S. Korean official leaves for rare trip to monitor food aid in N. Korea

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SEOUL, Nov. 25 (Yonhap) -- A South Korean official and four civilians left for North Korea on Friday on a rare mission to ensure that recent aid from Seoul had reached its intended beneficiaries, an official said.

   The trip comes a day after North Korea threatened to turn South Korea's presidential office into "a sea of fire" in anger over Seoul's massive military maneuvers near the tense sea border.

   The show of force near Yeonpyeong Island was timed to mark the first anniversary of the North's shelling of the South Korean border island that killed two Marines and two civilians.

   The Unification Ministry official and four civilians were to arrive in the North's capital later Friday via Beijing, according to the Unification Ministry, which handles inter-Korean affairs.

   It is 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.

   They are scheduled to visit a day care center and two other child care facilities in the northwestern city of Jongju to monitor how 300 tons of flour were distributed to children and other recipients, according to a civic group.

   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 said the monitors also plan to discuss details on another 300 tons of flour aid before returning home Tuesday. Some members of the civic group are associated with the controversial Unification Church.

   The trip comes amid 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 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.