

## North Korean human rights abuses

In February 2018, the world was exposed to cheerful images of Kim Jong-un's sister, Kim Yo-jong, smiling and shaking hands with the South Korean president Moon Jae-in, and of North and South Koreans marching together under the same flag, while an all-female squad of cheerleaders dressed in red occasionally upstaged the athletes at the PyeongChang Winter Olympics. Against this charm offensive, a few dozen kilometres north, far from the spotlight, up to 120 000 political prisoners continued experiencing atrocities in inhumane political prison camps, known as *kwanliso*.

### 'Systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations'

A February 2014 [report](#) by the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea, set up by the United Nations' Human Rights Council, has found a broad range of 'systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations' perpetrated by public authorities. In many instances the violations found by the Commission constituted crimes against humanity. State officers have committed repeated human rights violations against the country's intimidated population, despite the formal protection it is afforded in the [Constitution](#).

#### *Detention camps, extrajudicial executions*

The regime operates two different types of camps. One is the *kwanliso*, a [penal labour colony](#) where people found to have engaged in major political crimes are incarcerated, held *incommunicado* and gradually eliminated; in the past, even their close relatives were subjected to the same fate. Currently, some 80 000-120 000 people are believed to be detained in such camps. The other type of camp is ordinary short and long-term prison labour facilities, known as *kyohwaso*. In both systems, people are detained without trial or a court order and are subjected to [cruelty](#) such as forced labour, execution, torture, rape, forced abortion and infanticide. Executions may be carried out secretly, but public (and [cruel](#)) executions are carried out to instil fear in the population, as was the case with Kim Jong-un's uncle, [Jang Song-thaek](#), killed in 2013, followed by a purge of his relatives. The regime admits the existence of the *kyohwaso* while denying the existence of the *kwanliso*, which journalist Anne Applebaum defined as '[Auschwitz under our noses](#)' back in 2004.

#### *Food deprivation, gender and class discrimination, denial of the freedom of religion or thought*

The state has used its monopoly on food to control the population, including by confiscating food and giving priority access to it to groups crucial for maintaining the regime, and by using deliberate starvation as punishment in detention facilities. State-sponsored discrimination is rooted in the [songbun](#) system, classifying people on the basis of birth and state-assigned social class, and barring any freedom of movement and residence. [Systematic discrimination against women](#) is pervasive in all aspects of society, and places them in a position of vulnerability. The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as well as to freedom of opinion, expression, information and association is denied. According to the Open Doors mission, North Korea is the country where [Christians](#) are the most persecuted. North Korea ranks last (180th) in the [2017 Press Freedom Index](#); news is [exclusively channelled](#) through the state media; people are not allowed to open websites outside the national intranet, and are reportedly [executed](#) if discovered watching foreign dramas. All social activities undertaken by citizens of all ages are controlled by the Workers' Party of Korea.

#### *Forced labour*

The regime recruits workers for bilateral contracts with foreign governments, including in Russia and central and eastern European countries. [Tens of thousands](#) of North Korean workers are allegedly employed in Russian logging camps under harsh working conditions, facing punishment if they fail to meet production targets. Workers' wages are kept in accounts controlled by the government, which retains most of the money and makes it a source of foreign currency for the regime (around [US\\$2 billion annually](#)). Hundreds of thousands of North Koreans are estimated to be subjected to forced labour under the domestic [dolgyeokdae](#) system.



### *Defectors*

Around 30 000 North Koreans have fled to the South since the end of the Korean War. However, [defecting](#) across the border is a [dangerous move](#). Those who cross over into China are often [repatriated](#), as Beijing, despite being a state-party to the UN Refugees Convention, labels North Koreans as 'economic migrants'. There are many reports about women, who, while trying to flee to China, fall victim to trafficking and forced into transactional sex and prostitution, and even marriage or concubinage. If they have children, they cannot be registered. Defectors' families often endure retaliatory punishment.

### *Abductions and separated Korean families*

From the 1960s to the 1980s, hundreds of South Koreans, Japanese and other countries' nationals were abducted by North Korean agents, and disappeared. In recent years, Pyongyang has abducted a number of its own nationals and South Koreans from China. Family members abroad and foreign states wishing to exercise their right to provide diplomatic protection have been consistently denied the information necessary to establish the fate and whereabouts of the victims. A 2016 [report](#) from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) calls attention to 60 years of separation between families on the Korean peninsula.

## **The international community's reaction**

The human rights situation in North Korea has been the subject of close international scrutiny for a number of years. However, UN-adopted [sanctions](#) have never focused on human rights issues, but only on Pyongyang's missile and nuclear programme. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, [Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein](#), said sanctions may hamper UN agencies' humanitarian aid to millions of North Koreans in need, echoing concerns voiced by the [Special Rapporteur](#) on the situation of human rights in North Korea – a post established by the UN Commission on Human Rights in 2004. In April 2016, Human Rights Council resolution [31/18](#) requested the UN High Commissioner to designate one or two independent experts to support the work of the Special Rapporteur, and to co-author a [report](#) (published in March 2017) focussing on issues of accountability for human rights violations in North Korea, in particular where such violations amount to crimes against humanity. In December 2017, the UN Security Council held its [fourth annual meeting](#) on human rights abuses in North Korea, despite opposition by China, which tried to block it. Pyongyang denies allegations of human rights violations, and allows [limited cooperation](#) with the international community – in May 2017, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, Catalina Devandas-Aguilar, [visited](#) the country.

Every year since 2005, [the EU and Japan](#) have co-tabled to both the UN Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly a [resolution](#) on the situation of human rights in North Korea. In the [resolution](#) adopted on 19 December 2017, the UN General Assembly asked the Security Council to refer North Korea to the International Criminal Court. This is also the position of the [International Bar Association's War Crimes Committee](#), which calls on the international community to hold culpable parties – including Kim Jong-un – accountable for the crimes committed in the *kwanliso*.

Some of the countries with a stake in the region have adopted specific legislation related to human rights in North Korea. In 2004, the US – which issued its third [Report](#) on Human Rights Abuses and Censorship in North Korea in October 2017 – adopted the [North Korean Human Rights Act](#). In 2006, Japan adopted its Law Concerning [Measures to Address the Abduction Issue](#) and other North Korean Human Rights Violations. Tokyo is especially keen on drawing international attention to the issue of the [abductions](#) of its citizens by Pyongyang (17 cases). South Korea, whose society is quite [divided](#) on the topic, adopted its [North Korean Human Rights Act](#) in March 2016. Seoul raised the issue of [family reunions](#) during the January 2018 inter-Korean meetings that led to North Korea's participation in the Winter Olympics.

## **The European Parliament**

The European Parliament has adopted several [resolutions](#) on North Korea, in which it has regularly highlighted the issue of human rights, even when the nuclear and missile programme was the main focus of attention. In a [resolution](#) of 21 January 2016, MEPs called on VP/HR, Federica Mogherini, to report back to Parliament so as to ensure that the issue stays high on the EU's political agenda. They expressed deep concern about the persistent deterioration of the human rights situation and several other issues, including the death penalty, the forced labour programme abroad and the food situation. Parliament asked Pyongyang's authorities to ensure that humanitarian organisations, independent human rights monitors and the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights have access to the country. In May 2017, Parliament hosted a [hearing](#) dedicated to the issue of the abductions of Japanese nationals by North Korean agents.