Legal framework

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), or North Korea, is the world's most closed, isolated, and repressive state, with one of the worst records for human rights. It is ruled by the only dictatorship in the world which is both a dynasty and portrays itself as a deity.

There is no freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief in North Korea, and any citizen who expresses an opinion or a belief which differs from the regime's propaganda faces severe punishment.

Commission of Inquiry

The gravity and extent of human rights abuses being perpetrated by the North Korean regime were exposed in the ground-breaking United Nations Commission of Inquiry (COI) report on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) published in February 2014. It concluded that the "gravity, scale, and nature of the violations of human rights in North Korea reveal a State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world" and recommended that the UN Security Council refer the situation in the country to the International Criminal Court (ICC).

The COI report detailed widespread crimes against humanity and noted that "there is an almost complete denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion." It concluded that the regime "considers the spread of Christianity a particularly severe threat" and as a result, "Christians are prohibited from practising their religion and are persecuted." Severe punishments are inflicted on people "caught practising Christianity." Documented incidents include Christians being hung on a cross over a fire, crushed under a steamroller, herded off bridges and trampled underfoot.

In July 2021, a report by the UK's All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on North Korea found that the situation of human rights in the country has not improved since the COI report and that the atrocities "amount to crimes against humanity." It states that "there are reasons to believe that some of the atrocities reach the threshold of genocide, particularly in relation to three groups: Christians; half-Chinese children; and the 'hostile' group."

In 2018 CSW's North Korea report, *Movies, Markets and Mass Surveillance*, found that although the North Korean regime has not shown any signs of change in regard to human rights, increased flows of information into the country via radio broadcasts, DVDs, USB sticks and other means, as well as economic changes in the country, have resulted in a greater awareness among North Korean people about the outside world. The COI is also believed to have had some impact within the country, resulting in anecdotal reports of a reduction in the most severe violations. That does not mean that there is any meaningful improvement in human rights in North Korea, but it does mean that international pressure and information flows need to be maintained and increased.

Prison camps

According to The Korea Institute for National Unification, a South Korean government agency, an estimated 80,000 to 120,000 people are detained in prison camps, where they endure dire living conditions and brutal torture. Many of these are Christians.

Defectors who are forcibly returned to North Korea are charged with 'treachery against the nation', sent to prison camps and face abuse, violence and even execution. Despite this, the Chinese government has retained its policy of repatriating all North Korean defectors.

COVID-19

The full impact of the coronavirus on North Korea remains unknown but should not be underestimated. Claims by the ruling regime that there are no cases in the country seem unlikely.

North Korea has imposed strict anti-virus measures, including border closures and domestic travel curbs since the pandemic began early 2020. Reuters reported in January 2022 that some humanitarian aid was starting to enter the country despite shipments of key supplies, including food, remaining blocked.

The pandemic has made it even more difficult for North Koreans to flee their country, with borders officially closed and increased security making it harder to cross illegally. According to the Ministry of Unification in South Korea, only 12 North Koreans reached Seoul between April and June 2021, compared to 320 during the same period in 2020.

Recommendations

To the government of North Korea:

- Release all persons currently detained in prison camps immediately and unconditionally.
- Stop charging defectors from the nation with 'treachery' or requesting that defectors into China be returned to North Korea.
- End the violent, targeted persecution of Christians across the nation.
- Implement the recommendations of the COI report in their entirety.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Ensure that the human rights situation in North Korea continues to be discussed annually at the UN, including at the UN General Assembly and UN Human Rights Council, and separately from the question of nuclear non-proliferation.
- Support the implementation of all the recommendations of the UN COI report published in February 2014 and provide technical assistance where possible to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) field office in Seoul.
- Call on the UN Security Council to resume regular meetings on the situation of human rights in North Korea as part of its official agenda, and to ensure such meetings focus on accountability.
- Urge the UN Security Council to refer North Korea to the International Criminal Court, in line with the Commission of Inquiry's recommendations.
- Urge all governments engaging with North Korea to raise human rights concerns in bilateral dialogues.
- Make strategic use of the interactive dialogues with the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in North Korea and the High Commissioner for Human Rights at the UN Human Rights Council to raise human rights concerns in the country.
- Urge all relevant UN mechanisms, including the Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include the right to freedom of religion or belief in their reporting on North Korea, addressing the vulnerabilities and violations faced by religion or belief communities.

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