



# Voices of the Voiceless

“  
Unveiling **Human Rights**  
in North Korea  
”

우리 나라 사회주의 제도를 만세 !



Korea Institute for  
National Unification



# **Voices** of the **Voiceless**

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Unveiling **Human Rights**  
in **North Korea**

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The content of this report is based on the opinions of the authors  
and does not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Korea  
Institute for National Unification.



우리나라 사회주의 제도 만세!

YOU MAY CHOOSE TO LOOK THE OTHER WAY,  
BUT YOU CAN NEVER SAY AGAIN  
THAT YOU DID NOT KNOW

William Wilberforce  
1759-1833

위대한 김일성 - 김정일

Special thanks to **Kang Dong-wan** peoffessor at Dong-A University





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# Voices of the Voiceless

Unveiling Human Rights in North Korea

## 01

UNDERSTANDING

**NORTH  
KOREA**



**Voices**  
of the  
**Voiceless**



# 1 Understanding North Korea

## BASIC INFORMATION ON NORTH KOREA



North Korea Map

Flag of North Korea



Emblem of North Korea



**D**EMOCRATIC  
**P**EOPLE'S  
**R**EPUBLIC OF  
**K**OREA

**CAPITAL**  
Pyongyang



**Area**  
**123,138**km<sup>2</sup>



**Population**  
**25,708,000**  
(2023)



**Foreign Trade**  
**\$0.713B** (2021)  
Exp \$82M, Imp \$631M  
**SOUTH KOREA**  
**\$1,259B** (2021)



**Real GDP Per Capita**  
**\$1,700**  
(2015)  
**SOUTH KOREA**  
**\$44,200** (2021)



**Chronic Food Crisis**  
The food shortage  
in 2022 was  
estimated to be  
**1m tons** of Grain



**Human Rights**  
“The  
Worst of  
the  
Worst”

Freedom House  
March 2023



**Freedom of Press**  
“Tight control  
of information,  
prohibition of  
individual  
journalism”

RSF  
May 2023



**Religion**  
“Arrests of  
Christians,  
house-churches  
closed”

Open Doors  
Jan. 2023

## NORTH KOREA THROUGH KEYWORDS

### JUCHE IDEOLOGY

The ruling ideology of North Korea. It forms the foundation for every aspect of the state, including politics, economy, society, and culture. It has been transformed into a tool to strengthen one-man dictatorial rule by defining the relationship of the ruler and the populace as a master-servant relationship.

### MILITARY FIRST (SON-GUN) POLITICS

Refers to North Korea's political policy of placing the Korean People's Army **KPA** above the Workers' Party of Korea **WPK** with the mission of preserving the standing dictatorship. In North Korea, influence of the KPA is widely reflected throughout the entire society. Its influence permeates not only the politics and the economy, but also education, culture, and art.

### KIMILSUNGISM-KIMJONGILISM

An ideology that emphasizes allegiance to the Kim dynasty. North Korea's constitution states that Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism is the sole guiding principle of the state.

### SUPREME LEADER (SU-RYEONG)

North Korean terminology depicting the 'leader of all humanity.' In North Korea, title of supreme leader can be awarded only to those directly tied to the Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un dynasty. The supreme leader is viewed as an absolute father and as a godly entity, requiring unconditional obedience.

### DAY OF THE SUN (TAEYANG-JOL)

Day of the Sun is a designated national holiday of North Korea commemorating the birthday of Kim Il-sung. It is the most important holiday of the year and is used to idolize Kim Il-sung and justify the regime succession of the Kim dynasty.



## REACTIONARY (BANDONG)

Refers to any act or person that defies the supreme leader or the Workers' Party of Korea. North Korea passed the "Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act" in December 2020 to repress the dissemination of outside information and culture, which pose a threat to the Kim Jong-un regime.

## RELIGION

Christian, Buddhist, and other religious facilities exist in North Korea, but only nominally. Religious activities are outlawed, and existing state-run religious groups, churches, cathedrals, and temples are tools for external propaganda.

## JUSTICE SYSTEM

The justice system of North Korea operates on a two-trial system and the defendants can face execution based on only one trial. As the North Korean judiciary is subordinate to the Workers' Party of Korea, it is difficult to expect a fair and impartial judicial determinations are unlikely. Attorneys may operate only to the extent that their actions justify the party's policies and decisions.

## CASTE SYSTEM BASED ON LOYALTY

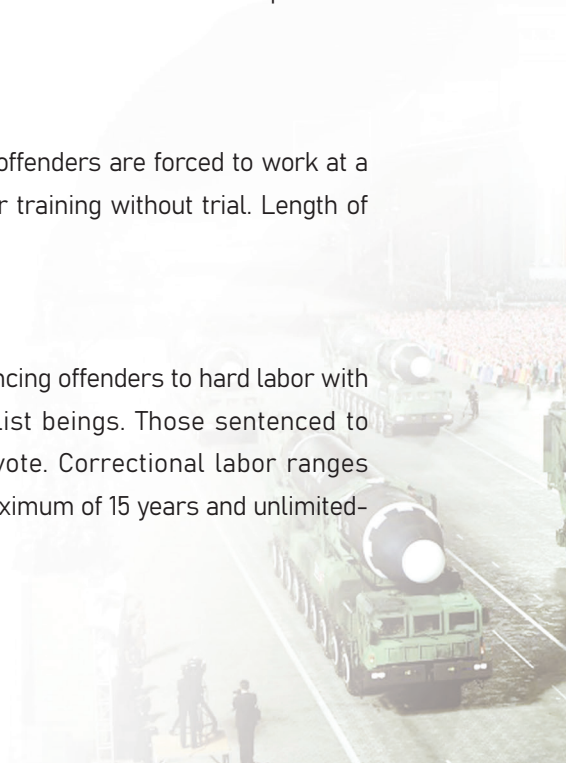
North Korea stratifies its residents into one of three groups: the "basic" masses, "complex" masses and "remnants of the hostile" class. Residence, occupation, food rations, education, and even punishment are differentiated based on both personal background *chulsin-songbun* and level of allegiance.

## LABOR TRAINING

Labor training is a form of punishment in which offenders are forced to work at a given location. People may be sentenced to labor training without trial. Length of the sentence ranges from six months to one year.

## CORRECTIONAL LABOR

Correctional labor is a form of punishment sentencing offenders to hard labor with the objective of transforming them into socialist beings. Those sentenced to correctional labor are revoked their right to vote. Correctional labor ranges between limited-term correctional labor for a maximum of 15 years and unlimited-term correctional labor.



## NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR - MISSILE PROGRAMS

The North Korean nuclear crisis began in 1993 when North Korea announced its withdrawal from the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty **NPT**. The issue appeared to subside in 1994 when the United States and North Korea signed “the Agreed Framework between the United States of America and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea **Agreed Framework**” in Geneva. However, it resurfaced as the Agreed Framework was abandoned in 2002 when North Korea lifted its freeze of plutonium facilities amidst allegations of enriching uranium.

The Six-Party Talks began between the two Koreas, the United States, China, Japan, and Russia to find a diplomatic solution to the issue. There were some agreements, including the 2005 September 19 Joint Statement and the 2007 February 13 and October 3 Agreements. Despite the progress, the Six-Party Talks have been halted since December 2008 after North Korea began refusing to implement each agreement. Throughout the dialogue, North Korea publicly stated its aim to realize a “strong and prosperous country” through nuclear armament and conducted its first nuclear test in 2006. Following the breakdown of the Six-Party Talks, North Korea continued to develop its nuclear program and conducted its second nuclear test in 2009.

North Korea heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula once again in 2010, conducting the attack against ROK warship Cheonan in March and shelling Yeonpyeong Island in November. In 2012, the United States and North Korea reached the “Leap Day Agreement” through bilateral talks, in which North Korea promised the cessation of nuclear development and missile launches. However, on April 13th, the “Leap Day Agreement” was rendered null when North Korea launched long-range missiles and explicitly proclaimed its status as a nuclear power in the preamble of its constitution.

PHOTOGRAPH SOURCE

「Korean Central News Agency」, 2022.7.17



Subsequently, North Korea conducted nuclear tests in February of 2013, January and September 2016, and September 2017. In addition, to formalize its status as a nuclear power despite strong opposition from the international community, North Korea took various measures such as “declaring its permanent position as a nuclear weapons state” in March 2013, adopting the “parallel development policy of economy and nuclear weapons,” enacting the “law consolidating the position of a nuclear weapons state for self-defense” in April, incorporating the dual policy into the Party Charter of the Workers’ Party of Korea in 2016, and codifying into law its “policy of the nation’s nuclear forces” in September 2022.

Despite three inter-Korean summits in 2018 and the North Korea-US summit in Singapore, denuclearization has fallen into a prolonged stalemate since the breakdown of the North Korea-US summit in Hanoi in 2019. North Korea has continued to engage in provocations since. In January 2021, Kim Jong-un declared a “struggle for the enhancement of nuclear capabilities” and emphasized the completion of “miniaturized, lightened, and standardized tactical nuclear weapons,” as well as the production of “more powerful nuclear warheads” and the development of “advanced tactical nuclear weapons” to advance its first- and second-strike capabilities. Particularly in 2022, North Korea escalated tensions in an unprecedented manner, launching a total of 71 ballistic missiles, including 8 intercontinental ballistic missiles [ICBMs](#).

## HUMAN RIGHTS ACCORDING TO NORTH KOREA

While human rights are widely perceived as a universal value, it carries a vastly different meaning in North Korea. In North Korea, human rights apply only to those who conform to and obey the regime. The North Korean regime maintains that individuals who are considered to be threats to the regime, such as traitors and counter-revolutionaries, lack human rights guarantees. Additionally, North Korea argues that differing traditions, ethnicity, cultures, and histories, the standards and forms of human rights protection vary by state. It promotes “Human Rights of North Korean Style.” North Korea argues that human rights



issues cannot exist in North Korea under the “North Korean-style socialism” system, as the entire country is one harmonious extended family under “Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un bestowing blessings upon the residents.”

North Korea, under the “principle of collectivism,” emphasizes that interests of the collective trumps that of individual rights and asserts that individual rights can be restricted to any extent for the sake of collective interests. Article 63 of the North Korean Socialist Constitution states that “the rights and duties of citizens in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea are based on the principle of collectivism of ‘one for all, all for one.’” Thus, in North Korea, individuals exist as members of society and the collective, and the dedication of oneself to society and the collective is seen as an vital value.

North Korea argues that human rights are “state’s rights” and connects them to national sovereignty. According to the “Report of the DPRK Association for Human Studies,<sup>1</sup>” North Korea claims that “human rights is internal affairs and it presupposes the assurance of state sovereignty. It is by no means an object of interference or a tool to justify it. From this perspective, the DPRK maintains that human rights is state sovereignty. In other words, it means that state sovereignty is the national independent rights.” Through these claims, North Korea seeks to define the international community’s demands for human rights improvements as hostile political maneuvers by Western powers that seek to overthrow the regime through pressure and sanctions. When the UN adopted the North Korean human rights resolution for the 18th consecutive year in April 2023, North Korea criticized the document, claiming that the resolution “was created with the sole purpose of undermining the dignity of the country.” North Korea extended criticism to the Western countries involved in drafting the resolution, calling them “countries that have committed invasions and massacres, racial discrimination, and all kinds of human rights violations” and accused the West of “harboring intentions to infringe upon a sovereign state’s internal affairs.”

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<sup>1</sup> The DPRK Association for Human Rights Studies, *Report of the DPRK Association for Human Rights Studies*. <<http://www.kcna.kp/en/article/q/b1c51702e11787215c5ec380096673c3.kcmsf>>, (Accessed 16 June 2023).

## VOICES OF THE VOICELESS

In this way, North Korea has advocated for a distinct and collectivist concept of human rights that differs from the universal understanding of human rights. As such, systematic and widespread human rights abuses perpetrated by the North Korean regime persists under Kim Jong-un. It continues to divert massive resources to nuclear development even though its residents are facing substantial threats to their basic livelihoods. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korea closed its borders under the pretext of disease prevention, effectively ending physical and human exchanges with the outside world. Authorities further blocked residents' means of sustenance by imposing restrictions on movement and shutting down markets [Jangmadang](#). Furthermore, as evinced by cases such as public executions and political prison camps, the regime suppresses the freedom of and violates human rights of the North Korean residents to maintain its dictatorial system. It strictly controls and surveils North Koreans to prevent them from accessing external information, fundamentally blocking them from exercising their rights. Therefore, intervention by the international community is inevitable for the improving the protection of individual human rights in North Korea.



PHOTOGRAPH SOURCE  
「Korean Central News Agency」  
2023.6.5

# Voices of the Voiceless

Unveiling Human Rights in North Korea

## 02

NORTH KOREAN  
**HUMAN RIGHTS**  
**ABUSES** UNDER  
KIM JONG-UN  
REGIME





**Voices**  
of the  
**Voiceless**

## 2 North Korean **human rights abuses** under Kim Jong-un regime

### HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES OF NORTH KOREAN RESIDENTS

#### 01

#### Oppressive information control

“...authorities [are] monitoring youths' cell phones and carrying out house searches to check if they are using pictures, videos and documents from foreign media and using Republic of Korea-style language.

Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, March 2023

#### Information control for the preservation of dictatorial power

North Korea maintains its socialist regime based on the inheritance of power. While most socialist systems collapsed with the dismantling of the Cold War order in the late 1980s, North Korea has maintained itself by strictly controlling ideology and information and severing ties with the outside world. As a result, North Korea prioritizes controlling external ideology and information as a critical element for regime continuance. However, such controls infringe upon fundamental rights of the residents, including freedom of thought, freedom of conscience, religious freedom, freedom of expression, freedom of the press and publication, and the right to access information.

With the development of science and information communication technologies, access to external information has become easier for North Korean residents. In response, following Kim Jong-un's rise to power, North Korean authorities have further strengthened the control of external information, resulting in worsened violations of the residents' right to access information. Furthermore, North Korea has enacted three major oppressive laws to stem information flow: the "Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act" <sup>2020</sup>, the "Youth Education Security Act" <sup>2021</sup>, and the "Pyongyang Cultural Language Protection Act" <sup>2023</sup>. According to these laws, North Korean residents can face execution simply for consuming South Korean movies, books, or videos in private, for disseminating them within North Korea, and even for using South Korean speech patterns and typefaces. North Korean authorities engage in human rights abuses against consumers of South Korean media, subjecting them to public execution, torture, physical abuses, and detention in correctional facilities and political prisons.



PHOTOGRAPH SOURCE

PSCORE, "The Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act of North Korea", 2023.3.21.

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q80pMWkQMby>)

“In November 2021, high school students in Cheongjin City, North Hamgyong Province who secretly watched the world-famous series ‘Squid Game’ were punished under the Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act. The original distributor was sentenced to death by firing squad and the student who purchased the USB was sentenced to unlimited-term correctional labor. Students who watched the series were sentenced to 5 years of correctional labor.”

November 23, 2021, RFA

## External contents are anti-socialist and corrupt culture

North Korean authorities strongly control the inflow of foreign videos and the information they contain. North Korea defines external contents as “anti-socialist and corrupt” and has continuously bolstered censorship, surveillance, and punishment in response. To achieve this, North Korea established a specialized organization called the ‘109 Permanent Committee’ to monitor residents’ contact with external information. The committee conducts its operations such as house searches without prior notice or warrants.

It is reported that consuming Chinese songs and recorded materials is subject to labor training punishment, while consuming South Korean dramas entail harsher punishments such as correctional labor. The punishment for consuming South Korean media is more severe than drug use, and there have even been cases where individuals were sent to political prison camps as a result. Testimonies state that there have been public notices declaring that consuming or distributing South Korean media is punishable by death, and that those discovered to be engaged in such acts are subject to summary execution. Despite North Korean authorities’ attempts to strengthen control and intensify punishment for the possession of external information, consumption of South Korean media in secret among North Korean residents continues to spread widely.

## Widespread communications censorship

Mobile phones used by North Korean residents are a significant means of accessing and disseminating external information. The figure of wireless communications users in North Korea is estimated to be 4.5 million, accounting for 20% of the total population. Amidst the increasing adoption of mobile phones and computers, North Korean authorities are employing various methods to control the internal spread of external information, including incorporating wiretapping and surveillance programs onto devices and installing jamming and eavesdropping equipment. Furthermore, authorities enhance these programs’ capabilities by conducting upgrades under the guise of regular mobile phone or

computer software updates.

Another issue surrounding the inflow and dissemination of external information through video and mobile phones is that the severity of punishment depends on whether bribery is involved. When caught in possession of foreign media, one's ability to bribe authorities on the spot often determines the level of punishment. The reality of North Korea is that monetary compensation can resolve situations such as these, as those who can pay bribes often conclude their sentences in months or weeks instead of years at correctional labor facilities.

## 02

## Suppression of the freedom of thought and conscience

The government of the [Democratic People's Republic of Korea] reportedly [continues] to execute, torture, arrest, and physically abuse individuals for their religious activities.

U.S. Department of state, May 2023

## Kim Dynasty as the sole Ideology

Article 3 of the Socialist Constitution of the DPRK stipulates that Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism serves as the sole guiding principle of the state, emphasizing that it is the only ideology in North Korea. North Korean residents are required to adhere to Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism as an absolute code of conduct, and no other ideologies or freedom of thought or conscience are permitted. North Korean authorities embed spies within the Local People's Unit *Inminban* and organizations to secretly monitor residents' activities and encourage mutual surveillance. Authorities utilize Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism to brand and punish those who harbor political resentment against the regime as political, ideological criminals.

“A 9-years old elementary school student, for the offense of scribbling with a pencil on the faces of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il in the textbook, and an elderly grandmother, for the offense of using a newspaper with Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il on it as wallpaper, had their entire families disappear.”

“White Paper On Human Rights In North Korea 2022”, KINU, p.176

The core factor behind the lack of freedom of thought and conscience in North



Korea can be found in the personality cult stemming from the unitary Su-ryeong ruling system. In North Korea, where the leader dominates all aspects of society, any ideology other than Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism is an anti-regime ideology that threatens the unitary Su-ryeong ruling system. For this reason, as North Korean escapees have explained, North Korean residents cannot even begin to imagine any other thought apart from Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism. One North Korean escapee said, "In school, they always emphasize that there will be severe punishment for disobeying Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism. And after receiving such education, one becomes indoctrinated and avoids any transgressions."

### Religion, the opiate of the people

While North Korea claims to guarantee freedom of religion, it has laid the groundwork for religious repression by stating in the Socialist Constitution that 'religion cannot be used to invite foreign intervention or disturb the state and social order.' According to a report by the DPRK Association for Human Rights Studies, "freedom of religion is allowed and provided by the state law within the limit necessary for ensuring social order, health, social security, morality, and other human rights." It emphasizes that religion, by principle, is placed under the control of the state.

Since the establishment of the regime, North Korea has restricted religious activities of its residents based on Kim Il-sung's doctrine that "religion is the

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The officials of the Workers' Party of Korea visited the kumsusan palace of the sun in Pyongyang around Kim Jong-il's birthday(Day of the shining star) to pay their respects.

PHOTOGRAPH SOURCE  
「Korean Central News Agency」  
2023.2.17



opiate of the people.” Moreover, many Christians have been oppressed in North Korea under the notion that they pose a negative impact on regime stability. North Korea indoctrinates its residents that “religion is a false and deceitful ideology” and missionaries are “evil individuals.” As a result, North Korean residents avoid expressing interest in religion, and the term “missionary” evokes a sense of fear.<sup>2</sup> In 2021, Kim Jong-un further entrenched the notion that religion is a punishable offense by enacting the “Youth Education Security Act”, which legally prohibits “religion and superstitious acts.”

“In 2015, two women were executed in North Hwanghae Province for evangelizing others, and in 2018, two individuals were publicly executed in Pyongsong, South Pyongan Province, for being found in possession of a Bible. In 2019, an underground church was discovered, leading to 5 publicly executed, 7 sent to political prison camps, 30 sentenced to correctional labor, and 50 individuals alongside their families deported from Pyongyang to other regions.”

“White Paper On Human Rights In North Korea 2022”, KINU, p.185

**Kenneth Bae**, a Korean-American, entered North Korea on November 3, 2012, and was subsequently detained for carrying a Bible. In April 2013, he was sentenced to 15 years of hard labor on charges of “hostile acts against the Republic.” He was released on November 8, 2014, and returned to the United States.

PHOTOGRAPH SOURCE

“Korean Central News Agency”, 2014.1.20



<sup>2</sup> ROK Ministry of Unification Center for North Korean Human Rights Records. “2023 Report on North Korean Human Rights”. ROK Ministry of Unification, 2023.

## 03

### Chronic Food Shortages

Condemning the Democratic People's Republic of Korea  
for national policies that increasingly divert its resources  
into pursuing nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles over the welfare  
of its people and their access to food...

Resolution adopted by the UN Human Rights Council on April 2023

#### The worst food shortage since the 'Arduous March'

The international community continuously issues warnings about North Korea's critical food situation. From 2016 to 2022, the average yearly grain production in North Korea was estimated to be around 4.6 million tons, resulting in an annual shortage of approximately 1 million tons of food. This means that the entire population of North Korea experiences 2 to 3 months' worth of food shortages each year. Furthermore, between 2019 and 2021, an estimated total of 10.7 million people in North Korea were affected by malnutrition, accounting for 41.6% of the population.<sup>③</sup> This number exceeds the estimated 7.9 million people affected by malnutrition in the early 2000s following the North Korean famine, also known as the "Arduous March."<sup>④</sup>

PHOTOGRAPH SOURCE Kang Dong-wan professor at Dong-A University



③ FAO · UNICEF · WFP · WHO Joint Declaration. *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2022*, Food & Agriculture Organization of the United Nations(FAO), 2022

④ Jakob Skoet · Kostas Stamoulis. *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2006*, Food & Agriculture Organization of the United Nations(FAO), 2006

## Border lockdowns during the Pandemic

After the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in 2020, North Korea closed its borders and expelled all international organization personnel stationed in North Korea effectively severing all personal and material exchanges with the outside world. As a country that relied on international support to fill its annual food shortage, North Korea's food situation appears to have significantly worsened due to its border closure. Furthermore, North Korea placed movement restrictions in May 2020 as COVID-19 rapidly spread, leading to significant reductions in food trade and reports of increased starvation in certain regions. However, the North Korean regime continues to reject international assistance, maintaining that it is an attempt by imperialists to subjugate and dominate North Korea

“Recent reports show that there has been an increase of deaths from malnutrition, with dozens dying each day in Kaesong. The situation is exacerbated by extreme cold, with reports of severe poverty-related suicides. As Kaesong is considered a "special city" or "model city" within North Korea, the occurrence of malnutrition deaths in Kaesong suggests that the food shortage situation in regional cities is even more severe.”

February 6, 2023, Yonhap News

## Collapse of the Public Distribution System

North Korea's official food distribution system, the Public Distribution System **PDS**, is not functioning properly. Discriminatory and irregular distribution fails to address the food shortages faced by the residents. State-supplied rations are primarily distributed to those working for government institutions, while the general population either receives no distribution at all or only a minimal amount. North Korean residents have resorted to cultivating small gardens or clearing mountains near their homes to provide food for themselves. However, since 2015, North Korean authorities have imposed restrictions on the practice citing deforestation and flood damages, further exacerbating food shortages among the population as a result.

## 04

### Human rights abuses against women and children

North Korea has the highest estimated prevalence of modern slavery in the world at 104.6 per 1,000 population. Modern slavery occurs when victims cannot avoid exploitation due to threats, violence, coercion, or trickery.

2023 Global Slavery Index, May 2023

#### The most beautiful, women-respecting society?

According to the DPRK's Country report for 2019 UN Universal Periodic Review [UPR](#) and the 2021 report for Voluntary National Review [VNR](#), North Korea claims to guarantee women's rights with the aim of gender equality. However, deeply entrenched notions of male dominance and fixed gender roles as well as a culture of gender discrimination prevail.

North Korea's "Law on the Protection of the Rights of Women" prohibit all forms of domestic violence and mandate administrative or criminal responsibility for violations. However, as North Korean authorities perceive domestic violence only as a family matter, there is minimal intervention by law enforcement in addressing cases of domestic violence. Economic poverty, infidelity, alcoholism, and drug abuse are cited as major causes of domestic violence in North Korea. However, as victims of domestic violence are not protected by the state or society in practice,



PHOTOGRAPH SOURCE Kang Dong-wan professor at Dong-A University



domestic violence rarely results in punishment. Additionally, there is a lack of awareness regarding sexual violence among North Korean residents, to the extent that many women do not recognize sexual violence unless it is accompanied by physical force. Escapees' testimonies state that rapes are often reported as assault and battery in North Korea because victims of rape face social stigma, and that sexual assault by acquaintances are not considered as rape.

“It is estimated that male-initiated violence against women is present in 70-80% of North Korean households. However, as there is no legal recourse, women are subjected to daily abuse.”

“White Paper On Human Rights In North Korea 2022”, KINU, p.368

“I have experienced a lot of sexual harassment by men on my way home at night, but I have never witnessed anyone being punished for it. Sexual harassment and assault are pervasive in North Korea.”

“White Paper On Human Rights In North Korea 2022”, KINU, p.372

## A peerless paradise for children?

Children, given their physical and mental immaturity, require special protection and care including that of legal safeguards. North Korea ratified the UN

The Korean Children's Union(KCU) is an organization created for the ideological education of children and teenagers.

The North Korean authorities have mobilized them to participate in events such as ceremonies where they are presented with replicas of “Sonyon” multiple rocket launchers.

PHOTOGRAPH SOURCE  
「Korean Central News Agency」  
2023.6.7





Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, a year after its adoption in 1989. In a 2017 report submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, North Korea self-assessed that “North Korean children fully enjoy their rights in accordance with Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un’s policy of love for children, and their welfare has been further promoted to a higher level.”

However, children in North Korea receive excessive political and ideological education, and are often mobilized for political and regime propaganda events, leaving insufficient time for rest and leisure. Students’ right to education are infringed upon as they are mobilized for parades on national holidays, choir teams *gachangdae* during elections, and performances for memorial services on the anniversary of Kim Jong-il’s death. Additionally, students must partake in group gymnastics practice to prepare for the annual Day of the Sun *April 15*, commemorating Kim Il-sung’s birthday. Students are made to endure practices that extend far into the night amidst the cold weather of February. There have been cases of students collapsing during gymnastics practice in the summer after spending 3 to 4 hours in the scorching heat.

Students are obligated to receive military training and are frequently mobilized for various forms of labor during break time or class hours, unrelated to their official curriculum. According to testimonies, students learn marksmanship, firearm assembly and disassembly, army crawling, guard duty, and military

PHOTOGRAPH SOURCE  
Kang Dong-wan professor at Dong-A University



regulations during training, with the last day involving live ammunition fire. Students are also mobilized for weeding and rice planting in spring and potato harvesting in autumn. These forms of mandatory rural mobilizations start early in the morning, placing great physical and mental burdens on the students. Moreover, students are often mobilized at construction sites to perform tasks such as transporting sand and gravel, as well as at logging sites and railroad construction sites. Although North Korea claims to prohibit child labor by law and to have eradicated all forms of it, the reality is that children are subjected to physical and mental suffering by being mobilized for their labor at various farms and construction sites.

“On May 9th, 2023, North Korean authorities dispatched over 70 students from Pyongsong Middle School, an educational institution for orphans aged 12-15, to the South Pyongan ‘High-Speed Shock Brigade’ to take part in construction works in Pyongyang’s Seopo District.”

May 9th, 2023, Daily NK



## 05

### Movement control and forced deportations

“

Border guards are under orders to ‘unconditionally shoot’ on sight anyone entering or leaving without permission.

There were several reports of border guards shooting North Koreans trying to leave the country, some resulting in death.

World Report 2023, Human Rights Watch, January 2023

”

#### Increased restrictions on movement

While the North Korean Constitution specifies ‘freedom of residence and travel’ [Article 75](#), authorities strictly restrict the freedom of movement for its residents. North Koreans must obtain travel permits to move to other regions, and stricter control and management are imposed when traveling to Pyongyang or border areas. North Korean law restricts free movement and states that those who violate the ‘travel order’ may be subjected to over three months of unpaid labor or re-educational labor discipline.

When traveling, minors must be accompanied by guardians with travel permits, and even officials must acquire travel permits for business trips. Patients must obtain a medical diagnosis as well as a certificate specifying the location of the hospital or the caregiver’s place of residence in order to travel. Furthermore, once arriving at their destinations, travelling residents must confirm their arrival with the local people’s unit [inminban](#) chief and register their credentials in the travel roster. A stamp by the Ministry of People’s Security [MPS](#) is also required. As it takes at least a week to obtain a travel permit, cases where residents bribe local officials for



The issuance of border pass

expediting the process is on the rise. Since Kim Jong-un's rise to power in 2015, reports state that market prices have been formed around bribes for obtaining travel permits.

“In Sinuiju, it costs around 200 Chinese yuan to travel to Pyongyang and 100 Chinese yuan to go to Cheongjin, while it costs 200 Chinese yuan to go from Cheongjin to Sinuiju. While the price to leave special zones such as Pyongyang for general zones is relatively cheaper, the bribe to enter special zones from general zones is twice as high.”

"White Paper On Human Rights In North Korea 2022", KINU, p.118

Additionally, after the outbreak of COVID-19, North Korea enacted the Emergency Quarantine Law and implemented containment, restriction, interdiction, and isolation measures to completely control resident movements. The Emergency Quarantine Law states that violations are punishable by death, leading to increased concern that residents may face excessive punishment for infractions.

### Shackles must be freed

North Korean authorities have been engaging in the forced expulsion of 'rebellious elements' and anti-regime personnel and their families, as well as the forced relocation of individuals defined as 'people with disreputable backgrounds.' 'Forced expulsion' refers to the compulsory transfer of individuals by the state, thus infringing upon one's freedom of residence and movement. Kim Jong-un has relocated undesirable residents such as ex-convicts and unemployed individuals away from Pyongyang, while increasing benefits such as food distribution within the capital. Furthermore, individuals who have committed 'anti-socialist' crimes such as prostitution, drug trafficking, and fraud are subject to forced expulsion along with their families. Cases of forced relocations along border areas have also been reported, carried out with the aim of curbing defections. Around 2015, North Korean authorities forcibly relocated and

demolished the homes of approximately 200 households in the border areas of Samjiyon.

“A mother was forcibly expelled to another region because her son was charged with fraud, a woman who was caught operating a brothel was shot, and the woman's son was expelled.”

“White Paper On Human Rights In North Korea 2022”, KINU, p.126

## 06

### Disregard for life

“Surveillance is prevalent, as is arbitrary arrest and detention, and punishment for political crimes are harsh.

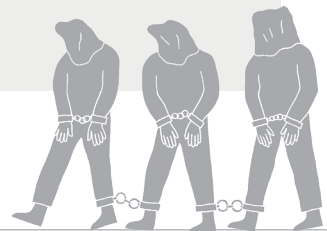
Freedom in the World 2023, Freedom House, March 2023

“Every human being has the inherent right to life. This right shall be protected by law. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his life.” The right to life, as stated in Article 6-1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights [ICCPR](#), is recognized as the most fundamental right of every human being and serves as a basis for other rights. As a party to the Covenant, North Korea has an obligation to protect the right to life of its residents. However, while North Korean authorities claim to protect this right through state laws and institutions, this claim is far from the truth.

In North Korea, arbitrary or unlawful arrests and detentions usually take place. Particularly, individuals who criticize the regime, insult the supreme leader, attempt to escape to South Korea, or engage in religious activities are sent to political prison camps without due process.

“In January 2016, in Hyesan, Ryanggang Province, my son was arrested and taken away by an unidentified man without being informed of the reasons or charges. He was held for several days and was interrogated until release.”

“White Paper On Human Rights In North Korea 2022”, KINU, p.81





Even individuals deprived of freedom for crimes they committed have the right to humane treatment. However, detainees in prison camps *kyohwaso*, labor training camps *rodong-danryundae*, and other detention facilities in North Korea must endure arbitrary abuse and cruel treatment. The nutritional, hygienic, and medical conditions in such places are extremely poor, leading to frequent deaths among detainees.

“Between 2018 and 2019, when I was in a detention center (*guryu-jang*), I received a fistful of corn with salt water for meals, and the quality was so poor that even dogs would refuse to eat.”

“White Paper On Human Rights In North Korea 2022”, KINU, p.107

Despite North Korea’s Criminal Law and Criminal Procedure Law outlining statutes against torture and inhumane treatment, abject human rights violations including torture and abuse occur during the handling of criminal cases.

“I was subjected to so-called ‘airplane torture’ during an investigation by the Ministry of State Security. ‘Airplane torture’ is where they have you face the wall first, bend over, press the back of your head to the wall, and raise your arms so that the back of your hands touches the wall. They would beat you relentlessly if you moved the slightest.”

“2023 Report on North Korean Human Rights”, ROK Ministry of Unification, p.71

To instill fear among the population, North Korean authorities publicly execute individuals for political beliefs, superstition, drug offenses, murder, watching and distributing South Korean media, and others. Moreover, extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions by state officials occur frequently, and even minors are subjected to the death penalty.

“Since Kim Jong-un assumed power, cases of assassination and execution of high-ranking officials such as Kim Jong-nam and Jang Song-thaek are being regularly confirmed.”

“White Paper On Human Rights In North Korea 2022”, KINU, p.48

“In 2018, two residents were publicly executed by the riverside in Chongjin for superstitious and religious activities, one of whom was a minor under 18 years old. In 2015, six minors between the ages of 16 and 17, all graduates of a prestigious middle school, were sentenced to death, and their sentences were immediately carried out by firing squad at the Wonsan Stadium. Their crime was watching South Korean videos and consuming opium.”

“2023 Report on North Korean Human Rights”, ROK Ministry of Unification, p.381

Kim Jong-un is believed to have been involved in the assassination of his half-brother, Kim Jong-nam, and the execution of his uncle by marriage, Jang Song-thaek.



PHOTOGRAPH SOURCE

“Rodong Sinmun”, 2013.12.13

## 07

### Political Prison Camps (Kwanliso)

Nutrition, hygiene, and the medical situation inside political prison camps are dire. Torture such as beatings and high voltage shocks, and water torture occur within the camps and children are subject to over 12 hours of forced labor while being deprived of education.

US 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: North Korea, March 2023

#### Every human rights violation imaginable

Since the era of Kim Il-sung, North Korea has been utilizing political prison camps as a means of rule to maintain its regime. Serious and grave human rights violations are carried out by North Korean authorities within these political prison camps, and they can be aptly described as a one-stop center for human rights abuses. For this reason, North Korean residents harbor a strong sense of fear regarding these camps. According to data published by the Korea Institute for National Unification in 2013, a total of 80,000 to 120,000 political prisoners are held in camps such as Camp No. 14 and No. 18 in Kaechon [South Pyongan Province](#), Camp No. 16 in Hwaseong County [North Hamgyong Province](#), and Camp No. 25 in Cheongjin. However, during the 3rd UPR in 2019, North Korean authorities officially denied the existence of political prisoners or political prison camps, claiming that the terminology itself does not exist.

According to Article 14-1 of the ICCPR, all persons are equal before courts and tribunals, and in the determination of any criminal charge against them, are entitled to a fair and public hearing by a competent, independent, and impartial tribunal established by law. However, North Korea does not guarantee a person the right to a fair trial, especially when the defendant is deemed as a threat to the regime. When the regime senses threat, North Korean residents are often

incarcerated in political prison camps without any formal procedure. Furthermore, North Korea applies a guilt-by-association system, punishing not only the political criminal themselves but also their direct family members and relatives.

### Subhuman Existence

Some of the most common reasons for being sent to political prison camps in North Korea include one's constituent background *chulsin-songbun*, regime opposition, disrespect towards the supreme leader, espionage, religious activities, abuse of power, defection, and issues related to South Korea. Those who oppose the North Korean regime or criticize Kim Jong-un are sent to political prison camps. Cases have been reported where individuals who have permission to conduct business in China were sent to political prison camps under charges of espionage for contacting and transacting with South Koreans and carrying North Korean newspapers and magazines into China. Residents have been sent to political prison camps for engaging in religious activities.

**“If one distorts what Kim Jong-un says or fails to execute his policies correctly, they are sent to political prison camps.”**

“White Paper On Human Rights In North Korea 2022”, KINU, p.456

Many are sent to political prison camps for issues related to South Korea. These include accepting money from South Korea, making phone calls to South Korea, planning to escape to South Korea, brokering escapes to South Korea, contacting South Koreans, expressing favorable opinions about South Korea, and providing sensitive documents or information to South Korea, and more.

In political prison camps, detainees are treated as subhuman, often referred to as ‘working ants.’ In these camps, arbitrary executions are carried out by camp authorities without due process for reasons such as disciplinary infractions and

disobeying orders. Physical abuse and violence are rampant, and nutritional, hygienic, and medical conditions are extremely poor, causing extreme suffering for detainees. Even the basic human right of 'right to family' is violated in these camps. Refugees have stated that parents and siblings cannot live together, and even married couples are forced to live apart. Marriage and childbirth are prohibited, and couples' work schedules are staggered to day and night so they will have less time together.

“In April 2016, a detainee who was captured while attempting to escape from the Hamhung Reeducation Camp was publicly executed without any legal process.”

“White Paper On Human Rights In North Korea 2022”, KINU, p.47



PHOTOGRAPH SOURCE

아리랑day, "Actual footage of North Korean defectors caught in the act"  
2020.11.15

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgVWfaXLvig>)



## HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES OF NORTH KOREANS OVERSEAS

### 01

#### North Korean escapees in China

“

[The Committee]

... notes with concern that North Korean women and girls defectors are categorically classified as “illegal migrants” and some are forcibly returned. It further notes with concern that children born in the State party (China) to North Korean women are deprived of their rights to birth registration, nationality, education and health care because their birth cannot be registered without exposing the mother to the risk of deportation to North Korea.

Concluding observations on the ninth periodic report of China by UN CEDAW, May 2023

”

#### Beyond the Panopticon

As the food shortage in North Korea intensified during the mid-1990s, the number of residents illegally crossing the border and settling in China increased. Most of the escapees were women, as women in North Korea are under more lenient surveillance compared to that of men. Men in North Korea are under stricter surveillance as they are expected to work and serve in the military, while women’s expectations are mostly confined to the household. One of the issues that North Korean defectors in China face is human trafficking. Organized human traffickers mainly targets women, but men are also traded as a source of labor in rural areas of China. While most North Korean women are trafficked to China through deceitful or coercive methods, there are cases where women willingly sell themselves because they lack the brokerage fees to escape. Particularly,

ever since Kim Jong-un bolstered cracking down on defections, many have resorted to trafficking themselves out of desperation, believing that it is the only way out of North Korea.

North Korean women, once trafficked into China, are often coerced into prostitution in karaoke bars and entertainment establishments. They are also sold to Chinese men as brides or as mere objects to satisfy sexual needs. North Korean women who have been trafficked into forced marriages live under the watchful eyes of their new husbands, families, and neighbors, and they are made to endure their husbands' sexual and physical abuse, alcoholism, and gambling. Even if they do manage to escape, it is extremely difficult for North Korean women to support themselves in China. As a result, they often come to the realization that marriage with Chinese men is their only option. Furthermore, North Korean defectors in China are constantly exposed to the threat of forced repatriation to North Korea due to their illegal, alien status. This is the fundamental reason why North Korean defectors cannot help but accept their brutal situation that is human trafficking, domestic abuse, and labor exploitation.

### Violence against repatriated escapees

Defectors forcibly repatriated from China undergo investigation by the State Security Department **SSD** which entails human rights violations such as torture and abuse. Since coming to power, Kim Jong-un has strengthened the punishment for forcibly repatriated individuals. Contacting Christians or attempting to escape to South Korea are considered felonies, and repatriated individuals are sentenced to correctional labor or sent to political prison camps without trial. The international community has been urging China to stop its practice of forced repatriations based on international agreements such as the UN Convention Against Torture and the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. However, China maintains that North Korean defectors are not 'refugees' but 'illegal aliens or economic migrants.'

Forcibly repatriated North Korean women experience severe human rights abuses during the repatriation and investigation process. The most significant



abuses include forced abortions and inhumane treatment. Should a North Korean woman be found with the child of a Chinese man during the repatriation process, North Korean authorities administer drugs or perform dilation and curettage D&C procedures to forcibly abort the pregnancy. Additionally, sexual violence is present in detention facilities against repatriated women. Authorities subject the detainees to frequent strip searches to search for money, secret letters, and confidential documents. During the process, unsanitary uterine examinations are usually involved.

“In December 2016, a defector in her second trimester was forcibly aborted in the Hyesan gathering facility, Ryanggang Province. She was forcibly mobilized for logging work right after her D&C procedure, which she found extremely difficult.”

“White Paper On Human Rights In North Korea 2022”, KINU, p.377

“In 2017, a forcibly repatriated woman was subjected to a uterine examination in Onsong County, North Hamgyong Province, by a female official with the Ministry of State Security. When the search yielded no results, she was made to repeatedly do squats and was fed food to induce bowel movements. Once she defecated, the examination was resumed.”

“White Paper On Human Rights In North Korea 2022”, KINU, p.378

PHOTOGRAPH SOURCE  
Kang Dong-wan peofessor at Dong-A University

## 02

### North Korean Laborers Overseas

The vast majority of North Koreans employed outside the country were in Russia and the PRC.

...

Laborers worked between 12 and 16 hours per day.

...

They were paid an average wage 270,000 to 900,000 won per month (\$300 to \$1,000), but in most cases employing firms paid salaries directly to the government, which took between 70 percent and 90 percent of the total earnings.

US 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: North Korea, March 2023

#### The dictator's 'cash cow'

Despite sanctions imposed by the United Nations, North Korea continues to dispatch laborers to over 40 countries including China and Russia to earn foreign currency. It is estimated that several hundred million dollars flow into North Korea through these laborers annually. On September 11, 2017, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 2375 as part of its sanctions against North Korea's continued nuclear and missile tests, prohibiting UN member states from accepting new North Korean laborers. On December 22, 2017, the Security Council passed Resolution 2397, mandating the repatriation of North Korean laborers residing in each member state within 24 months. However, it is estimated that a significant number of North Koreans are still deployed as laborers in places such as China, Russia, the Middle East, and Laos.

The key criterion in selecting overseas laborers is their potential for defection once abroad. Therefore, anyone who is unmarried, has relatives overseas, or does not have children is now excluded from the selection. Various institutions

assess and verify potential overseas laborers, and bribery is essential during the process.

### Prison without walls

Once selected, North Korean overseas laborers typically endure long hours of strenuous labor. A North Korean resident who worked in Magadan, Russia, until 2014 testified that laborers worked 16 hours a day. Another resident dispatched as a plasterer to a North Korean overseas construction office in Moscow, Russia, from 2010 to 2017 testified that the laborers' schedule had them working from 8 am to 10 pm without weekends. A resident who worked as a construction worker in Mongolia from 2016 to 2019 testified that they had to work from 8 am to 10 pm, with little time to rest except for lunch. There were no days off, even on holidays or weekends.

Overseas laborers are placed under strict surveillance and control by North Korean authorities during their assignments. The lives of overseas laborers are monitored by guards from the State Security Department or managers from affiliated North Korean companies. North Korean overseas laborers live collectively and are required to attend Life Review Sessions [saenghwal-chonghwa](#) held in their company dormitories. Their possessions are inspected 2 to 3 times a week and they are not allowed to possess mobile phones. Laborers are subject to punishment or forced repatriations back to North Korea should they be found in breach of rules. Listening to South Korean radio or watching South Korean TV is punished most heavily. Overseas laborers are generally restricted from exiting the premises alone and contact with foreigners is strictly prohibited. Only site managers and interpreters have the authority to contact outsiders.

**“North Korean laborers in Chinese factories are subjected to intensive labor for more than 12 hours a day for over two years, with no outside contact.”**

Daily NK, February 2022

North Korean overseas laborers must offer a significant portion of their earnings to the North Korean regime. Additionally, laborers' remaining earnings are exploited by their higher-level organizations and local foreign companies. A North Korean defector who worked as a construction worker in Russia testified that they had to pay \$600 to the government each month, leaving laborers with only about \$230 per month. Another defector assigned to Eastern Europe until early 2018 stated that their monthly salary provided by the company was around \$500, but only \$150-200 was recorded as the official tally. The laborers believed the remainder went to the North Korean regime.



The rough hands of overseas North Korean Workers

PHOTOGRAPH SOURCE

Kang Dong-wan professor at Dong-A University

## FURTHER HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS BY THE NORTH KOREAN REGIME

### 01

#### Prisoners of War from the Republic of Korea

“

*Noting with concern the allegations of continued violations of the human rights of unrepatriated prisoners of war and their descendants, and the issue of nationals of other states members detained in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea with no information available regarding their health or the conditions of their detention.*

Resolution adopted by the UN Human rights Council on April 2023

”

The Armistice Agreement of the Korean War, signed on July 27, 1953, was an agreement that prisoners of war would be repatriated. However, it is estimated that a sizeable number of South Korean prisoners of war were never repatriated and remained detained in North Korea. The United Nations Command estimates that around 82,000 South Korean soldiers went missing in action, but only 8,343 prisoners of war were ultimately repatriated. North Korea maintains that all prisoners of war were repatriated and that there are no South Korean prisoners of war held against their will in North Korea. As of September 2022, 80 prisoners of war have escaped North Korea to return to the South, and over 430 family members of the prisoners of war have also defected.

According to the testimonies of returned POWs, it is believed that they were either incorporated into the Korean People's Army or forced into collective labor in mines, industrial facilities, and rural areas during the Korean War. POWs were initially held in Camp No. 25 in Chongjin following the armistice and were granted



North Korean People's Registration Cards in June 1956, allowing them to leave the detention facilities and into society. However, many were deployed to coal mines in the Hamgyong region as coal mines are easier to monitor and control. POWs assigned to coal mine labor worked 12 hours a day in two shifts, and it is estimated that there were once as many as 1,100 to 1,200 POWs deployed in coal mines in the North Hamgyong region.

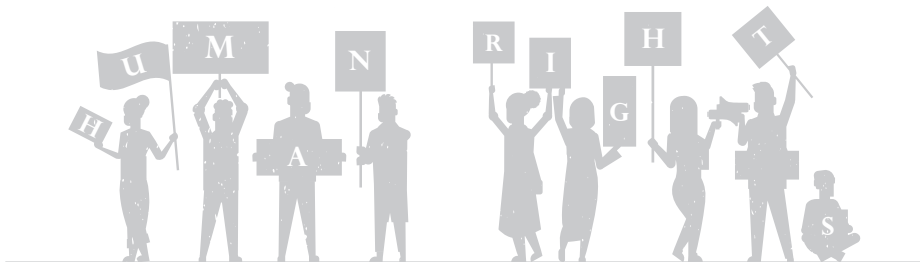
Forced labor of South Korean POWs is a violation of the Geneva Conventions. According to the Geneva Convention Relating to the Treatment of Prisoners of War of August 12, 1949 [Third Geneva Convention](#), POWs must always be treated humanely [Article 13](#) and provided appropriate working conditions [Article 51](#). Additionally, the Third Geneva Convention prohibits POWs from engaging in work that is harmful to their health or exposes them to undue risk [Article 52](#). Furthermore, the forced labor imposed on POWs is a violation of Article 8, paragraph 3 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which prohibits forced labor.

In North Korea, POWs face oppression and social discrimination in their daily lives due to their backgrounds [songbun](#). Many do not openly disclose their status as a POW out of concern that it might affect their children's status. Repatriated POWs faced restrictions on choice of residence and employment during their detention in North Korea. The children of POWs face barriers in joining the Workers' Party of North Korea, pursuing higher education, and employment. Refugees have stated that POWs cannot join the Workers' Party or work for the Party, and even if their academic performance is excellent, POW children are not given recommendations for university admission due to their status.

**“All forcibly disappeared persons are under strict surveillance and deprived of opportunities for education or employment.”**

“White Paper On Human Rights In North Korea 2022”, KINU, p.536

The Republic of Korea government has repeatedly raised the issue of confirming the survival of remaining POWs and repatriating them through inter-Korean dialogues. However, it is fundamentally difficult to seek a solution to the matter as North Korea denies the existence of POWs. The exact number of surviving POWs in North Korea is unknown, and it is estimated that a significant number may have died due to old age while detained. As of December 2022, out of the dozens of POWs that escaped from North Korea, only 14 were known to be alive in South Korea.



## 02

### Abductees in North Korea

**The leaders reaffirm a shared commitment to the immediate resolution of the abductions issue. Prime Minister Kishida and President Biden also express their support for the immediate release of the ROK citizens detained in the DPRK.**

Phnom Penh Statement on US-Japan-ROK Trilateral Partnership for the Indo-Pacific,  
November 2022

The Abduction of South Koreans by the North Korean regime occurred not only during the Korean War but also following the signing of the Armistice Agreement. It has been estimated that up to 82,959 South Korean nationals were abducted during the Korean War. After the armistice, there were approximately 3,835 cases of abductions from the mid-1950s to the 1970s. Cases include fishermen who were kidnapped while fishing along the East Sea and West Sea, passengers of hijacked flights, civilians on vacation, military personnel, coastal guards, and South Korean expatriates. Among them, 3,310 were repatriated to South Korea, and 9 managed to escape from North Korea after 2000. As of September 2022, it is estimated that 516 South Koreans remain detained in North Korea.

Several of the abductees were used as assets for anti-South Korea broadcasts or for espionage training. On December 11, 1969, North Korea hijacked a Korean Air **KAL** flight carrying 4 crew members and 47 passengers. Crew members such as Sung Kyung-hee and Jeong Gyeong-suk were misused as broadcasting assets against South Korea. Additionally, many abductees were employed as instructors to train spies and forced to engage in clandestine operations against South Korea. However, abductees deemed to have no further value were presumed to have been detained in political prisoner camps. In January 1999, the National Intelligence Service disclosed that 22 abductees and defectors, including

Lee Jae-hwan, were being held in political prisoner camps.

## Open wounds

Since Kim Jong-un came to power, six South Korean citizens are known to have been detained in North Korea, including Christian missionaries Kim Jeong-uk, Kim Kook-gi, and Choi Chun-gil, as well as a former defector and naturalized South Korean Ko Hyun-chul. North Korean authorities do not recognize the consular access rights of the detained South Korean citizens. As a result, the whereabouts, health conditions, and safety of South Korean citizens currently detained in North Korea remain unconfirmed. Since the inter-Korean summit in 2000, the South Korean government has consistently raised the issue of abductees with North Korea, along with the POW issue. However, North Korea categorically denies the existence of abductees and insists that they entered North Korea by choice.

The civilian kidnappings orchestrated by the North Korean regime is not limited to South Koreans alone. Since 1950, North Korea has systematically abducted foreigners as part of its national policy and refused to repatriate them. The Japanese government has identified 17 Japanese victims of North Korean abductions. In October 2022, five were returned, and the Japanese government continues to demand the return of the remaining 12 individuals. However, North Korea insists that since they have repatriated five of the recognized abductees and the remaining eight died in North Korea, the abductee issue has been completely resolved.

North Korea also engages in the detention of American citizens with impunity. From 2009 to 2010, American citizens Euna Lee, Laura Ling, and Aijalon Mahli Gomes were arrested on charges of illegal entry and espionage and sentenced to correctional labor. After Kim Jong-un came to power, Kenneth Bae, a Korean American missionary, was sentenced to correctional labor on charges of attempting to overthrow the regime through religious activities. He suffered through extreme physical labor and malnutrition from inadequate food while in the labor camp, losing over 20kg in the process. American college student Otto

Warmbier visited North Korea in 2015 and was detained. He was tried on January 22, 2016, and was sentenced to 15 years of correctional labor. On June 6, 2017, he was repatriated to the United States in a vegetative state and died six days later.

According to the UN Commission of Inquiry report in 2014, it is estimated that the number of enforced disappearances by North Korea, including children, exceeds 200,000 worldwide. Most enforced disappearances were carried out by North Korean authorities for the purpose of exploiting their labor and skills, while some victims were forced to engage in espionage and terrorist activities. Women abducted from Europe, the Middle East, and Asia have also been forced into marriages with men from other countries. Civilian abductions perpetrated by North Korean authorities are not only a violation of individual rights but also constitutes a grave criminal act.



Megumi Yokota (Japan)



Anocha Panchoi (Thailand)



Kim Jung-wook (South Korea)



Kim Kuk-ki (South Korea)



Choi Chun-kil (South Korea)

Warmbier an American, was detained in North Korea for 17 months starting from January 2016 on charges of attempting to steal political propaganda. He tragically passed away in June 2017.

PHOTOGRAPH SOURCE  
「Korean Central  
News Agency」  
2016.2.29



## 03

## Separated Families

To South Koreans,  
people in North Korea are not just ‘anybodies.’ Millions of South  
Koreans still have our family members and relatives living in the North.  
Even though we never hear from them,  
even though by now the pain of the separation  
has become the cold fact of life, we know that they are  
just a few hundred kilometers away from where we live.

Oh Joon, Former ROK Ambassador to the United Nations, December 2014

In the Korean Peninsula, there are separated families who have been scattered between South Korea and North Korea for various reasons such as division of the peninsula, abduction to North Korea, non-repatriation of prisoners of war, and detention in North Korea. These separated families are being deprived of their right to family reunification, which is protected under international humanitarian law. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international human rights treaties stipulate that men and women of marriageable age have the right to marry and form a family, and states have the obligation to protect the family.

As the division between North and South Korea persists, the first generation of separated families is aging, and the number of deceased individuals is rapidly increasing. As of April 30, 2023, the number of registrants hoping for inter-Korean family reunions in South Korea stood at 133,678, including 41,423 living survivors and 92,255 individuals who passed away while waiting to meet family members. Among the survivors, 12,979 individuals 31.3% are aged 90 or above, and 14,867 individuals 35.9% are aged 80 to 89, indicating that ages 80 and above account for 67.2% of current survivors. Their time is running out.

The South Korean government has made efforts to resolve the issue of separated families through inter-Korean Red Cross talks and ministerial-level meetings, but North Korean unresponsiveness has stagnated the issue. In September 2022, Minister of Reunification Kwon Young-se proposed intergovernmental talks on the issue of separated families to North Korea, but North Korea refused to accept the letter.

The North Korean authorities classify and control their residents into three categories: the "basic" masses, "complex" masses and "remnants of the hostile" class. Separated families in North Korea are classified as "traitors who have fled to South Korea" or "families of traitors who have fled to South Korea" and are managed as part of the 'complex masses' category. Those classified as 'complex masses' face discrimination in social life ranging from employment to education, housing, and military service. They are barred from joining the Workers' Party of North Korea or serving in the military, and they also face social discrimination in other aspects such as university enrollment and marriage. One North Korean defector testified that if one was born into families where a member defected to the South, are entitled to repatriation, or are children of such families, they cannot even dream of becoming high-ranking officials and the best they could hope for, especially for women, is to work in a factory. Families with a member that defected to the South become targets of continuous surveillance by the North Korean authorities. A North Korean defector who escaped in 2016 testified that after it was revealed that her grandfather was living in South Korea through the separated family search in 2006, she was placed under strict surveillance and control by authorities for ten years until she couldn't bear it anymore and decided to defect.



“During the family reunion event for separated families, I met my aunt from South Korea at Mount Kumgang Hotel. After that, security personnel frequently visited our home, making our lives unbearable. The People's Unit also kept us under surveillance. My brother used to work at the military electric power enterprise but was fired about ten days later.”

“2023 Report on North Korean Human Rights”, ROK Ministry of Unification, p.444



PHOTOGRAPH SOURCE  
「Nocutnews」, 2018.8.20



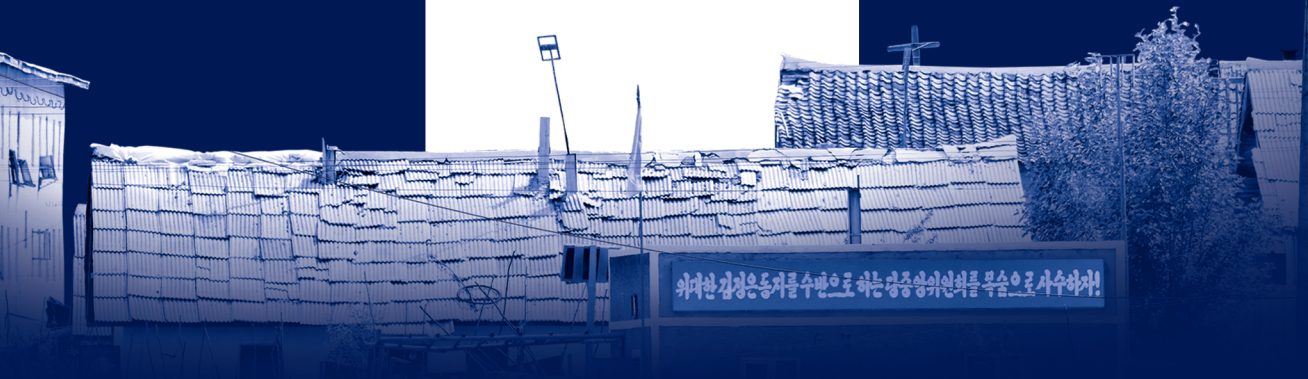
# Voices of the Voiceless

Unveiling Human Rights in North Korea

## 03

**EFFORTS BY THE  
INTERNATIONAL  
COMMUNITY**

TO IMPROVE  
THE NORTH KOREAN  
HUMAN RIGHTS  
SITUATION



**Voices**  
of the  
**Voiceless**

# 3 Efforts by the International Community to Improve the North Korean Human Rights Situation

UN Member States must continue to support the solution of the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, especially by exploring ways to support the work of NGOs that seek to raise women's rights.

Elizabeth Salmón, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in DPRK, April 2023

The international community has consistently expressed its deep concerns about the severity of human rights abuses in North Korea and has called on the North Korean regime to improve its human rights of North Koreans. The United Nations General Assembly has adopted North Korean human rights resolutions for 18 consecutive years since 2005, and the UN Human Rights Council has adopted resolutions on North Korean human rights for 21 consecutive years since 2003. Through these resolutions, the international community conveys its strong concerns about the serious human rights abuses in North Korea. Efforts are also being made to hold perpetrators accountable, and several countries are leveraging sanctions against North Korea to strongly urge its improvement of the human rights situation. Currently, free flow of information into North Korea is emphasized as the critical means to improve the human rights of North Koreans. The issue of involuntary family separation, such as separated families and detainees, is recognized as a human rights violation and is being raised as a problem that needs to be addressed from a human rights perspective.

PHOTOGRAPH SOURCE  
UNHCR homepage  
([www.unhcr.co.kr](http://www.unhcr.co.kr))

In 2004, the United Nations established a UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in North Korea in accordance with resolutions of the UN Commission on Human Rights, tasked with investigating and researching the human rights situation in North Korea and reporting to the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council. In August 2022, Elizabeth Salmón was appointed as the 4th UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in North Korea. In March 2013, the UN Human Rights Council established the Commission of Inquiry **COI** on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in accordance with its resolution. In June 2015, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Seoul was established. Efforts by the United Nations are directly related to accountability work for human rights abuses in North Korea. In particular, the COI, through its report published in February 2014, emphasized the existence of extensive and grave human rights abuses carried out by North Korea and clearly stated the direct responsibility of North Korean authorities. It further mentioned criminal responsibility of North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong-un.



PHOTOGRAPH SOURCE  
CSIS homepage  
([www.csis.org/events/north-korean-human-rights-and-international-cooperation-forward-after-un-commission](http://www.csis.org/events/north-korean-human-rights-and-international-cooperation-forward-after-un-commission))

Western states, including the United States, are strengthening sanctions against North Korean institutions and individuals who engage in human rights abuses against North Korean residents, to induce substantive improvement in North Korea's human rights record. The United States has imposed sanctions on North Korean human rights violators through the 'North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act' and 'Executive Order 13722,' both enacted in 2016. The United Kingdom enacted the 'Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act' in 2018 and the 'Global Human Rights Sanctions Regulations 2020,' while the European Union adopted the 'EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime' in 2020.

North Korea considers the free flow of external information into its borders as a grave threat to its authoritarian regime and strictly controls residents' contact with outside information. The international community recognizes this and has emphasized the importance of unrestricted flow of information to the North Korean population as a pathway to improving North Korean human rights. To address North Korea's human rights issues, the United States enacted the 'North Korean Human Rights Act' in 2004 and reauthorized it three times in 2008, 2012, and 2018. Through this law, the United States expands financial support to civil organizations conducting information inflow activities such as radio broadcasts to North Korea. Furthermore, in December 2022, the United States passed the 'Otto Warmbier Countering North Korean Censorship and Surveillance Act of 2021,' emphasizing the promotion of freedom of information within North Korea and the response to censorship and surveillance to expand the inflow of free information into North Korea.

At the United Nations General Assembly and Human Rights Council, the issue of separated families is emphasized as an urgent and important matter and viewed the issue from the perspective of human rights violations. In December 2022, the United States enacted the 'Divided Families Reunification Act,' which stipulates by law to cooperate with the South Korean government to provide separated Korean American families opportunities for reunions, including video reunions. The United Nations has shown significant interest in issues such as POWs and other detainees since Kim Jong-un came to power. The 2021 United Nations General Assembly resolution on North Korean human rights expressed concerns about human rights abuses against unrepatriated POWs for the first time, and it recommends North Korea, a party to the Vienna Conventions, to ensure the rights of detained individuals within its borders, including consular access for detainees.

### Michael Kirby

Commission of Inquiry on  
Human Rights in the DPRK –  
Press Conference  
Geneva, 17 February 2014



### Elizabeth Salmón

Special Rapporteur  
on the situation of  
human rights in the  
Democratic People's  
Republic of Korea





# **Voices** of the **Voiceless**

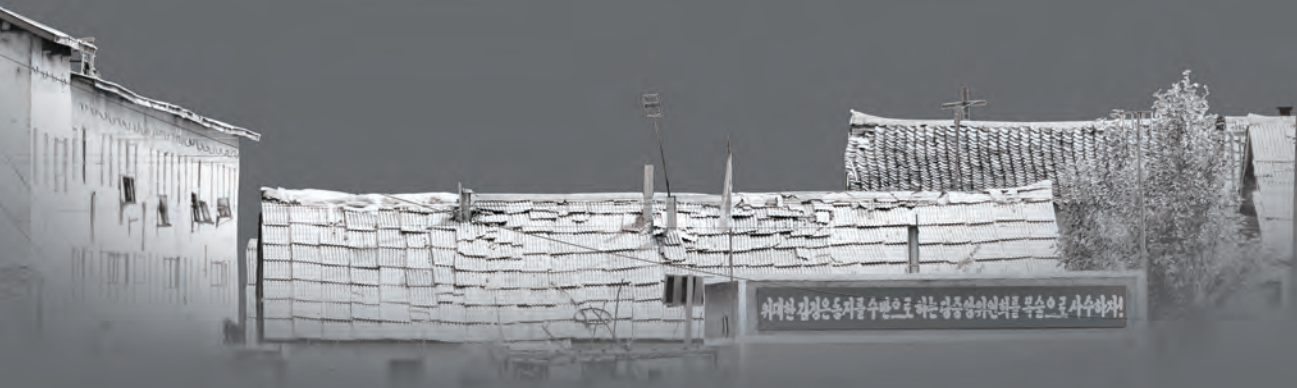
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