KCNA news agency said.

Massive flooding last year left hundreds of people dead or missing, swept away buildings, and inundated farms, prompting the reclusive state to seek foreign help to fight sharply worsened food shortages.

The KCNA dispatch did not elaborate on the damage to farms or how the rains would affect production, but said parts of the most productive southern farming region were hit by heavy downpours between Aug. 1 and 3.

The U.N.'s World Food Programme said last week flooding last year, higher oil and commodity prices, and a fall in aid shipments from countries including South Korea were adding to food shortfalls.

The United States has said it would provide 500,000 tonnes of food to North Korea in a sign of improving cooperation.

But Seoul has suspended annual shipments after a conservative president took office in February, vowing to get tough on its neighbour so Pyongyang would live up to promises to scrap its nuclear weapons programme.

The U.N.'s Food and Agricultural Organisation said in late March it expected North Korea to have a cereals shortfall of about 1.66 million tonnes for the year ending in October 2008, the largest deficit in about seven years. (Reporting by Jack Kim; editing by Jonathan Thatcher and Jonathan Hopfner)

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