

# 2023 Report on North Korean Human Rights

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This report was written based on the testimonies of  
508 North Korean defectors who described  
the human rights situation in North Korea since 2017.



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SUMMARY



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# SUMMARY

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# 1. Civil and Political Rights

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## SUMMARY

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Considering the overall situation of civil and political rights in North Korea, it has been found that North Korean residents are not guaranteed the fundamental freedoms and rights provided in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The right to life is under severe threat in North Korea. There were numerous documented cases of arbitrary deprivation of life committed by the North Korean authorities, and it has been assessed that the death penalty is frequently imposed for activities that do not qualify as “the most serious crimes” justified under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, including drug offenses, distribution of South Korean video content, and participation in religious or superstitious practices. Furthermore, there is deep concern about the high incidence of detainee deaths resulting from the harsh conditions prevalent in detention facilities.

The North Korean authorities’ violation of the right to be free from torture or inhumane treatment is another grave concern. Despite some legislative measures, such as the enactment of the Law on the Prevention of Beatings, various forms of torture, such

as beatings and being forcibly restrained in a fixed position are still being carried out during the interrogation. Of particular concern are the authorities' public executions, which violate the rights of both the executed and the witnesses to be free from cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment or treatment.

Detainees held in *Kyohwaso* (prison camps) or *Rodong Danryundae* (labor training camps) are being subjected to forced labor that exceeds the time limit set by the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. In addition, various forms of forced labor are being imposed, such as mobilization to construction sites through the *Rodong Kyoyang* penalty (labor education penalty) imposed by administrative organs and not by court sentence.

Even though the North Korean Socialist Constitution, Criminal Law and other laws explicitly prohibit arbitrary or unlawful arrests, it appears that there is no guarantee of the right to liberty and security.

It is assessed that the human rights of those detained in detention facilities such as *Daekisil* (temporary detention centers), *Kuryujang* (pre-trial detention centers), *Rodong Danryundae*, and *Kyohwaso* are not properly protected. Detainees are subjected to harsh conditions in terms of heating, meals, and hygiene, as well as brutal treatment. Nevertheless, there have been some testimonies that the directive to prevent human rights abuses has recently been issued, resulting in improvements in the detention environment and a decrease in cruel treatment, so it is necessary to continue to pay attention and monitor the situation.

While North Korea's Socialist Constitution explicitly guarantees the freedom of travel, the freedom of movement is still restricted

due to systems such as travel permits and accommodation inspections. In particular, additional approval is required when moving to special areas such as Pyongyang. The freedom of residence is also restricted through forced displacement.

It is also assessed that the North Korean authorities routinely violate its resident's right to privacy. The neighborhood watch units called *Inminban* and the life review sessions known as *Saenghwal Chonghwa* appear to perform extensive surveillance and control functions over North Korean residents. The Socialist Constitution establishes 'Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism' as the sole guiding principle and residents' thoughts are controlled through the 'Ten Principles for the Establishment of the Party's Unitary Leadership System' and other principles. Furthermore, the authorities continue to violate the freedom of religion through policies such as anti-religious education.

The freedom of expression is also severely limited in North Korea. An example is the crackdown and punishment for verbal treason or *Mal Bandong*. The North Korean authorities have established special task forces to thoroughly control residents' access to and dissemination of external information. It has been observed that North Korea has strengthened the punishment for contact with or distribution of external information by revising legislation related to information control.

Due to the nature of North Korea's socialist system, it appears that residents remain unable to exercise their freedom of assembly and association, and right to political participation. Discrimination based on one's *Songbun* (background) and class is still prevalent and affects various aspects of life, including residence allocation, job assignments, promotions, job transfers, and college admission.

It has been revealed that arbitrary deprivation of life by state authorities exists in North Korea. Cases of summary executions in which individuals are deprived of their lives in border areas without due legal process continue to be documented. There have been instances in which escapees from detention facilities were caught and executed in public, or infants born to female detainees in the facilities were killed by detention guards. Testimonies have been collected regarding secret executions in some detention facilities. Furthermore, it has been found that the death penalty is being widely enforced in North Korea. Through amendments to the Criminal Law, North Korea has expanded the number of crimes punishable by the death penalty and recently enacted special laws, such as the Law on Emergency Anti-epidemic Work and the Law on the Prevention of Drug-related Crimes, that allow for the death penalty to be imposed for offenses such as violating quarantine measures. There have been testimonies of the death penalty being enforced not only for violent crimes like homicides but also for offenses that are not punishable by the death penalty under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights such as drug trafficking, watching or distributing South Korean videos, and engaging in religious or superstitious activities. Additionally, there have been instances where the death penalty was executed on children under 18 years of age and pregnant women.

It has been documented that torture and inhumane treatment frequently occur during interrogations in North Korea. Testimonies indicate that individuals were forced into confes-

sion, and beatings and other forms of torture are used to extract confessions. Although there have been testimonies that beatings are prohibited in detention facilities and investigations are conducted on human rights violations during interrogations, it is said that such abuses have not been substantially reduced. Testimonies of witnessing public executions in North Korea have been collected annually until 2020, which is considered inhumane treatment for both those executed and those who witness the execution. Public executions are generally carried out by firing squad in places such as sports grounds accessible by a large number of people. Residents, including children, are mobilized through schools, state-run companies, and *Inminban* (neighborhood watch units) to witness these executions. There have also been testimonies of North Korean authorities conducting biomedical experiments without the consent of the subjects. It has been revealed that detainees in *Kyohwaso* (prison camps) or *Rodong Danryundae* (labor training camps) are subjected to excessive labor. Even when detainees are sick, the assigned workload remains the same, and if they fail to meet their quota, they face beatings, punishment, restricted visitation, or denial of meals. In North Korea, labor punishment could be imposed through administrative decisions rather than court rulings, and such punishment appears to be common practice. According to testimonies, there are cases where bribes are offered to officials to expedite the release date because of the poor detention conditions and harsh labor. Those held in temporary facilities, such as waiting cells and *Jipkyulso* (holding centers for illegal

border crossers and travelers), were also found to be regularly forced into labor. Specifically, individuals who are forcibly repatriated and gathered in *Jipkyulso* are often mobilized into labor from sunrise until sunset, with no days off. Furthermore, it has been reported that ordinary residents are forcibly mobilized to local construction sites or farming fields through social organizations such as *Inminban*, state-run companies, or schools. The frequency of mobilization varied by organization, but it was found to be quite common. Some of these mobilized groups were given special names such as women *Dolgyeokdae* (shock brigades), college student *Dolgyeokdae*, and family *Dolgyeokdae*, and were sent to various construction sites. This type of labor seems to exceed what is typically expected as normal civic duty.

There have been numerous cases of frequent arbitrary and unlawful arrests and detentions in North Korea. Testimonies have been collected regarding the arrest and detention of individuals for expressing political opinions, engaging in religious activities, or exercising other rights guaranteed under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These arrests are often carried out without a warrant and in violation of the procedures outlined in North Korea's Criminal Procedure Law. In many cases, the arrest was made without any explanation for the cause of the arrest or the alleged offense. Families were not notified of the reason or place of confinement after the arrest. Furthermore, many detainees were questioned while being held, some of whom were detained for periods exceeding the legal maximum. Additionally, there have been continued testimonies of enforced

disappearances where individuals who were arrested for various reasons, including religious activities, criticism of the regime, or human trafficking, could not be located.

The detention conditions in North Korean execution facilities are reportedly extremely poor. While each facility differs, the detention spaces are generally very cramped and mostly do not meet the United Nations minimum standards. In some cases, the facilities fail to provide sufficient blankets or flooring mats. Most of the testimonies indicate that the quantity and quality of meals provided is below standard. Detainees are often unable to maintain good health unless they obtain food from visitors, and there have been cases where detainees have died due to malnutrition. Those interviewed described detainees being covered with lice and fleas, as they are unable to bathe while in detention, leading to unhygienic conditions and unbearable smells in the facilities. Additionally, it has been found that the prison authorities do not take any active measures to treat sick detainees. The mistreatment of detainees in North Korean detention facilities is particularly concerning, as many report experiencing cruel and abusive treatment. Most detainees testified that they were forced to maintain a fixed posture in the cell and were unable to move. Additionally, many reported being subjected to torture or other degrading, cruel treatment when they did not confess or answer properly. Visits and letters were restricted, and in some facilities, there was no separation between detainees awaiting trial and those who had already been convicted, or between adults and minors. Women detainees



were also stated to be mistreated. They were forced to undress completely for a body search, which included vaginal inspection. Multiple women were inspected simultaneously by a single inspector with no regard for hygiene considerations, and in some cases, a male guard conducted the inspection. Women detainees are often victims of sexual violence, and some have stated being forced to undergo abortions. Cases have also been collected where measures such as prohibiting detention or imprisonment of pregnant women and suspending the execution of punishment have not been observed. However, some detention facilities have recently shown improvement in terms of human rights. Some testimonies indicate that the authorities have issued directives to punish officials who commit violent acts and improve detention conditions. Nonetheless, it is reported that violence and cruel treatment have not completely disappeared.

In principle, North Korean residents are not allowed to move to a different city or province without obtaining a travel permit, which can be a long and complicated process. Some have reported bribing officials to expedite the process or attempting to travel without a permit. It is even more difficult and expensive to obtain a permit to travel to Pyongyang or the border regions. Those who travel without a permit are subject to inspection and can be caught at various checkpoints or on trains. Although most cases are resolved with bribery, some received administrative penalties. Additionally, travelers must obtain approval from the authorities in order to stay overnight at their destination, and individuals without the required permit are at

risk of being caught during accommodation inspections, and many have resorted to using bribes. During crackdowns where the authorities visit each household, other illegal activities such as watching unauthorized materials or the use of unapproved electronic devices may also be subject to inspection and control. Individuals are required to obtain approval from the authorities when relocating their place of residence. Relocating to a different city or a special region such as Pyongyang requires additional procedures and approvals, making it difficult and time-consuming. It has been found that the policy of forced relocation is also implemented for reasons such as political reasons, contact with South Korean information, and drug trafficking. Forced relocation involves canceling and revoking the permission to use one's current residence and assigning new housing in the forced migration area, making it common for entire families to migrate together. Individuals are also restricted from traveling abroad. The authorities impose strict limits on passport issuance and punish those who are caught illegally crossing the border without proper documentation. Individuals who were forcibly repatriated faced varying consequences. Individuals who stayed in China for a short period or used bribes were often released without punishment while others who stayed longer were sentenced to *Rodong Kyohwa* (reform through labor).

Recent findings indicate that individuals in North Korea are not ensured the right to a fair trial. Administrative agencies can even impose *Rodong Kyoyang* (labor education penalty) which is equivalent to imprisonment. Those convicted of anti-state or

anti-nation crimes can be sent to political prison camps without a proper court trial. Furthermore, judicial independence is not recognized in North Korea. In line with the Socialist Constitution, which asserts that North Korea shall conduct all activities under the leadership of the Workers' Party of Korea, the judiciary is effectively controlled by the Workers' Party. Additionally, it has been found that public trials are employed as a tool for propaganda and to indoctrinate the populace in North Korea. In some cases, local public trials were conducted in front of a large audience to serve as a warning to others. There have also been testimonies of public disclosing gatherings that force suspects to admit their crimes in front of a large crowd. It has also been found that North Korean authorities do not fully guarantee defendants' rights, including the right to counsel, the right to silence, and the right to appeal. According to testimonies, defendants were not fully guaranteed the right to counsel even when there was a state-appointed attorney. Attorneys treated defendants like criminals and provided no practical defense during trials.

Residents are heavily monitored and controlled from a young age through their participation in social groups that are influenced by the authorities. The lowest level of this structure is made up of local *Inminban* groups that monitor and report on the activities and beliefs of residents in their area. *Inminban* leaders work alongside reporters and informants who receive orders from the authorities to closely monitor the daily lives and ideological leanings of households and visitors. Defectors and

their families reportedly face even more stringent surveillance measures than the general population. In addition, residents must participate in regular life review sessions, known as *Saenghwal chonghwa*, at least once a week within their respective organizations, such as schools, workplaces, military, *Inminban* groups, and the Women's League. This requirement extends to North Korean workers and students living abroad. During the life review sessions, participants are expected to reflect on their own failures and those of their colleagues in both their work and personal lives. Failure to attend can lead to criticism. House searches are also conducted to crack down on outside information, smuggled goods, and electronic devices. These searches are carried out during routine accommodation inspections, and in some cases, without the presence of a warrant or other due process protections. There have been testimonies of on-the-spot inspections of smartphones on the streets and in colleges, aimed at identifying illicit content among young people. Additionally, the authorities monitor residents' telephone conversations, and carry out regular inspections of correspondence, as well as portraits and insignia pins featuring Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, and clothing. It seems that authorities have increased these inspections in response to residents' growing exposure to external information.

The Socialist Constitution provides that North Korea is guided in its building and activities only by great Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, indicating that Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism is the guiding ideology of North Korea. Ideological education begins

from childhood and takes various forms, such as music, art, and physical activities. It is organized throughout the curriculum from elementary school onward and continues through lectures and study sessions in the military, workplace, and other organizations. Ideological education touches every aspect of people's daily lives through the *Inminban*. Every institution, state-run company, and school in North Korea has a room dedicated to the study of the revolutionary ideas of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. In every city and province, there are revolutionary museums and statues of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, to which people are expected to show their loyalty. It is said that every household must display portraits of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, and people must wear badges bearing their portraits on their outer clothing. It has also been found that no ideology other than Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism is allowed. Instances have been collected that indicate *Inminban* units keep an eye on residents' ideological tendencies, while the *Unified Command* engages in crackdowns and punishment of anti-socialist and non-socialist behaviors. Freedom of religion exists only in theory and is not guaranteed in practice. It has been found that, due to continued policy of religious persecution, most people have not experienced religion. Some testimonies suggest that anti-religious education is given in schools or organizations, while people have been publicly executed or sent to political prison camps for possessing the Bible or engaging in missionary activities. Superstitious acts are also considered non-socialist and subject to crackdown and punishment. While superstitious acts were rarely punished in

the past, crackdowns and punishment were strengthened from 2018, and some people were sentenced to *Rodong Kyohwa* (reform through labor) or even executed.

The freedom of expression is limited due to surveillance and censorship, with the authorities controlling media and publication content. The authorities have the power to recall publications that spread certain ideologies, cultures, and lifestyles deemed reactionary. Criticizing the Supreme Leader or the political system is considered *Mal Bandong* (verbal treason), and those who speak out can be arrested, disappear, or sent to a political prison camp, as testified by some defectors. The North Korean authorities are becoming stricter with surveillance and control due to advancements in communication technologies, which have given residents greater access to external information. External information is mostly brought into North Korea by students and laborers who are abroad, as well as by merchants, and is particularly popular among young people. To crack down on external information, a task force named the '*109 Unified Command*' was created, which conducts house searches and random street inspections. Since 2017, South Korean dramas and movies have gained widespread distribution in North Korea, prompting the authorities to crack down not only on the dissemination of external information, but also on fashion and lifestyle trends that may be influenced by it. Testimonies suggest that while in the past, small bribes were sufficient to avoid prosecution for possessing external information, now larger bribes are required, and instances of public criticism or labor

punishments have increased. The Law on Rejecting Reactionary Ideology and Culture enacted in 2020 stipulates that those accessing, possessing, or distributing external information could face up to ten years of *Rodong Kyohwa* (reform through labor), while those accessing, possessing or distributing South Korean dramas, movies, and music videos could face even harsher punishments.

North Korean people, whether they are students, laborers, farmers, soldiers, or housewives, are forcibly mobilized to attend state-controlled assemblies or public events several times a year. They are not allowed to assemble freely otherwise. These events include commemorations such as the anniversary of Kim Il Sung's death, the founding day of the North Korean regime, and the Workers' Party anniversary, as well as rallies. Attendance is mandatory, as failure to participate can lead to criticism and accusations of disloyalty to the party. Students, in particular, are often required to participate in mass gymnastics and endure extensive practice hours, with non-participation resulting in penalty fees. Additionally, residents are compelled to join organizations such as the Children's League, General Federation of Trade Unions, and Socialist Women's League starting from their second year of elementary school. It is reported that joining and leaving these organizations is automatic, and withdrawal based on individual will is not allowed. Members of these organizations are required to contribute supplies and effort and participate in lectures and life review sessions, and failure to do so can result in criticism. However, some individuals reportedly opt out of these

sessions by paying a certain amount of money.

Representatives who can be elected by popular vote in North Korea are members of the Supreme People's Assembly, as well as members of city, county, and provincial people's assemblies. Participation in elections is mandatory and failure to do so, or casting a dissenting vote, is believed to result in punishment. Therefore, voting is viewed as an obligation, not a right. Those interviewed stated that they typically vote in favor of the candidate by placing the ballot paper into the box without any marking. They also reported that they do not know how to vote against a candidate, nor have they ever heard of anyone doing so. The right to run for office is limited as well. Typically, candidates for people's assembly member positions are nominated from individuals who meet the Party Committee's criteria for *Songbun* (background) and party membership, and only one candidate appears on each ballot. Anyone who becomes a candidate is practically guaranteed to be elected.

North Korea has a social classification system called *Songbun* (background) or *Todae* (family background), which determines a person's social status and access to opportunities such as higher education, jobs, and membership in the Workers' Party. It appears that a person's place of residence, whether in Pyongyang or a province, or in an urban or rural area, is determined based on their *Songbun*. Furthermore, discrimination based on *Songbun* is evident even between central and surrounding districts within Pyongyang. *Songbun* also affects college admissions, job placements, promotions, and opportunities for occupational



or job changes. In some cases, people resort to bribery or connections to change their jobs.

Discrimination is prevalent among families of defectors, South Korean prisoners of war, separated families, returnees from Japan, and people with relatives in China. While the extent of discrimination varies, they are often subject to surveillance in their daily lives, and face discrimination in every aspect of social life such as difficulty in joining the party, getting into college, or being allowed to participate in party work.

## 2. Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights

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### SUMMARY

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It has been found that people are not guaranteed the economic, social and cultural rights essential for a dignified life.

In terms of the right to food, people in North Korea are experiencing difficulties in securing adequate food, with discriminatory access to food based on social class and economic power. In addition, inequalities and insufficiencies in food distribution between Pyongyang and the provinces, prioritized rations to the elite class, and differences in ration amounts by state-run companies are exacerbating the food shortage situation for North Korean residents.

As for the right to health, essential vaccinations for children, including infants, are provided free of charge. However, there were conflicting testimonies regarding the management of highly infectious diseases such as tuberculosis by the authorities, with some indicating proper management while others citing a lack thereof. The free healthcare system, which forms the basis of the medical system in North Korea, is not being properly operated. People often have to bear the cost of medical services, and access

to healthcare services is discriminatory based on *Songbun*. As it is difficult for ordinary residents to access public medical services, unauthorized private medical practices have become widespread, posing a threat to the healthy lives of North Korean residents.

In North Korea, residents are forcibly placed in jobs, and veterans and graduates are collectively assigned to industries that are generally avoided. Due to inconsistent and often unpaid wages, many workers only attend work formally and engage in personal economic activities to make ends meet. There were testimonies that overseas dispatched workers suffer from excessive work hours ranging from 10 to 17 hours per day depending on the type of business. In terms of compensation, workers often take home very little after deduction of the state-planned quota and operating expenses, with some testifying that 80% of their income went toward the planned quota. Workers deployed abroad are subjected to the same surveillance and control as those within North Korea.

Despite the adoption of a 12-year free compulsory education system in North Korea, people are not receiving adequate education. The burden of paying for school operating expenses, as well as all necessary learning costs, places a significant financial strain on parents. Additionally, discrimination based on social class in college admissions, as well as a serious disparity of educational opportunities due to economic and regional differences, create further obstacles for students. The poor treatment of teachers also negatively impacts the quality of the educational environment.

North Korea's social security system falls short of its goal to protect vulnerable groups. Elderly pensions and working disability pensions are too meager to provide practical assistance, and

despite the relevant policies, survivor's pensions and subsidies often go unpaid, leaving socially disadvantaged groups largely unprotected.

It appears that the food ration is distributed in a discriminatory way based on different ratings, such as gender, age, occupation, and labor intensity. Even during the economic crisis of the 1990s when the distribution system did not function properly, privileged groups such as the party, military, the Ministry of State Security, and the Ministry of Social Security still received rations. Following the implementation of the Corporate Responsibility Management System in 2012, the ration distribution system has been divided into '*state ration*' and '*state-run company ration*.' *State ration* is distributed to children, social security beneficiaries, security apparatus, and those living in certain areas including Pyongyang. Distribution of rations to security apparatus and Pyongyang residents appears to be well-maintained, whereas rations for teachers and medical professionals, who were known as priority recipients, varied depending on the region and hospital. In the case of *state-run company ration*, there is significant disparity in the amount of rations depending on the circumstances of the companies. *State-run companies* earning foreign currency provided decent rations, but many other *state-run companies* provided only a very small amount that did not meet the regulations or no ration at all. Due to the breakdown

of the food ration system, most residents engage in personal economic activities such as cultivating small plots of land, raising livestock, trading in markets, and smuggling to supplement their scarce food supply.

Various testimonies suggest that the operation of North Korean-Chinese joint ventures has become difficult due to sanctions, and that mining operations have also been halted due to fuel and electricity shortages. Furthermore, the rising fuel prices have negatively affected the economy. The situation is particularly dire for those in border areas who rely on small-scale cross-border smuggling with China.

North Korea claims that the right to health is guaranteed through a system of preventive medicine and free medical care. Children and infants receive free essential vaccinations in schools or clinics. During outbreaks of infectious diseases such as typhoid, measures were reportedly taken to prevent the spread of disease through hygiene promotion campaigns and vaccination campaigns. There were conflicting testimonies regarding the management of the highly infectious tuberculosis outbreak by the authorities, with some indicating proper management while others citing a lack thereof. Since 2020, North Korea has enacted and amended the Law on Emergency Anti-epidemic Work to prevent the spread of COVID-19, taking measures such as closing borders and quarantining incoming travelers for 45 days. There were also testimonies that those who broke quarantine measures faced *Rodong Kyohwa* (reform through labor) punishment. North Korea claims to be protecting the residents' health through the

*'household doctor system.'* However, testimonies indicate that the duties of *household doctors* are primarily confined to hygiene campaigns and vaccinations, and that people have never met with them. They even prioritize private economic activities instead of official duties.

While North Korea claims to have a free medical care system, testimonies suggest that it is not functioning properly. While medical examination, treatment, and hospitalization seem to be free of charge, multiple testimonies suggest that patients have to pay medical staff in cash or in kind. Numerous testimonies also indicate that patients are responsible for paying for the costs of medicine, expendable supplies, and fuel to operate medical appliances. In addition, patients must purchase their own medicine. North Korea's medical system suffers from a lack of adequate equipment and facilities, and it seems that not everyone has equal access to medical supplies or professional medical services. It appears that access to specialized hospitals and advanced medical services is provided in a discriminatory manner based on family background and economic status. According to testimonies, hospitals in North Korea have specific departments catering to high-ranking cadres and their families, who receive expensive medicines and hospitalization free of charge. Recent testimonies indicate that personal connections and bribery have become important factors causing discrimination in medical services, allowing anyone with money to utilize special hospitals in Pyongyang. According to testimonies, illegal private medical practices are also being carried out openly, but there is

no active crackdown by the authorities. Additionally, it has been found that narcotics are being used indiscriminately in place of proper medication.

Regarding drinking water, it is reported that tap water is generally available, but the supply is limited due to power shortages, and that those who do not have access to tap water rely on public street pumps, rivers, or wells for drinking water. Some have even reported that the number of people buying bottled water has increased recently due to unclean tap water.

In North Korea, individuals are forcibly assigned jobs regardless of their personal preferences. The testimonies consistently indicate that family background is the most significant factor in determining job assignment. Consequently, people use personal connections or bribes to transfer or avoid being placed in undesirable jobs, indicating that economic power is increasingly important for job placement. There were reports of veterans being collectively assigned to work in farms and coal mines to alleviate the shortage of labor in industries that are avoided. Connections and bribes are also necessary to avoid being placed in such assignments. North Korea also punishes the unemployed or those who are absent from work. While inspections are generally conducted by social security officers responsible for residential areas and workplaces, there are also '*unified command*' (task force) dedicated to cracking down on unemployed individuals. Those who are arrested for being jobless or absent from work are subject to *Rodong Kyoyang* (law education penalty). However, many are able to avoid arrest

and punishment through personal connections or bribes. In addition, due to the failure of state-run companies to fully pay wages, some workers turned to private economic activities for their livelihood, working as *8.3 workers* who paid a set fee each month to their employer to avoid going to work. If classified as *8.3 workers*, they are excluded from inspection, and it appears that a significant number of workers skip work by paying this fee. The working environment of North Korean workers was found to be generally poor, although it varies by industry. Wages are very low, except in *state-run companies* that earn foreign currency. After various charges are deducted, there is little left for workers to take home. In practice, legal provisions that guarantee working hours, rest hours, and leave are often not enforced. Additionally, regulations pertaining to safety training and the provision of safety equipment at workplaces are frequently overlooked.

Shock brigades, known as *Dolgyeokdae*, work under extremely difficult conditions. They are organized for large-scale construction projects and recruited either forcibly through group assignments or temporary transfers, or voluntarily for party membership or college admission. *Dolgyeokdae* workers are mostly unpaid and suffer from high-intensity labor in harsh conditions. According to testimonies, working hours frequently extended beyond 10 hours per day, and malnutrition was widespread among workers. As a consequence, desertion from work was prevalent. Such poor treatment resulted in a decrease in the number of volunteers, and more positions had to be filled with forcibly mobilized individuals. With the reluctance to join



*Dolgyeokdae* increasing, some resorted to paying others to enlist on their behalf.

North Korean workers are deployed abroad such as China and Russia to earn foreign currency in construction, service, or manufacturing industries. Unlike *Dolgyeokdae*, those who volunteered to work abroad mostly pursue economic purposes; they go through a selection process that includes pre-screening based on family background, family relations, and reputation, as well as multiple rounds of interviews, with many resorting to bribery to secure their positions. However, it has been found that working conditions are different from what workers were initially led to expect. While wages may vary among different *state-run companies*, workers are in general partially paid and not on a consistent monthly basis. Unpaid wages are reportedly paid in a lump sum when workers return to North Korea after completing their deployment. In addition to their work duties, overseas workers are also required to pay state-planned quotas, party membership fees, and business operating expenses. Workers deployed overseas may also have to pay for embassy operating expenses, depending on the country they are sent to. As a result, their actual take-home pay is significantly reduced, with some reporting that up to 80% of their wages went toward state-planned quota. Furthermore, workers often have to work excessively long hours without rest days, with some working between 10 to 17 hours a day. Their living conditions are also poor, residing in containers on construction sites. Furthermore, they are subjected to the same strict surveillance and control

measures as they would be in North Korea, with resident security officers monitoring their every move and receiving detailed reports from informants among the workers. It is reported that workers are strictly prohibited from accessing external information, and the use of mobile phones is prohibited in principle. Even in cases where cell phones are allowed, smartphones are mostly prohibited, and state security officers regularly inspect personal belongings to find them. In most cases, those caught with a smartphone had to pay a fine to cover it up, but there were also cases where individuals were repatriated to North Korea for watching South Korean videos. Additionally, *life review sessions* are held on a weekly basis, but they are often perceived as a mere formality for non-party members who are simply instructed to return to work.

Although North Korea guarantees universal 12-year compulsory education in the Socialist Constitution and the General Education Law, it has been found that various education expenses are being passed onto students. Textbook fees are often required, and there have been numerous instances where textbooks were not sufficiently provided to all students. Students had to pass them down to the next grade at the end of the school year. Consistent testimonies indicate that individuals are required to pay for school operating expenses and children's assignments known as '*kkoma kwaje*.' The cost of running schools has increased as school facilities modernization has progressed. The school's demand for money or goods was often enforced by teachers, and students who could not afford the costs often faced criticism or

embarrassment in front of their peers. As a result, it has been reported that many financially challenged students choose to drop out of school. Furthermore, significant disparities have been found in the educational environment between urban and rural areas in North Korea. Individuals also face discrimination in college admissions based on their background, and access to educational opportunities is often influenced by economic power. These factors suggest the existence of discrimination based on background, region, and economic power. Along with a poor educational environment, it appears that many schools lack basic facilities such as infirmaries, libraries, and proper hygiene facilities, despite efforts to modernize school facilities. In addition, inadequate economic compensation for teachers has led them to rely on support from well-off parents or mobilize students to work in their private gardens to make ends meet. As a result, students are deprived of proper educational conditions and opportunities. Furthermore, schools prioritize political and ideological education over general education, and include mandatory military training involving live-fire exercises in the curriculum, which compels students to participate.

North Korea's social security system includes pension programs such as elderly pensions, disability pensions, and survivors' pensions to guarantee basic livelihoods for those in need, and subsidy programs that function like social insurance. Elderly pensions are provided to those who have completed a certain number of years of continuous service and have reached a certain age. However, it is found that the level of pension

payment is not enough to be practically helpful for a living. Disability pensions are paid to those who have lost their ability to work for six months or longer due to industrial accidents or other reasons. However, there have been cases where individuals bribed their way into becoming eligible for social security benefits, but even then, pension was not provided, or the amount paid out was very small. There have been testimonies indicating that survivors' pensions, which are meant to compensate the surviving family members of workers who died on the job, have not been effectively paid out. Also, in many cases, various subsidies were not paid out despite being legally provided for. North Korea is propagandizing the construction of new elderly care facilities and support for the elderly, and there have been testimonies collected from people who claim to have witnessed nursing homes and other elderly care facilities in North Korea. However, cases were collected where elderly individuals were admitted to such facilities even if they had family members who could provide support. In some instances, children used their connections or bribes to have their parents admitted to these facilities, in order to avoid the burden of caring for them.

### 3. Vulnerable Groups

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#### SUMMARY

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When reviewing the human rights situation of vulnerable groups in North Korea, it appears that the rights of women, children, and persons with disabilities are not being adequately protected. North Korean society is predominantly patriarchal, which means that women are not guaranteed their rights and they are at risk of different types of violence at home, school, military, and detention centers. Moreover, female defectors are subjected to serious human rights violations, including human trafficking, while fleeing North Korea. Women who are trafficked are at risk of sexual violence, and those who are arrested and forcefully returned to North Korea by Chinese authorities suffer from various types of human rights abuses like naked body searches, vaginal inspections, sexual violence, and forced abortions in detention centers.

Although children are entitled to protection and care from the state and society, those in North Korea are not guaranteed their rights properly. North Korean children can sometimes be sentenced to death and publicly executed. Children under the age of 17 can be arrested and detained without a warrant for

watching South Korean videos or for other reasons, and they can be subjected to the same treatment as adults. North Korean children are also exposed to various forms of violence at home, in schools, or in shelters, and it has been found that the authorities take no proper measures to protect child victims. Additionally, North Korean students are mobilized by schools to participate in various labor activities, in addition to the *agricultural support activities* (production labor) that are required as part of the school curriculum. Students are also forcibly mobilized to various labor sites by institutions or organizations other than schools.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) declares that all human beings are born equal. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities stipulates that discrimination based on disability should be prohibited. However, persons with disabilities are negatively perceived in North Korea, as if their existence alone is a disgrace. Such perception leads to discrimination against persons with disabilities. It was also found that North Korean authorities restricted people with disabilities from changing their places of residence. Though the authorities have recently provided some support for the treatment and rehabilitation of people with disabilities, it appears to be insufficient.

In North Korea, there is a general perception that men are prioritized over women, and it appears that discrimination against women still exists in various aspects of life, including home, social, and educational settings. Violence against women is a major issue in North Korea. Many testimonies indicate that there is a lack of awareness about the need to report domestic

violence in North Korea, and even when reports are made, the authorities often do not intervene, as domestic violence is often perceived as a personal issue. Sexual harassment and sexual violence are also reported to occur in various settings, such as homes, schools, military, detention facilities, and *Dolgyeokdae* (shock brigades). However, most victims choose not to report sexual violence due to fear of humiliation and victimization if their case becomes public. Even when they decide to report, victims do not actively do so due to the likelihood of being blamed for the circumstances.

As the North Korean authorities provide free healthcare in principle, they claim that giving birth to a child costs nothing, and they have made efforts to promote the rights to health of pregnant women. However, it appears that there is insufficient medical support such as prenatal checkups and other support to assist with the delivery of a child, resulting in many children being born at home. Testimonies have indicated that although laws aim to protect motherhood, such as providing maternal leave before and after childbirth and reduced working hours for mothers with multiple children, in reality, people do not benefit from prenatal or postnatal leave or childbirth benefits.

It has been found that a significant number of women who fled North Korea primarily due to economic hardships are facing human rights violations. Many of them have fallen prey to human trafficking by brokers, and some have defected without even realizing they were being trafficked. Testimonies show that some women were aware they were being trafficked but felt they had

no other option as it was the only means to escape North Korea. Women who were trafficked were also at risk of sexual violence from their brokers, and many were forced into marriages with Chinese men or sold to the sex industry. In some instances, those who were arrested in China and forcibly repatriated to North Korea were subjected to naked body searches and vaginal inspections, as well as sexual violence and forced abortions during their transfer. It appears that even if they were identified as victims of human trafficking, they could not receive protective measures or avoid punishment as victims. Testimonies reveal that individuals who were forcibly repatriated were often punished, including being sentenced to *Rodong kwohwa* (reform through labor) for illegal border crossing, and were subjected to surveillance by the authorities even after being released.

Children's physical and mental immaturity requires special protection from violence and labor. However, it appears that the rights of children in North Korea are not being adequately protected. Testimonies have revealed that children below 18 years of age who were sentenced to death for committing a crime were publicly executed. Testimonies have also been collected, indicating that the due process of law was not observed during the arrest and detention of children, and that they were held without being segregated from adult detainees and subjected to the same treatment as them.

Ongoing testimonies of violence against children have shown that the authorities do not intervene or provide support due to the belief that domestic violence is a form of discipline.



There have been numerous cases of physical assault or abuse by teachers in educational institutions or children protection facilities. According to the testimonies, students were punished for failing to meet *kkoma kwaje* (children's assignments) or complete tasks when mobilized for field labor. Juvenile offenders are frequently subjected to verbal abuse, assault, and harsh treatment by handling officers, and minors are at risk of being trafficked while attempting to escape from North Korea.

It also appears that North Korean students, from elementary schools to senior middle schools, are frequently required to participate in after-school labor. During the spring and fall farming seasons, they attend classes in the morning and are then mobilized to nearby farms for agricultural work. As they advance to the next grades, they are mobilized more often and must endure longer hours and more intense labor. Senior middle schools even have '*agricultural support activities*' incorporated into their curriculum. Although the duration and frequency of mobilization vary by school, it appears that students are sent to the homes of farm members, where they stay for weeks and are mobilized for agricultural work for more than eight hours a day. There have been cases where principals and teachers openly mobilized students to their *bueupji* (small fields around individual houses) for their own personal interests, and there have also been cases where children under the age of 16 were assigned to *Dolgyeokdae* (shock brigades). However, it has been found that there are no crackdowns or protective measures from North Korean authorities regarding child labor.

North Korea claims to be improving its children protection facilities, such as *yugawon* (orphans' nurseries) and *aeugwon* (orphans' kindergartens) for children without guardians. They also claim that students leaving these facilities can get a job of their choice. While there have been some partial improvements in the environment of these facilities, including the construction of new orphanages and modernization of existing facilities, testimonies show that many graduates are forcibly placed into *Dolgyeokdae* (shock brigades) or factories instead of going to college or getting job placements of their choice. In addition, homeless children called *kkotjebi* are subject to crackdowns by an organization called '*kkotjebi sangmu*' and are sent to detention facilities. However, due to the poor conditions and forced labor in these detention centers, they often end up running away from these facilities.

It appears that the perception of persons with disabilities remains low in North Korea. According to testimonies collected, they are often avoided and denied their right to freedom of movement and the right to liberty. The North Korean authorities restrict their ability to get married or have children and only allow them to live in isolated communities such as *Dwarf Village*. There were reports that persons with disabilities were forced to leave Pyongyang so that they could not live there. However, there have been some testimonies showing that the authorities have recently permitted individuals with disabilities to reside in the city.

It appears that the rights of persons with disabilities to

facilities, treatment, education, and work are not fully guaranteed as claimed by the North Korean authorities. It has been reported that facilities for people with disabilities are insufficient. Even in apartments where visually impaired people live together, there is a lack of proper passages customized for people with disabilities. Additionally, although there are assistive device factories to assist with the treatment and rehabilitation of persons with disabilities, it is reported that the authorities do not supply medical equipment free of charge. Rather, people have to pay for orthotic devices. While there are schools for the deaf and blind that provide special education for people with disabilities, there is no evidence that special classes or education are available for people with disabilities in regular schools. Regarding employment, it appears that separate workplaces are established for people with disabilities to perform light labor. However, similar to regular workers, disabled workers are frequently unpaid. On the other hand, there have been cases of people with disabilities being employed in regular state-run companies. It appears that *honorary soldiers* receive preferential support and social benefits from the authorities compared to other disabled individuals. According to testimonies, *honorary soldiers* are classified into a special class, class 1, class 2, or class 3, with those in the special class receiving sufficient food, daily necessities, and other resources. Reportedly, benefits received by *honorary soldiers* who are not in the special class are not very helpful.

## 4. Special Issues

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### SUMMARY

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It has been found that political prison camp inmates, Korean War POWs, abductees, and separated families are particularly vulnerable to severe human rights violations. Based on the investigation conducted by the Center for North Korean Human Rights Records, a total of eleven political prison camps have been identified, of which five are reported to be currently operational. While the treatment of inmates may vary among facilities, inmates are generally exposed to cruel treatment. Korean War POWs, abductees, and separated families are subjected to surveillance and discrimination. However, given that few North Korean escapees have recently experienced or witnessed life in a political prison camp, it is difficult to obtain a detailed account of the current status of the camps and how inmates are treated. As for Korean War POWs and abductees, obtaining a detailed understanding of the extent of human rights abuses has also been challenging due to the limited number of testimonies available.

It is known that there are specialized facilities in North Korea designed for the confinement of political prisoners. Based on the investigation conducted by the Center for North Korean Human Rights Records, a total of eleven political prison camps have been identified, of which five are reported to be currently operational. Political prison camps are typically located in remote, mountainous regions that are difficult for ordinary citizens to access, which makes it extremely challenging for inmates to escape. Moreover, the size of these camps can be quite large, with some spanning an area equivalent to several '*ri*'s and '*gu*'s combined. The reasons for confinement in these camps are varied. These include having a poor *Songbun* (background), participating in activities perceived as insulting the authority of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il (such as verbal treason), participating in espionage, practicing religion, being involved in power struggles or embezzlement within North Korean institutions, having family members who have escaped to South Korea, attempting to flee to South Korea, engaging in human trafficking, communicating with South Korean residents over the phone, and other issues related to South Korea. In most cases, family members of political prisoners are also subjected to confinement. It has been found that the arrest and detention of individuals in political prison camps are carried out without following due process of law. When an individual is arrested by the state security institute for an alleged political crime and subsequently goes missing, it is commonly assumed that they have been sent to a political prison camp, and the family members are often informed of this by institutional

officers.

While the treatment of inmates may vary depending on the facility, it has been found that political prison camps execute prisoners and subject them to forced labor. According to testimonies, those who attempted to escape from political prison camps but were caught were executed. Some executions were conducted in the presence of mobilized camp inmates, while others were carried out in secret. Inmates are typically assigned to physically demanding work in coal mining. Only those who are pardoned and released are given relatively easier jobs, such as leading work groups or performing tasks that do not involve working in the underground mine, such as blasting. According to testimonies, inmates usually lived in communal housing units known as *harmonica blocks*, which were cramped and in a state of severe disrepair, with extremely poor living conditions. While families were reportedly allowed to live together in political prison camps, there have been testimonies indicating that inmates were not allowed to form relationships or get married. However, there has been a report indicating that life inside the political prison camps was not significantly different from the lives of regular North Korean residents, implying that the level of control and treatment may have varied from camp to camp. There were testimonies of discrimination in healthcare and education between inmates and officers and their families in political prison camps. Some testimonies indicated a severe shortage of medicines available to inmates. Additionally, while education was provided, there were separate schools for the

children of inmates and the children of officers with different curriculums.

South Korean prisoners of war, civilian abductees, and those who have been separated from their families due to political, economic, or other reasons should be protected by the state and safeguarded against discrimination based on their background and other reasons. Although there are limited testimonies on South Korean prisoners of war, it appears that they are under constant surveillance and face discrimination. Many of these prisoners were forced to work in coal mines or farms, and there have been testimonies of several dozen of them living in Musan County in North Hamgyong Province and Tanchon City in South Hamgyong Province. North Korean authorities classify South Korean prisoners of war as Category 43 and manage them separately, subjecting not only the POWs themselves but also their immediate family members to surveillance. Testimonies indicate that children of POWs face discrimination in practically all aspects of life, including college admission, job placement and promotion, party membership, and military service. According to testimonies, the prisoners of war were constantly monitored and had to report separately to state security officers even when moving with permission. Most POW children were unable to pursue higher education, join the military or become party members and were often assigned to work in coal mines or farms as a group.

North Korean authorities have repeatedly denied the existence of abductees. However, there have been testimonies individuals

who were abducted as part of the North Korean Voluntary Army experienced discrimination and surveillance. There have been testimonies indicating that during the Korean War, abducted civilians lived in a variety of locations, but many were assigned to work in coal mines in groups. These abductees and their families were under constant surveillance through the *Inminban* system. Due to the limited number of available testimonies, it is challenging to gain a comprehensive understanding of the human rights violations committed against abductees.

The issue of separated families involves two groups: families of those who fled to South Korea and families of defectors to North Korea. However, these two groups were not subjected to the same kind of discrimination, and the degree of discrimination also varied. Some testimonies indicated that individuals whose families had defected to South Korea were barred from becoming party workers or legal workers, while others stated they could become civil servants. Another testimony indicated that the person was unable to gain admission to a military officer school or a state security college because of a family member or relative's defection to South Korea. Defectors to North Korea and their families also faced difficulties finding employment in the party job, military, or certain universities. Some testified that, after meeting their families from South Korea through South-North family reunion events, their children were subjected to surveillance and discrimination.





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### SUMMARY

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