

S. Korea says food aid reached intended beneficiaries in N. Korea

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SEOUL, Nov. 30 (Yonhap) -- South Korea's recent private food aid has reached North Korean children, an official said Wednesday, a sign that aid is going to its intended beneficiaries in the communist country.

There have been widespread allegations that the North could divert outside food aid to its elite and military, a key backbone of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il's rule.

The assessment came a day after a South Korean official and four civilians returned from their rare trip to the North to monitor how 300 tons of flour were distributed to children.

The monitors visited two kindergartens and a nursery in the northwestern city of Jongju last week and saw first hand the distribution of the flour and how it is stored and prepared, said Unification Ministry spokeswoman Park Soo-jin.

The distribution of flour was going well and "the government plans to make efforts to ensure it can consistently monitor" aid to the North, Park told reporters.

It was the first time that North Korea has allowed a South Korean official to travel to the isolated country to monitor aid since a conservative government took power in Seoul in 2008.

The trip came amid renewed tensions on the Korean Peninsula over South Korea's massive military drills near the tense sea border -- the scene of the North's two deadly attacks on the South last year.

North Korea has recently threatened to turn Seoul's presidential office into "a sea of fire" in its latest harsh rhetoric against South Korea.

Ambassadors for Peace Association, a civic group that is partly funded by the Unification Group [Tongil Group], donated the flour to Jongju, the birthplace of Unification Church founder Moon Sun-myung.

The civic group has said it also plans to deliver another 300 tons of flour aid to the North Korean city in coming weeks.

The North has relied on foreign handouts since the late 1990s when it suffered a massive famine that was estimated to have killed 2 million people.