

Introduction

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, and any North Korean who expresses an opinion or a belief which differs from the regime's propaganda faces severe punishment. According to The Korea Institute for National Unification, a South Korean government agency, it is estimated that between 80,000 and 120,000 people are detained in prison camps,¹ 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.

There has been increased engagement between the US and North Korea, and Kim Jong-Un has held several meetings with his South Korean counterpart Moon Jae-In, but disappointingly human rights concerns have not featured on the agenda of the talks. For engagement with North Korea to be meaningful, countries must raise their concerns about the human rights violations happening under Kim Jong-Un's leadership.

Commission of Inquiry

The gravity and extent of human rights abuses were exposed in the ground-breaking United Nations Commission of Inquiry (COI) report on human rights in North Korea, published in February 2014 after a year-long investigation.² The Commission 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'.

In addition to its total denial of respect for a wide range of other human rights, freedom of religion or belief in North Korea is non-existent, and the country is cited as one of the worst in the world for the persecution of Christians. With the exception of four official state-controlled churches in Pyongyang, Christians face the risk of detention in the prison camps, severe torture and, in some cases, execution for practising their religious beliefs. North Koreans suspected of having contact with South Korean or

other foreign missionaries in China, and those caught in possession of a Bible, have been known to be executed.

The COI report details 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.

The COI report calls for accountability for the widespread and grave violations of human rights, states that these violations amount to crimes against humanity, and calls for a referral to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for prosecution for these crimes.

Since the publication of the COI report, the human rights situation in North Korea has risen up the UN's agenda. The Human Rights Council and General Assembly passed resolutions in 2014 endorsing the report and its recommendations. In December 2014, the Security Council considered for the first time the human rights situation separately from the nuclear non-proliferation question, and human rights in North Korea are now discussed in this way every year.

However, with the exception of the establishment of the UN Field Office in Seoul, few of the COI's recommendations have been implemented; further work must be done to see the recommendations implemented. Action to end the crimes against humanity in North Korea is long overdue.

In 2018 CSW published a new report,³ which found that although the 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 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 improvement in human rights in North Korea, but it does mean that international pressure and information flows need to be maintained and increased.

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-44069749>

² Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/coidprk/pages/reportofthecommissionofinquirydprk.aspx>

³ CSW, 'Movies, Markets and Mass Surveillance', 31 January 2018
<https://www.csw.org.uk/2018/01/31/report/3832/article.htm>

Recent developments

In April 2020, speculation mounted that Kim Jong-Un may have been gravely ill or may even have died. However, in May 2020 he re-emerged, opening a fertilizer plant outside Pyongyang. It is unclear precisely what happened to Kim in this time, however the episode highlighted once again how difficult it is to get reliable information regarding the situation in North Korea, including in relation to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

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, given South Korea has seen over 11,000 cases and over 250 deaths, despite being praised for its handling of the virus.

Reports indicate that “thousands have been quarantined and categorized as ‘under medical observation.’”⁴ A news site run by North Korean escapees claimed in March 2020 that 180 soldiers had died of the virus, and 3,700 were in quarantine.⁵ Additionally, in May the Chinese president had expressed concern regarding the threat the virus posed to North Korea, and offered assistance.⁶

All indications are that the virus may have reached North Korea. What remains unclear is the extent to which it has affected the country’s elite, its general population, and its infamous prison camps.

The government’s contention that the nation is virus-free was thrown into further doubt by the publication of a report by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) which analysed the impact of COVID-19 on access to food in 47 countries, including North Korea. According to the report, North Korea has suffered substantial food shortages this year,⁷ while the country’s borders remain closed despite claims of no infections.

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 this year – seven in April, two in May, and

three in June. Last year, 320 North Koreans made it to South Korea during the same period.

In addition, the journey for North Koreans fleeing to South Korea via China, which can involve travelling through Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, or Mongolia, will also have become more difficult due to COVID-19-related travel restrictions and lockdowns in many of these nations.

Recommendations

To the government of North Korea

- Ensure that all human rights are upheld and defended by the government, including the right to freedom of religion or belief.
- Release all persons currently detained in prison camps immediately and unconditionally, and to provide for their physical, mental and societal rehabilitation where needed.
- 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 all of the recommendations of the UN COI report published in February 2014.

To the international community:

- Ensure that the human rights situation in North Korea continues to be discussed annually at the UN and separately from the question of nuclear non-proliferation.
- Urge all governments engaging with North Korea to raise human rights concerns.
- Implement all of the recommendations of the UN COI report published in February 2014.
- Ensure that the International Criminal Court investigates allegations of crimes against humanity thoroughly, in particular following up on investigations by the UN Commission of Inquiry and the UN Field Office, and prosecutes for these crimes if sufficient evidence is found.

⁴ The Tablet, ‘North Korea’s deadly culture of secrecy’, 13 May 2020 <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/blogs/1/1441/north-korea-s-deadly-culture-of-secrecy>

⁵ Daily NK, ‘Sources: Almost 200 soldiers have died from COVID-19’, 9 March 2020 <https://www.dailynk.com/english/sources-almost-200-soldiers-have-died-covid-19/>

⁶ BBC, ‘Coronavirus: China offers to help North Korea fight pandemic’ 9 May 2020 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-52597749>

⁷ Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, ‘The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea: Revised humanitarian response Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) May–December 2020’ <http://www.fao.org/3/cb0209en/CB0209EN.pdf>