

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 the DPRK, 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 groundbreaking United Nations (UN) Commission of Inquiry (COI) report on human rights in the DPRK published in February 2014.¹ 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 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, had resulted in a greater awareness among North Korean people about the outside world.² 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. This was not interpreted as meaning that there had been any meaningful improvement in human rights in the DPRK, but it did highlight that international pressure and information flows need to be maintained and increased.

In July 2021 a report by the UK's All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on the DPRK found that the situation of human rights in the country had not improved since the COI report and that the atrocities 'amount to crimes against humanity.'³ It stated 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 September 2024 CSW published a report to mark ten years since the publication of the COI's report.⁴ It found that the Kim regime had made no effort to uphold international human rights standards and had taken no steps to participate as an equal and active member of the international community. The situation of human rights in the country remains unchanged at best and may even have deteriorated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, an increased prioritisation of weapons testing and development, the introduction of new domestic legislation, and the continued forced repatriation of North Korean refugees from neighbouring China.

In April 2026 a report by the Seoul-based NGO Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG) found that executions in the DPRK have increased by 117% since the country closed its borders at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, identifying 46 execution locations and specifying the exact coordinates for 40 of them.⁵ The report also documents a further 144 executions, including 136 events involving at least 358 individuals, finding that 70% of executions were carried out publicly, with crowds often including schoolchildren forced to watch.

The report highlights that executions for religious and 'superstitious folk' activities increased since the Anti-Reactionary and Thought Crime Law, which also criminalises the viewing and dissemination of Western and South Korean content such as music and K-dramas, was enacted in 2020 and revised in 2022/23. During the period covered by the report, capital murder cases – previously the most common crime punished by the death penalty – fell by 44%, while capital punishment for the dissemination of western culture and information (including religious practice) rose by 250%.

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.⁶ Many are Christians.

1 United Nations General Assembly, Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 7 February 2014 <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g14/108/66/pdf/g1410866.pdf>

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

3 All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on North Korea, Inquiry into Human Rights Violations in North Korea 2014-2020/1, July 2021 https://b64a88a3-b1cd-4d11-8279-50610a8df584.filesusr.com/ugd/897883_e29ba84cd0fc4c92a2de7182050f9e11.pdf

4 CSW, 'We Cannot Look Away', 11 September 2024 <https://www.csw.org.uk/2024/09/11/report/6311/article.htm>

5 Transitional Justice Working Group, 'Mapping Human Rights Abuses', April 2026 <https://en.tjwg.org/mapping-project-north-korea/>

6 BBC, 'North Korea: How many political prisoners are detained in prison?', 10 May 2018 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-44069749>

Defectors who are forcibly returned to the DPRK 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. As of March 2026, the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB) had recorded 8,245 cases of forced repatriations from China over more than two decades.⁷ According to the NKDB, ‘the overwhelming majority’ of cases ‘involved group returns’.

On 8 October 2013 South Korean missionary Kim Jeong-wook was arrested by the DPRK’s State Security Department (renamed Ministry of State Security in 2016). Two other missionaries, Kim Kook-kie and Choi Chun-gil, were arrested in October and December 2014 respectively. All three were charged with spying for South Korea and have been kept in incommunicado detention since their arrests.

In January 2024 two teenage boys were sentenced to 16 years of hard labour for watching K-dramas after a public trial in front of their classmates.

General remarks

The DPRK was the first country in the world to close its borders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and remains officially closed to international tourism, with the sole exception of Russian nationals who are currently permitted to visit under limited arrangements. No official announcements or timelines have been released regarding when the country will reopen its borders to travellers of other nationalities. This prolonged isolation only exacerbated food insecurity in the country and reduced virtually all legal and illegal trade in the country.

The DPRK is using hackers to steal cryptocurrency to fund its nuclear projects, most notably through cells like the ‘Lazarus Group’. These groups were reported to have stolen at least 600 million dollars in 2023. In early 2025 the Lazarus Group was responsible for the biggest crypto heist in history, stealing USD 1.5 billion worth of digital tokens, of which they successfully converted at least USD 300 million to unrecoverable funds.

Kim Jong-Un has sold weapons to Putin to be used in the Ukraine War and North Korean labourers are being sent into Russia in increasing numbers to make up for the manpower shortage faced due to increasing levels on conscription in Russia.

Advocacy on the DPRK has been significantly impacted by funding cuts by the US government. Key human rights organisations, independent news sources, advocacy groups and organisations providing humanitarian assistance have been impacted. Some crucial organisations have ceased to exist entirely. This limits the accountability of the North Korean regime, including by limiting independent reporting from within the country and undermining the work of

groups who are trying to support democratic freedoms at the grassroots and governmental levels.

Recommendations

To the government of the DPRK:

- End the violent, targeted persecution of Christians across the nation.
- Implement the recommendations of the COI report in their entirety.
- Release all persons currently detained in prison camps immediately and unconditionally.
- End the practice of charging defectors with ‘treachery’ or requesting that defectors into China and other countries be returned to the DPRK.
- Clarify the fate and whereabouts of repatriated North Korean refugee Kim Cheol-ok and missionaries Kim Jeong-wook, Kim Kook-kie and Choi Chun-gil and allow them to contact their families, lawyers and consular officials.
- Immediately return all abductees, detainees and unrepatriated prisoners of war.
- Uphold, in law and practice, freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) as stipulated in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).
- End the violent, targeted persecution of Christians across the nation.
- Implement the recommendations of the COI report in their entirety.
- Invite the United States (US) Special Envoy for North Korea Human Rights, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the US Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, once confirmed, the European Union (EU) Special Envoy for the promotion of FoRB outside the EU, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in the DPRK, the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, and other UN Special Procedures and investigative mechanisms, to visit the country with unhindered access.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Ensure that the human rights situation in the DPRK continues to be discussed annually at the UN, including at the UN Security Council, UN General Assembly and UN Human Rights Council (HRC), and separately from the question of nuclear non-proliferation.
- Urge the UN Security Council to refer the DPRK to the ICC, in line with the Commission of Inquiry’s recommendations, and consider all unexplored judicial avenues for DPRK accountability, including possible proceedings at the International Court of Justice (ICJ).
- Support the implementation of all the recommendations of the UN COI report published in February 2014,

⁷ Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, The Machinery Behind the Forced Repatriation of North Koreans in China, 5 March 2026 <https://en.nkdb.org/researchreport/?q=YToxOntzOjEyOiJrZXI3b3JkX3R5cGUlO3M6MzoiYWxsIj9&bmode=view&idx=170265783&t=board>

provide technical assistance where possible to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) field office in Seoul and clarify and strengthen the OHCHR's DPRK Accountability Project's mandate by requesting it to collect, consolidate, analyse and preserve information and evidence of the most serious crimes and violations of international law in the DPRK and to support relevant judicial and other proceedings.

- Continue supporting the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK, and ensure the mandate is fully resourced to carry out its work.
- Consider sanctions against policymakers responsible for human rights abuses in the DPRK.
- Urge all relevant UN mechanisms, including the Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include the right to FoRB in their reporting on the DPRK.
- Utilise the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process to raise the concerns and recommendations highlighted in this briefing.
- Provide asylum and sanctuary for North Korean asylum seekers and refugees in conformity with international obligations, particularly by taking active steps to prevent North Korean agents from carrying out abductions, desisting from repatriating North Koreans who have fled, allowing access to asylum procedures, and facilitating resettlement including providing psychosocial support.
- During bilateral meetings with China, raise concerns about the repatriation of North Korean refugees, and call on China to cease doing so in line with its obligations under the Refugee Convention to which it is party.
- Urge the government of the DPRK, at every appropriate opportunity, to make the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above 'To the government of the DPRK'.

CSW everyone
free to believe