



# To North Korea, with love

**Two Langley-based aid agencies have teamed up to send a crucial food supplement called Cibo to malnourished orphans in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea**

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Times Reporter

A flurry of activity surrounds the semi-truck parked outside the doorway of a Mufford Crescent warehouse on a chilly December morning.

A single forklift runs back and forth, emerging every few minutes from the darkened interior of the storage bay to hoist pallets of cardboard boxes and small square plastic tubs into a freight container atop the truck bed.

Meanwhile, helpers on foot carry out small metal walkers and wheelchairs and pass them up to a group of men standing inside the container.

Like a life-sized game of Tetris, the men arrange the cubes of food, winter clothing, blankets and medical supplies inside the large metal box, to ensure it will be carrying as much as possible when it is delivered to the port later today, to begin its journey across the Pacific Ocean to North Korea.

Included in the cargo are 270,000 packages of dehydrated soup mix, prepared and donated by the Fraser Valley Gleaners, a non-profit, non-denominational Christian organization located in Abbotsford. But this shipment, organized by Langley-based Global Aid Network (GAIN), has been built around the contents of the square plastic buckets. Inside each one is eight kilograms of Cibo, a nutritional supplement for severely malnourished children in developing countries.

Cibo — the name (pronounced chee-bo) is the Italian word for food — contains high levels of protein and fat, along with essential vitamins and minerals in its mixture of peanut paste, oil, sugar, whey powder and powdered milk.

Nutritionally, the thick pudding-like substance is designed to provide everything children five and under need for healthy development.

It was Langley's Mary Martini who envisioned the relief project and, along with her family, funded the first round of production of Cibo, at a cost of about \$13,500. She was inspired by a report from

Anderson Cooper on the CBS program 60 Minutes.

The story, which first aired in October 2007, talked about the distribution of something called Plumpynut to children in the impoverished African nation of Niger.

As she watched the segment, deeply moved by the images of starving children and desperate mothers, Martini had an idea — a similar food supplement could be developed locally and distributed to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) world-wide, by a not-for-profit agency.

She spent the next year doing research online and talking to people at Doctors Without Borders — an agency that was featured prominently in Cooper's report — and UNICEF.

"At the time, I didn't think about doing it here," she said.

But the more people she talked to, the more the plan to produce Cibo in the Fraser Valley fell into place.

Langley-based Food For Famine was formed to serve as the non-profit agency that would do the job.

This fall, the first shipment of the supplement — about 5,000 kilograms — was prepared and packaged at Nanak Foods in Surrey.

"We went to tour the facility to get some ideas for packaging," explained Food for Famine director Ernie Charlton.

After being told about FFF's plan, the people at Nanak said, "we can do that," he recalled.

Workers there prepared the mixture and packed it in eight-kilogram buckets.

It was the first time the facility had produced something of Cibo's texture, said Martini, so packaging moved slowly at first.

"They didn't realize the density, and they were trying to fill the buckets quickly."

Eventually the workers found it was easiest to scoop the mix into the buckets — 600 in all — by hand.

Then came the biggest surprise yet for Charlton and Martini.



Ernie Charlton



John GORDON/Langley Times

Isaac Courtney, 12, and Global Aid Network (GAIN) worker Rebecca Hey load medical equipment into the back of a shipping container, which is bound for North Korea. The relief project is centred around a 5,000-kilogram shipment of Cibo, a locally produced food supplement designed specifically for young children in developing countries. The peanut butter-based product was prepared and packed in Surrey and is being distributed by GAIN on behalf of a Langley-based non-profit agency called Food for Famine. Video online at [www.langleytimes.com](http://www.langleytimes.com).

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# Christmas delivery extra special

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Without being asked, Nanak Foods donated all their labour and factory time.

"They did it for free for us," Charlton said. "Nanak Foods volunteered a staff of 20 for 10 hours, and their facility."

With the product ready to go, FFF's directors turned to Langley's Global Aid Network to help with the distribution. That, explained Charlton, is where the connection with North Korea was formed.

"Through a mutual contact back in the '90s, we were invited to come to North Korea at that time, and we've been assisting them in feeding and caring for children in several orphanages ever since," said Global Aid Network's Peter Koteles, the man at the controls of the forklift a few minutes earlier.

"We've augmented (this shipment) with food from the Fraser Valley Gleaners — soup and flour, baby food and formula — all non-expired, which is important because North Korea won't accept expired items," he said.

In order to help ensure the aid reaches its intended recipients — 1,100 North Korean orphans, aged five and under in the Nampo region, southwest of Pyongyang — the cargo is made up of items specific to infants and young children. That includes baby formula, along with children's clothing and child-size blankets and wheelchairs.

Because it's all made specifically for children, "it's less likely to be misused," Koteles said.

As for what the arrival of 600 containers of food supplement could mean to young orphans in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, "I hesitate to say that it could be the difference between life and death," said Koteles, "but their situation



John GORDON/Langley Times

Global Aid Network's Peter Koteles loads buckets of Cibo and a large box of winter clothes and blankets into a shipping container bound for North Korea on Tuesday.

is abysmal.

"In the winter it gets so cold over there," he said, noting the impoverished nation can only provide heat for a portion of its 24 million citizens at any given time.

"On a personal note, they don't celebrate Christmas in North Korea; it's illegal," Koteles said.

"So to me, it's a real privilege to be sending this at Christmas-time."

To watch her product being loaded into the container bound for children in North Korea is a pretty special moment for Martini, too.

Despite the communist nation's position on the U.S.'s so-called Axis of Evil, Martini has no problem with the container's destination.

"We don't care, because children are children, wherever they are in the world."

Eventually FFF hopes to be able to distribute Cibo more widely, to malnourished children in other Third World countries.

A few samples have been set aside so that other NGOs can try it out. Many have been clamouring for the supplement, but there isn't yet enough product available, she said.

That's the next part of the dream. Martini would like to see a local factory producing Cibo on a much larger scale by next year, and she's hoping people will step forward to help cover the cost of supplies while the Martini family will continue to fund the overhead.

As the container nears capacity, the workers pause for a moment to pose for photos and video to mark the occasion of the first international shipment of Cibo.

It's been an exciting morning for everyone involved, said Charlton. "But it will be really exciting in five or six weeks," he said, "when children are actually eating this stuff."

To learn more, or to help out, visit [www.foodforfamine.org](http://www.foodforfamine.org).

Video online at [www.langley-times.com](http://www.langley-times.com)