

Democratic People's Republic of Korea 2023

Human Rights Report

Executive Summary

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea during the year. The country began to ease added restrictions on cross-border travel that it imposed at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and there were reports that forced repatriations of North Koreans resumed.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings; enforced disappearance; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by government authorities; involuntary or coercive medical or psychological practices; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions, including in political prison camps; arbitrary arrest or detention; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; political prisoners or detainees; transnational repression against individuals in another country; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; punishment of family members for alleged offenses by a relative; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including censorship; serious restrictions on internet freedom; substantial interference with freedom of peaceful assembly and

freedom of association; restrictions of religious freedom; restrictions on freedom of movement and residence within the territory of a state and on the right to leave the country; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections; serious and unreasonable restrictions on political participation; serious government corruption; serious government restrictions on or harassment of domestic and international human rights organizations; extensive gender-based violence, including domestic or intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and workplace violence; instances of coerced abortion or forced sterilization or substantial barriers to sexual and reproductive health services access; trafficking in persons, including forced labor; prohibiting independent trade unions or significant or systematic restrictions on workers' freedom of association; and existence of the worst forms of child labor.

The government did not take credible steps to identify and punish officials who may have committed human rights abuses.

Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person

a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings

There were numerous reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings, during the year.

There was no indication the government acted to investigate such killings or punish officials involved; instead, such killings appeared to be a feature of authorities' system of governance and control.

Escapee, media, nongovernmental organization (NGO), and UN reports noted instances in which the government executed political prisoners, opponents of the government, asylum seekers who were forcibly returned, government officials, children, pregnant women, and others accused of crimes. The law prescribed the death penalty upon conviction for the most "serious" cases of "antistate" or "antination" crimes. These terms were broadly interpreted to include: participation in a coup or plotting to overthrow the state; acts of terrorism for an antistate purpose; treason, which included defection or handing over state secrets; providing information regarding economic, social, and political developments routinely published elsewhere; and "treacherous destruction." The law also allowed capital punishment for less serious crimes such as theft, destruction of military facilities and national assets, distribution of narcotics, counterfeiting, fraud, kidnapping, distribution of pornography, trafficking in persons, and distribution of certain forms of foreign media content.

Escapees, media, NGOs, and UN officials also reported cases of infanticide and forced abortion, particularly involving mothers who were political prisoners, persons with disabilities, victims of rape by government officials or prison guards, or individuals forcibly repatriated from the People's Republic of China (PRC). Defectors, media, NGOs, and UN officials reported

many prisoners died from torture, disease, starvation, exposure to the elements, or a combination of these causes.

Escapee, NGO, and media reports indicated those attempting to leave the country without permission could be killed on the spot or publicly executed, and guards at political prison camps were under orders to shoot to kill those attempting to escape.

The state also subjected private citizens to attendance at public executions. Escapees reported attending public executions on school field trips. Some media reported sources claimed that public executions decreased during COVID-19 but increased significantly with the reopening of the border. In September Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported authorities forced 25,000 residents to gather at the airport in Hyesan to watch the executions of nine persons by firing squad for allegedly operating an illegal beef distribution ring that profited from the slaughter and sale of state-owned cattle.

A March report from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) highlighted allegations that some persons accused of political crimes and held in political prison camps and those forcibly repatriated after escaping abroad were “summarily executed with no information provided to their families except that the person is dead.” In 2022 the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) expressed concern regarding “reported disproportionate measures” such as the 2020 law against

“reactionary ideology,” which contained “punishments including the death penalty for accessing foreign information.” Credible eyewitness reports in late 2022 indicated the government publicly executed two teenagers for watching and distributing South Korean movies in the city of Hyesan, on the China border.

In 2021 the Transitional Justice Working Group, a Seoul-based NGO, reported in the *Mapping Killings under Kim Jong-un* study that escapee interviews and satellite imagery of Hyesan, Ryanggang Province, pointed toward a state strategy to stage public executions at the local airfield and other locations distant from the China border and residential areas, and to monitor the crowds for recording equipment, in order to prevent information on the executions from leaking outside the country. The six-year study also reported numerous interviewee statements that “secret killings continue to take place in North Korea.” During the year, media reported the Hyesan airfield continued to be used for public executions.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government enhanced border closures for entry and exit of individuals. Using commercial satellite imagery and accounts from defectors, Reuters reported in May the DPRK built “hundreds of kilometers of new or upgraded border fences, walls and guard posts” along the China border during the pandemic. In prior years there were reports of shootings by troops along the border, as the DPRK implemented the 2020 “shoot-to-kill” order in a buffer zone near the border

to prevent transmission of COVID-19 into the country. In June 2022, according to media and NGO sources, there were fatal shootings of families in multiple border provinces as they attempted to cross the river into China. The UN secretary-general's 2022 report cited testimony from an escapee who reported being shot at by DPRK border guards when he was observed crossing into China. In 2022 the UN special rapporteur followed up earlier UN statements with an expression of concern regarding the "disproportionate" shoot-to-kill policy that targeted "those attempting to cross international borders without permission."

As of year's end, the government had not accounted for the circumstances that led to the death of Otto Warmbier, who had been held in unjust and unwarranted detention by authorities and died soon after his release in 2017.

b. Disappearance

There were reports of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

The OHCHR's March report identified two broad categories of enforced disappearances by authorities. The first was the "continued practice of arbitrary detention inside the DPRK of its nationals, including following their forcible repatriation from neighboring countries, and subsequent concealment of the fate and whereabouts of the forcibly disappeared

person.” The second was the “enforced disappearance of foreign nationals, mainly between 1950 and the mid-1980s,” including Republic of Korea (ROK) nationals during and after the Korean War, unrepatriated prisoners of war, and abductees from other foreign countries. The ROK officially recognized 516 South Korean civilians abducted by DPRK authorities since the end of the Korean War and not returned. ROK NGOs estimated that 20,000 civilians abducted by the DPRK during the Korean War remained or died in the DPRK.

During the year authorities provided no additional information on the whereabouts of 12 Japanese citizens believed to have been abducted by the DPRK government in the 1970s and 1980s but not yet returned. In addition to these cases, the Japanese government identified 873 other missing persons cases in which it stated the possibility of abduction by the DPRK could not be ruled out.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and Other Related Abuses

The law prohibited torture or inhuman treatment, but there were credible reports these practices continued. Numerous escapee testimonies and NGO, media, and UN reports described the use of torture by authorities in detention facilities. Methods of torture and other abuse reportedly included severe beatings, electric shock, prolonged periods of exposure to

the elements, humiliations such as public nakedness, confinement for up to several weeks in small “punishment cells” in which prisoners were unable to stand upright or lie down, being forced to kneel or sit immobilized for long periods, being hung by the wrists, water torture, and being forced to stand up and sit down or squat repeatedly to the point of collapse.

The law stipulated re-education through labor as an administrative penalty, including for minor offenses. For example, the 2022 *White Paper* by the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), an ROK government-affiliated think tank, detailed punishments of up to five years for unauthorized crossing into the PRC. Labor punishments commonly took place under harsh conditions, often in industries such as construction or logging.

The ROK Ministry of Unification’s *2023 Report on North Korea Human Rights* stated that “torture and inhumane treatment frequently occur during interrogations in North Korea. Testimonies indicate that individuals were forced into confession, and beatings and other forms of torture are used to extract confessions.” Specific abuses against detainees documented in the report included beatings, sexual violence, forced abortion, stress positions, inadequate food, and confinement in insect-infested facilities with inadequate heating and lack of access to medical care and bathroom facilities.

Physical abuse by prison guards was systemic. Citing years of testimony

from escapees, KINU's 2022 *White Paper*, released in May, reported that "violence and cruel treatment" continued to occur in several categories of detention facilities, and that "many detainees suffer from poor nutrition, sanitation, and health care." At the same time, the report noted "testimonies stating that violence and cruel treatment in [a prison camp-style detention facility run by the Ministry of Social Security] have substantially decreased compared to the past," although "there was no improvement in nutrition, sanitation, and health care." A March Korea Future report mapping 206 detention facilities across the DPRK cited victims who described "seeing prison guards raping women detainees, detainees being beaten up and forced to walk around with [their] body bowed at a right angle." Another detainee reported, "We should not move in the cell, and we had to sit with our hands on our sides, and as we were not supposed to look up we had to look down. We were not supposed to talk, so all you hear is people's breathing sound."

Reports from previous years attributed rape to the impunity and unchecked power of prison guards and other officials. The ROK-based NGO Database Center for North Korean Human Rights' 2020 *White Paper on Human Rights* stated that in some prisons, authorities held women in separate units from men and often subjected the women to sexual abuse. The *White Paper* added that women defectors who were forcibly repatriated suffered significantly worse sexual assaults and abuse in prisons and jails than did other women. A 2020 OHCHR report noted that, contrary to international

human rights standards that required women prisoners to be guarded exclusively by women prison staff to prevent sexual violence, women escapees reported they were overseen almost exclusively by male officers. In the same report, survivors alleged widespread sexual abuse at holding centers (*jipkyulso*) and pretrial detention and interrogation centers (*kuryujang*) by secret police or police interrogators, as well as during transfer between facilities. In a March report to the UN Human Rights Council, the UN special rapporteur expressed concern that women in detention were “subjected to torture and ill-treatment, forced labor, and gender-based violence, including sexual violence by State officials.”

There was widespread impunity for acts of torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by members of the security forces in places of detention.

Prison and Detention Center Conditions

Prison conditions were harsh and life threatening due to physical abuse, food shortages, gross overcrowding, and inadequate sanitary conditions and medical care. The government operated several types of prisons, detention centers, and camps, including forced labor camps and camps for political prisoners. Prisoners in all of these facilities could include individuals who had no formal convictions or access to due process, and some individuals may have committed no crime but were detained under the system of guilt by association. By year’s end, the government was known to be operating

six *kwanliso* (“total control-zone” camps where prisoners were not expected to survive): Camps 14, 15, 16, 18, and 25, as well as Choma-bong Restricted Area. External estimates of the nationwide *kwanliso* camp population varied, with some organizations placing the total as low as 80,000 and others as high as 200,000.

Forced labor was pervasive throughout the prison and detention system.

Abusive Physical Conditions: Nutrition, hygiene, and the medical situation inside prison camps and detention facilities were dire, according to KINU’s 2022 *White Paper*. Defectors reported deaths were commonplace as the result of summary executions, torture, lack of adequate medical care, and starvation. The 2014 UN Commission of Inquiry (UNCOI) report cited an “extremely high rate of deaths in custody,” due to starvation and neglect, arduous forced labor, disease, and executions.

Detainees and prisoners consistently reported violence and torture. During the year, Korea Future released a report documenting more than 1,000 instances of torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment and nearly 100 cases of the denial of the right to life. These abuses were committed with impunity. One witness testified that he attempted to report guards for raping women detainees but was beaten by guards shortly after making the report. The same report provided three illustrative cases of the use of torture or abuses inconsistent with international standards, including the use of forced abortions, denial of food, and use of positional torture. ROK

and international press reported the re-education through labor camps held thousands of political prisoners, economic criminals, ordinary criminals, and family members of accused individuals.

The 2022 report by the War Crimes Committee of the International Bar Association (IBA) and the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK) cited testimony that prisoners across multiple categories of detention facilities were forced to work in industries such as construction, agriculture, logging, and mining for up to 16 hours per day, including in extreme heat and cold. Witnesses reported prisoners who failed to meet work quotas were beaten and punished with reduced food rations, which elevated the likelihood of death from malnourishment or overwork. The report also cited testimony from prior years regarding the use of child labor in detention camps, in some cases for up to 12 hours per day in physically demanding industries. Defectors reported political prisoners faced significantly harsher conditions than the general prison population.

Administration: There was no indication that authorities systematically investigated credible allegations of mistreatment. Some survivors reported they were punished severely for attempting to report mistreatment. Citing two former inmates, RFA reported in May that the government had initiated a crackdown on prison officials accepting bribes from prisoners in exchange for preferential treatment, although it was difficult to determine how widespread or systematic this effort was.

Independent Monitoring: The government did not permit monitoring by independent international or nongovernmental observers.

d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention

The law prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention, but the government did not observe these requirements.

Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees

The law limited detention during prosecution and trial, required arrest by warrant, and prohibited forced confessions. According to defector, media, NGO, and UN reports, however, authorities widely disregarded these requirements.

Members of the security forces arrested citizens suspected of committing “political” crimes and transported them to prison camps without trial. According to one ROK NGO, the Ministry of Social Security handled criminal cases directly without the approval of prosecutors. The HRNK reported Ministry of State Security or Ministry of Social Security units interrogated suspects for months on end. No functioning bail system or other alternative for release pending trial existed.

There were no meaningful restrictions on the government’s ability to detain and imprison persons or to hold them incommunicado. Family members and other concerned persons reportedly found it virtually impossible to

obtain information on charges against detained persons or the lengths of their sentences. According to defector reports, families were not notified of arrest, detention, or sentencing. Judicial review or appeals of detentions did not exist. According to an opinion adopted in 2015 by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, family members had no recourse to petition for the release of detainees accused of political crimes, since the state could deem any such advocacy for political prisoners an act of treason against the state and petitioning could result in the detention of family members. No information on detainees' access to a lawyer was available.

Arbitrary Arrest: Arbitrary arrests reportedly occurred. Speaking at a meeting of the UN Security Council in August, Volker Turk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, reported that “thousands of enforced disappearances have been perpetrated by the State over the past 70 years,” and that individuals’ “fear of State surveillance, arrest, interrogation, and detention has increased.” During the session, one escapee told the Security Council that secret police “arrested, tortured, and beat” his aunt for failing to report his family’s escape. According to KINU’s 2022 *White Paper*, arbitrary arrest commonly occurred for political crimes, attempting to depart the country without authorization, engaging in religious activities, and watching or distributing foreign media. During the year, RFA reported on cases in which authorities detained citizens for using propaganda newspapers as scrap paper, selling memory cards containing foreign media in marketplaces, and living together out of wedlock, with punishments often

consisting of several years in a labor camp.

Six South Korean prisoners (Kim Jung-wook, Kim Kuk-gi, Choi Chun-kil, Kim Won-ho, Ko Hyun-chul, and Ham Jin-woo) were believed to remain in detention in the DPRK, some of them incarcerated for as long as 10 years.

e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

The constitution stated courts were independent and had to carry out judicial proceedings in strict accordance with the law; however, the government generally did not respect judicial independence and impartiality. According to KINU's *White Paper* for 2022, there were many reports of bribery and corruption in the investigations or preliminary examination process and in detention facilities, as well as by judges and prosecutors in the trial stage. The report also noted severe procedural shortcomings with trial procedures, including de facto party control over the country's judicial institutions, with the result that any trials were of a purely "perfunctory nature." KINU's *White Paper* for 2022 cited defector testimony that imprisonment in political prison camps was decided exclusively by the Ministry of State Security, regardless of trial.

Trial Procedures

Little information was available on formal criminal justice procedures and practices, and outside access to the legal system was limited. Public trials

were sometimes held for crimes such as violations of the 2020 law against “reactionary ideology,” which was aimed at curtailing South Korean cultural influence.

The constitution contained elaborate procedural protections providing that cases should be public, except under circumstances stipulated by law. The constitution also stated the accused had the right to a defense; however, when the government held trials and assigned lawyers to defendants, these lawyers often failed to actively or adequately defend the accused, particularly in the case of public trials for serious crimes. Some reports noted a distinction between those accused of political, as opposed to nonpolitical, crimes and claimed the government offered trials and lawyers only to the latter. The Ministry of State Security conducted “pretrials” or preliminary examinations in all political cases, but the courts conducted trials. Some defectors testified that the ministry also conducted trials. There were no indications authorities respected the presumption of innocence.

Political Prisoners and Detainees

There were widespread reports of political prisoners or detainees. Although no definitive information was available regarding the total number of political prisoners and detainees, most external estimates were between 80,000 and 120,000; some NGOs placed the figure as high as 200,000.

Incarceration in a kwanliso was in most cases for life and in many cases

included three generations of the prisoner's family. NGOs and media reported political prisoners were subject to harsher punishments and had fewer protections than other prisoners and detainees.

The government considered critics of the regime to be political criminals. During the August UN Security Council session, one escapee testified that "North Koreans cannot express any dissatisfaction to their government...anyone who disagrees is taken to a political prison camp, where they will do hard labor until they die or are simply shot dead." Escapees and inside sources described political offenses as including attempting to defect or contacting family members who had defected, sitting on newspapers bearing Kim Il Sung's or Kim Jong Il's picture, mentioning Kim Il Sung's limited formal education, or defacing photographs of the Kims. International legal experts continued to note that many prisoners were "detained without a substantive reason compatible with international law."

f. Transnational Repression

The country engaged in transnational repression against individuals outside its sovereign borders.

Extraterritorial Killing, Kidnapping, Forced Returns, or Other Violence or

Threats of Violence: The government was alleged to have killed or kidnapped persons, or used violence or threats of violence against

individuals in other countries, for politically motivated reprisal. DPRK agents continued to seek and carry out forced repatriations of DPRK citizens abroad, in some cases working with or pressuring foreign governments to do so. According to a 2020 report by the Hudson Institute, DPRK kidnapers in recent years focused on China, where they abducted ROK citizens who helped North Korean refugees while “China looks the other way.” In 2021 media reported a statement by the ROK Ministry of Unification that 42 North Korean defectors went missing in the previous five years and a defector’s observation that in some cases there was “strong suspicion of abduction or other foul play” by the DPRK Ministry of State Security.

In October human rights NGOs reported China forcibly repatriated up to 600 North Koreans to the DPRK. This total reportedly included asylum seekers, who upon return could be subjected to torture, sexual abuse, forced labor, and summary execution. Observers noted that a large backlog of North Korean detainees had built up in China during the DPRK’s three-year COVID-19 border closures, which the DPRK began to relax in the summer. Elizabeth Salmón, the UN Special Rapporteur, estimated in 2022 that as many as 2,000 North Koreans were detained in the PRC awaiting deportation. In 2022 Human Rights Watch reported on the case of Choe Kum Chol, a DPRK military information technology officer, who in July 2021 escaped DPRK control while working in Vladivostok, Russia. According to a Voice of America report, Choe left his post after deciding to seek asylum with the Moscow branch of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. In

September 2021 Choe sent an urgent message to an activist assisting his escape reporting that five men in Russian police uniforms were approaching his safe house in Razdolnoe, a nearby town. In December 2021 the activist learned that Choe was being held in the DPRK consulate in Vladivostok with two other North Koreans facing forcible repatriation.

Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, and Coercion: The government attempted to surveil, harass, and threaten defectors and other perceived enemies outside the country. In 2018 media reported Kim Jong Un ordered government agencies to exert greater pressure on family members of defectors to pressure them to return home. One escapee who previously worked at a DPRK embassy described how, with few exceptions, the government ensured that at least one immediate relative of overseas personnel remained in the DPRK as a form of collateral to discourage defections. Defectors reported family members in the country contacted them to urge their return, apparently under pressure from government officials. In 2020 other defectors reported they received threatening calls and text messages, presumably from government officials.

In 2021 ROK officials arrested a North Korean spy, Song Chun-son (also known as Song Mo), on charges of helping the DPRK Ministry of State Security in violation of the ROK's National Security Act. She confessed to operating in the ROK for approximately three years, coercing defectors to return to the DPRK to support the regime's political agenda. An ROK court

sentenced Song to three years in prison.

Efforts to Control Mobility: The government attempted to restrict mobility to exact reprisal and enhance control over its citizens abroad, including by holding or revoking their travel documents and punishing unauthorized travel away from worksites and residences. Such restrictions were often imposed with the complicity of local authorities and involved agents of the DPRK Ministry of State Security. Overseas workers and their managers routinely had their passports confiscated by DPRK officials to reduce opportunities for defection.

According to a 2022 HRNK report, *North Korean Workers Officially Dispatched to China and Russia: Human Rights Denial, Chain of Command & Control*, North Korean workers abroad had no freedom of association or collective bargaining, and their freedom of movement was “strictly limited.” “Perceived dissent results in swift repatriation and harsh punishment” such as that reported by a former North Korean logger in Primorsky, Amur Oblast, Russia: “They put plaster casts on both of the worker’s legs and send him back. The casts are taken off after they cross the border. They let the workers go home if it’s a minor problem but for bigger issues they are sent to the kwanliso.”

Bilateral Pressure: There were reports the DPRK attempted to exert bilateral pressure on other countries aimed at having them take adverse action against specific individuals for politically motivated purposes. In

November the UN General Assembly Third Committee approved by consensus a draft resolution expressing concern regarding the pressure the government exerted on other states to forcibly return North Korean refugees and asylum seekers, and regarding retaliations those individuals faced once repatriated, including internment; torture; other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; sexual and gender-based violence; or the death penalty. The resolution urged all states to respect the fundamental principle of nonrefoulement. A report published jointly by the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the George W. Bush Institute in September described how the PRC and Russia in particular acted as “active facilitators of the regime’s transnational repression,” including by “frequently detain[ing] and repatriat[ing] North Korean asylum seekers back to North Korea.”

In July RFA and other media reported Russian authorities grounded a commercial flight from Vladivostok to Moscow to arrest the wife and child of a DPRK diplomat who were wanted by DPRK authorities.

g. Property Seizure and Restitution

There were reports the government relocated citizens from their places of residence without due process or adequate restitution, including on politically motivated grounds. For example, in June RFA reported that to prevent escape attempts and unauthorized cross-border cellphone calls,

authorities forcibly relocated residents along the PRC border and demolished their homes, offering compensation in return.

h. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The constitution provided for the inviolability of one's person and residence and the privacy of correspondence, but the government did not respect these prohibitions. The government subjected its citizens to rigid physical and digital controls. According to the 2019 HRNK report *Digital Trenches: North Korea's Information Counter-Offensive*, the government relied on a massive, multilevel system of informants called *inminban*, loosely translated as "neighborhood watch unit," to identify critics or political criminals.

Authorities sometimes subjected entire communities to security checks, entering homes without judicial authorization. The UN secretary-general's 2022 report noted that *inminban* leaders regularly worked with the Ministry of Social Security, the Ministry of State Security, and Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) officials to "monitor anti-State behavior and conduct unannounced checks on households, including at night," with special attention to ensuring radios did not have devices enabling access to foreign broadcasts.

The government monitored correspondence, telephone conversations, emails, text messages, and other digital communications. The Ministry of State Security strictly monitored mobile phone use and access to electronic

media in real time. In June the ROK-based NGO PSCORE published a report, *Digital Hostages*, describing how internet access, restricted to a small minority of the population, was subject to a far-reaching system of surveillance, including software that allowed authorities to “track personal information and port connections, monitor browsing activity, and even plant programs.” Another piece of software was suspected of taking screenshots of a user’s device at regular intervals as part of the state surveillance system.

Government authorities frequently jammed cellular telephone signals along the China border to block use of the PRC network to make international telephone calls. Authorities arrested those caught using mobile phones with Chinese SIM cards and required violators to pay a fine or bribe, or face charges of espionage or other crimes with harsh punishments, including lengthy prison terms. According to the HRNK, the government added a software-based censorship program known as the “signature system” to all domestic mobile phones. This system was designed to make it impossible to view foreign media on mobile phones.

The Ministry of State Security and other state organs actively and pervasively surveilled citizens, maintained arresting power, and conducted special-purpose nonmilitary investigations.

The government divided citizens into strict loyalty-based classes known as *songbun* that determined access to employment, higher education, place of

residence, medical facilities, certain stores, marriage prospects, and food rations. Individuals and families with higher songbun were known to be treated more leniently by government authorities regarding the use of illegal mobile phones and consumption of foreign, particularly South Korean, media, television shows, and films. Some media reports suggested this leniency decreased due to the 2020 law against “reactionary ideology.”

A special unit called Surveillance Bureau Group 109 was tasked with identifying and arresting violators of the law against “reactionary ideology.” In February 2022 RFA reported this unit’s efforts resulted in the punishment of at least 10 high-ranking military officers caught in possession of South Korean, Japanese, and other foreign video content.

Escapee, NGO, media, and UN reports widely described the practice of punishing family members for offenses allegedly committed by relatives, including by sending entire families to political prison camps. In February RFA reported authorities arrested a family of four in North Hamgyong Province after one family member was caught making telephone calls to her child in the ROK.

Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties

a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the

Press and Other Media

The constitution provided for freedom of speech and the press for citizens, but the government prohibited the exercise of these rights.

Freedom of Expression: Media, NGO, defector, and UN reports described widespread use of punishments, often severe, for exercising the freedom of expression, particularly for political opinion that differed from views approved by authorities. There were numerous instances of persons interrogated or arrested for saying something construed as negative towards the government.

Discussion or promulgation of South Korean culture was targeted as being antiregime. Under various laws including one promulgated in January, the Pyongyang Cultural Language Protection Act, the government cracked down on the consumption and distribution of cultural materials from the ROK and on speaking or writing in the “South Korean style.” Penalties reportedly included two years of correctional labor for speaking, writing, or singing in the “South Korean style”; five to 15 years’ for watching, listening to, or possessing films, recordings, publications, books, songs, drawings, or photographs from the ROK; and life sentences or execution for importing and distributing such materials.

There were reports of such cases throughout the year. In January the ROK-based NGO Database Center for North Korean Human Rights published a

report detailing the inner workings of a nationwide network of officials, known as “nonsocialist groups,” tasked by central authorities with enforcing restrictions on various forms of “nonsocialist and antisocialist acts,” such as consuming South Korean media or having contact with South Korean Christian groups.

In April RFA reported approximately 20 young ice skaters and skiers were sentenced to three to five years in a labor camp after police discovered a video clip on one of the athletes’ mobile phones during a random inspection of her home that showed the group using South Korean slang while playing a word game. According to RFA, authorities also arranged a public denunciation of the athletes in Hyesan. In February RFA reported that during weekly neighborhood watch meetings in South Pyongan Province, authorities threatened to punish parents if their children were caught consuming foreign media or talking like a South Korean.

In 2021 authorities publicly executed one man for illegally selling South Korean movies, dramas, and music videos; sentenced high school students in Nampo, South Pyongan Province, to a re-education camp for watching and disseminating South Korean dramas; and executed another man for smuggling and selling flash drives of the South Korean Netflix drama *Squid Game*.

Censorship or Content Restrictions for Members of the Press and Other Media, Including Online Media: The government controlled virtually all

information within the country; independent media did not exist. Domestic journalists had no freedom to investigate stories or report freely. The government tightly controlled print media, broadcast media, book publishing, and online media through the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the WPK.

Authorities strictly censored domestic media, with no tolerance for deviation from official messages. The government prohibited ordinary citizens from listening to foreign media broadcasts and subjected violators to severe punishment. Radios and television sets, unless altered, received only domestic programming. Elite citizens and facilities for foreigners, such as hotels, had access to international television broadcasts via satellite. The government attempted to jam all foreign radio broadcasts.

National Security: Defector and NGO reports included accounts of individuals detained, and in some cases executed, for antistate crimes, such as criticism of the government.

Internet Freedom

The government severely restricted access to the internet and actively censored online content. Internet access was limited to high-ranking officials and other designated elites, including selected university students.

Government employees sometimes had limited, closely monitored access to email accounts. The HRNK reported the government installed monitoring

programs on every smartphone and tablet that, among other things, logged every webpage visited and randomly took undeletable screenshots.

The government used a file watermarking system on Android smartphones and on personal computers that added a user- or device-specific data string to the end of the filename of any media file each time it was shared.

Authorities conducted random physical searches of mobile phones for illegal media, and a history of all activity on the device was available for export upon inspection through monitoring software called TraceViewer.

b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The constitution provided for the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association, but the government severely restricted these rights.

Freedom of Peaceful Assembly

The government prohibited public meetings other than those organized by the government.

Freedom of Association

There was no reliable information indicating the existence of nongovernmental organizations of any kind. Professional associations were organized by authorities and existed primarily to facilitate government monitoring and control over organization members.

c. Freedom of Religion

See the Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country

The law provided for the “freedom to reside in or travel to any place”; however, the government did not respect this right.

In-country Movement: The government restricted freedom of movement for those lawfully within the state. Those who violated travel regulations were subject to warnings, fines, or forced labor. The law authorized detention without trial in a labor camp for up to three months for violating the internal travel permit system. Security checkpoints on main roads at entry and exit points from every town hampered movement. KINU's *White Paper* for 2022 reported individuals frequently resorted to bribery to circumvent restrictions on internal travel.

The government reportedly imposed internal exile on some citizens. For example, in 2022 RFA reported that 30 households in Ryanggang Province along the border with China were forcibly relocated to remote, mountainous areas after their family members escaped the country.

The government strictly controlled permission to reside in or enter

Pyongyang, where food availability, housing, health, and general living conditions were better than in the rest of the country.

Media and NGOs reported internal movement was even more difficult since March 2020, when the government tightened restrictions in response to COVID-19.

The government reportedly engaged in the forced displacement of some of its citizens as a form of collective punishment, moving entire families far from their places of habitual residence in multiple provinces in retaliation for what it deemed to be infractions of various kinds by family members. In 2022 the UN special rapporteur noted remaining relatives of escapees had been relocated further inland from border areas and put under stricter surveillance. During the year, according to media and NGO sources, authorities in multiple provinces forcibly relocated households with two or more missing family members or the families of young persons who had avoided calls to volunteer to live in agricultural villages. In 2022 RFA reported that North Koreans whose family members had escaped and resettled in the ROK were being banished to rugged rural areas.

Shortly after the central government had changed the designation of escapees from “illegal border crossers” to “traitorous puppets,” authorities in Ryanggang Province reportedly selected 30 households with two or more family members who had escaped and relocated them to villages such as Samsu, Kapsan, Pungso, and Pungsan, in remote mountainous regions. One

couple in their 70s was selected because two of their grandsons defected. Other residents selected included the parents of sons or daughters who escaped, or children left behind after their parents fled to the ROK. In June RFA reported authorities forcibly relocated residents near the border with the PRC in Ryanggang Province. The ostensible reason was demolishing “unsightly” single-story homes, but RFA’s sources believed the true aim was preventing unauthorized border crossings and international telephone calls.

Foreign Travel: The government severely restricted foreign travel. Exit visas for foreign travel were generally available only to officials and trusted businesspersons, artists, athletes, academics, and workers.

The government did not allow private citizens to emigrate and maintained tight security on its borders, dramatically limiting the flow of crossings into China. NGOs reported strict patrols, surveillance of residents of border areas, and a crackdown on border guards who aided border crossers in return for bribes. During the August UN Security Council session, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk reported that, “Following the closure of the country’s borders in response to the pandemic, border guards were explicitly ordered to use lethal force against people who approach the border without prior notice. Since the border shutdown, only a handful of people have managed to leave the [DPRK].”

The law criminalized defection and attempted defection. Individuals, including children, who crossed the border with the purpose of defecting or

seeking asylum in another country were subject to a minimum of five years of “labor correction.” In “serious” cases, the state condemned asylum seekers to indefinite terms of imprisonment and forced labor, confiscation of property, or death.

Many would-be refugees who returned involuntarily from foreign states were imprisoned under harsh conditions. OHCHR reporting included the accounts of several forcibly repatriated escapees who stated authorities reserved particularly harsh treatment for those who had extensive contact with foreigners or religious groups or who spent time in the ROK, including those with family members resettled in the ROK.

According to the ROK Ministry of Unification, the number of escapees arriving in the ROK remained well below prepandemic levels. Only 196 arrived during the year, nearly three times the 67 who arrived in 2022, but still a fraction of the 1,047 who arrived in 2019, the last full year prior to the imposition of COVID-19 restrictions.

The law stipulated a sentence in some cases of up to five years of “labor correction” for illegally crossing the border, but past reports from defectors noted the government differentiated between persons crossing the border in search of food (who could be sentenced to a few months of forced labor or in some cases merely issued a warning) and persons crossing for “political” purposes, including those who had alleged contact with religious organizations based near the China border (who were sometimes sentenced

to harsher punishment).

e. Protection of Refugees

The government did not cooperate with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees or other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, or asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern.

Access to Asylum: The law did not provide for granting asylum or refugee status, and the government had no system for providing protection for refugees. No information was available on any government policy or provision for refugees or asylum seekers.

Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process

Although the constitution provided for popular election of deputies to the Supreme People's Assembly and local People's Assemblies, citizens did not have the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot, and authorities permitted no organized political opposition.

Elections and Political Participation

Abuses or Irregularities in Recent Elections: The most recent national

elections for the Supreme People's Assembly occurred in 2019 and were neither free nor fair. The government openly monitored voting, resulting in a reported 100 percent participation rate and 100 percent approval of the preselected government candidates. In November the DPRK held elections for deputies to local and provincial people's assemblies, with state media reporting that 99.91 percent of voters had supported the preselected government candidates for the provincial assemblies and 99.87 percent for the local assemblies. State media also reported a voter turnout of 99.63 percent. An official from the ROK Ministry of Unification told Reuters the results represented the first time authorities had referred to dissenting votes in local elections since the 1960s.

Political Parties and Political Participation: The WPK held all political power in the country, and independent political parties were forbidden. Government-created "minority parties" existed only as rosters of officials with token representation in the Supreme People's Assembly.

Participation of Women and Members of Marginalized or Vulnerable Groups: Although the law afforded women equal right to vote and hold political office, few women were elected or appointed to senior government positions.

Section 4. Corruption in Government

The law provided criminal penalties for corruption by officials, but there was

no reliable information to indicate the extent to which they were applied. NGOs, media, and defectors widely reported officials at all levels routinely engaged in corruption with impunity.

Corruption: Corruption was reportedly widespread in all parts of the economy and society, particularly in the security forces. In June RFA reported widespread and routine corruption among police officers was a source of anger among the public, with an internal government document recording dozens of incidents of residents publicly confronting officers over bullying and high-handed behavior in Ryanggang Province alone.

Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Monitoring and Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights

There were no independent domestic organizations to monitor human rights conditions or comment on the status of such rights. In prior years the government reported that many organizations, including the Democratic Lawyers' Association, General Association of Trade Unions, Agricultural Workers Union, and Democratic Women's Union, engaged in human rights activities, but observers highlighted the lack of independence of these organizations from the party and state.

Foreign NGOs and UN officials testified to the grave human rights situation

in the country. The government decried international statements regarding human rights abuses in the country as politically motivated interference in internal affairs.

The United Nations or Other International Bodies: With limited exceptions, the government refused to cooperate with UN representatives in the human rights field. The DPRK's permanent mission to the United Nations in Geneva did not respond to a request to comment on a draft of the secretary-general's 2022 report. The government refused to recognize the mandate of Elizabeth Salmón, the UN Special Rapporteur. Shortly after Salmón assumed her position in 2022, the government denounced her work as an effort to overthrow the country's social system and did not respond to her request to visit the country. As the UN secretary-general's 2022 report noted, COVID-19 preventive measures made it even more extraordinarily difficult for international organizations and diplomats to operate inside the country. As a result, there was little firsthand knowledge available to the international community concerning the human rights situation in the country.

The most recent – and only – visit of a UN mandate holder took place in 2017, when the special rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities visited the country.

Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

Women

Rape and Domestic Violence: The law criminalized rape of women but not of men. Rape was punishable by “reform through labor” for up to five years; if the assailant “commits a grave offense,” a term of more than 10 years; and if the rape was “particularly grave,” a life term or the death penalty. According to the UN special rapporteur’s March report to the Human Rights Council, only a few men were convicted of rape, but many women escapees reported having been sexually assaulted or raped, particularly by men with authority acting with impunity. The report cited data submitted by the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights showing that 270 of 586 cases of sexual violence uncovered through its interviews with escapees had taken place in detention facilities. According to the special rapporteur, women working in private markets were especially vulnerable to “regime control and corruption,” including physical and sexual violence.

In 2021 the HRNK executive director declared that “North Korea’s women soldiers are subjected to relentless abuse, induced malnutrition, cruel punishment, sexual harassment and sexual assault.” A former soldier testified in an interview with the HRNK that she was subjected to sexual assault; she estimated that 70 percent of women in the army experienced sexual assault or sexual harassment.

The UN special rapporteur's March report acknowledged "progress in bringing domestic laws in line" with the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in response to concerns raised by the committee tasked with the convention's implementation. At the same time, the special rapporteur noted continued deficiencies in definitions under domestic laws that made it "even more difficult to legally address violations against women in the domestic sphere." The special rapporteur described domestic violence against women as "widespread and normalized" and "viewed as a private or family issue in which the State does not need to intervene."

Other Forms of Gender-based Violence or Harassment: Defectors reported the populace generally accepted sexual harassment of women due to patriarchal traditions, and that there was little recourse for women who were harassed. Defectors also reported that lack of enforcement and impunity enjoyed by government officials made sexual harassment so common as to be accepted as part of ordinary life. At the same time, KINU's 2022 *White Paper* reported "many testimonies" indicating that an "increase in women's economic power has weakened the idea of male superiority to some extent."

Discrimination: The constitution stated "women hold equal social status and rights with men." The law prohibited "all forms of discrimination against women." Despite the law's provision for women of equal social

status and rights, societal and legal discrimination against women continued. Few women reached high levels of the party or the government, and defectors reported gender inequality persisted in family, social, and professional settings. In July RFA reported authorities were attempting to enforce a ban on women smoking in public, on grounds that they were “promoting capitalist culture” and undermining “socialist morals”; however, the ban did not apply to men, including Kim Jong Un, often photographed with a lit cigarette in state media.

Labor laws and directives mandated sex segregation of the workforce and assigned specific jobs to women. Women’s retirement age was set at 55, compared with 60 for men, which affected women’s pension benefits, economic independence, and access to decision-making positions. KINU reported discrimination against women in the form of differentiated pay scales, promotions, and types of work assigned to women, in addition to responsibility for the double burden of labor and housework, especially considering the time and effort required to secure food.

Reproductive Rights: NGOs and defectors reported state security officials subjected women to forced abortion, particularly for forcibly repatriated North Korean women who had become pregnant in China. According to the 2022 IBA/HRNK report, “The evidence demonstrates a policy of DPRK officials forcibly ending pregnancies that would result in half-Chinese babies,” and such mistreatment of women impregnated by Chinese men

was “driven by official ideology that emphasizes the importance of maintaining the purity of the Korean race at all costs” and protecting it from what was considered an “impure” baby. There were also reports of infanticide, particularly in places of detention.

In addition to vulnerable women in detention, persons with disabilities were not always able to provide informed consent to medical treatment affecting reproductive health. For example, the KINU *White Paper* for 2021 described testimony of forced sterilization of persons with nanocormia, a form of dwarfism.

KINU’s report for 2022 described the testimony of women North Korean defectors who, following forcible repatriation from abroad, were subjected to “uterus examinations” in detention centers under the pretext of finding currency brought from the PRC.

According to the UN special rapporteur’s March report, menstruation matters “remained a source of social stigma,” with insufficient education on menstruation and poor sanitation and inadequate access to clean water in school and other facilities inhibiting women and girls’ ability to attend school and work during menstruation. The report noted accounts that more women were buying disposable sanitary pads, although they remained expensive to many families. There was no information on what sexual and reproductive health services (including emergency contraception or postexposure prophylaxis), if any, the government provided to survivors of

sexual violence.

Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination

The country was racially and ethnically homogeneous. Officially there were no minority groups. The small Chinese community and a few ethnic Japanese in total numbered less than 1 percent of the population, and there were no laws to protect members of racial or ethnic minorities or groups from violence and discrimination. In its 2022 *Freedom in the World* report, Freedom House wrote that members of the ethnic Chinese population had “limited educational and employment opportunities, but somewhat more freedom of travel and trade.”

The HRNK previously reported that officials treated women returning from China who were pregnant with half-Chinese babies as “impure,” and that the officials commonly used racial slurs while forcibly performing abortions or committing infanticide. The 2022 IBA/HRNK study cited testimony reporting repeated instances of such practices at detention centers.

The law did not prohibit discrimination with respect to employment or occupation based on race, religion, or ethnicity.

Children

Education: The law provided for 12 years of free compulsory education for all children. Many NGO reports indicated authorities denied some children

educational opportunities and subjected them to punishment and disadvantages because of the songbun loyalty classification system and collective punishment for transgressions of family members. NGOs also noted some children were unable to attend school regularly because of hidden fees or insufficient food. NGOs reported children in the total-control zones of political prisons did not receive the same curriculum or quality of education available to those outside the total-control zones.

Child Abuse: Information regarding societal or familial abuse of children was sparse. The law prohibited domestic violence against children, but defectors regularly reported such violence went unpunished by authorities. The law stated that a man convicted of having sexual intercourse with a girl younger than age 15 should be “punished gravely.” In its report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2016, the government stated no individuals had been punished for child sexual abuse since 2008 because “such acts are inconceivable for people in the DPRK,” but in 2017 Human Rights Watch documented several such cases between 2008 and 2015.

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: The minimum age of marriage was 18 for men and 17 for women. There was no information regarding enforcement of the law.

Sexual Exploitation of Children: The minimum age of consensual sex was 15. The law prohibited the commercial sexual exploitation of children. According to the 2014 UNCOI report, because many girls and young women

attempted to flee repressive conditions, poverty, and food shortages for their own survival or the betterment of their families, they were often exploited by traffickers. Traffickers promised these girls and women jobs within the country or in China but instead exploited them in forced marriages, domestic servitude, or commercial sex. In its 2019 publication *Inescapable Violence: Child Abuse within North Korea*, the Seoul-based NGO People for Successful Corean Reunification documented endemic child abuse, including child sexual abuse, in schools, homes, camps, orphanages, and detention centers.

Infanticide, Including Infanticide of Children with Disabilities: A 2020 OHCHR report stated that infanticide occurred. The 2022 IBA/HRNK report cited testimony regarding “repeated instances of infanticide and forced abortions at detention centers, particularly targeting ‘impure,’ half-Chinese babies.” A midwife who was forced to give a pregnant woman a labor-inducing injection testified that after the baby was delivered, it was suffocated with a wet towel in front of its mother because “no half-Han (Chinese) babies would be tolerated.”

Antisemitism

There was no Jewish population, and there were no reports of antisemitic acts.

Trafficking in Persons

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Expression, or Sex Characteristics

Criminalization: There were no laws against consensual same-sex sexual activity between adults. In 2014 the Korean Central News Agency, the state news agency, denied the existence of consensual same-sex sexual activity in the country.

Violence and Harassment: There was no information available concerning whether police or other government agents incited, perpetrated, condoned, or tolerated violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex (LGBTQI+) individuals or those reporting such abuse. There was no information available regarding nonstate actor violence targeting LGBTQI+ persons.

Discrimination: Because sexual orientation as a concept did not appear in the country's law, there was no legal prohibition of discrimination by state and nonstate actors based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics, nor did the law recognize LGBTQI+

individuals, couples, and their families. There were no “hate crime” or antigay propaganda laws, nor were there criminal justice mechanisms to aid in the prosecution of bias-motivated crimes against members of the LGBTQI+ community.

Availability of Legal Gender Recognition: LGBTQI+ rights group Equaldex characterized the right to change legal gender as ambiguous. There was no information regarding whether legal gender recognition was available.

Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices: There was no information to indicate whether so-called conversion therapy was practiced to change a person’s sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics.

Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly: The country’s severe restrictions of freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly also applied to LGBTQI+ topics.

Persons with Disabilities

In November DPRK state media reported on legislation regarding the rights of persons with disabilities adopted by the Supreme People’s Assembly during its September session. The law provided for the rights of persons with disabilities to reside in places “beneficial for their lifestyles and health” and to travel within the country at will. The law also provided for the rights of persons with disabilities to vote, file petitions with the government, and

give birth, and it stipulated persons with disabilities should be assigned workloads “less than regular employees” and exempted them from forced labor mobilization.

Persons with disabilities could not access education or health services on an equal basis with others. While the law mandated equal access to public services for persons with disabilities, the government did not provide consistent support for them. The UN special rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities visited the country for the first time in 2017 and noted most infrastructure, including newly constructed buildings, was not accessible to persons with physical disabilities. There was no information on whether authorities provided government information and communication in accessible formats.

In some cases, authorities sent persons with disabilities from Pyongyang to internal exile, quarantined them within camps, and forcibly sterilized them. In 2021 the OHCHR expressed concern regarding the expulsion of such persons from Pyongyang to isolation in “restricted areas or to facilities in other cities.” KINU’s 2021 *White Paper* noted testimonies that persons with nanocormia continued to live in segregated areas, although this was not uniform across the country.

Persons with disabilities experienced discrimination in accessing public life. Traditional social norms condoned discrimination against persons with disabilities, including in the workplace. In 2021 the OHCHR stated children

with disabilities were vulnerable to isolation from society and expressed concern regarding “a lack of available disaggregated data on the situation of children with disabilities, including those living in State institutions.” KINU’s 2021 *White Paper* evaluated the provision of special education to children with disabilities as poor.

Section 7. Worker Rights

a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining

Workers did not have the right to form or join independent unions, bargain collectively, or strike. There were no labor organizations other than those created and controlled by the government. While the law stipulated employees working for foreign companies could form trade unions, and foreign enterprises were required to provide conditions for union activities, the law did not protect workers who attempted to engage in union activities from employer retaliation, nor did it provide penalties for employers who interfered in union activities. Although the constitution stipulated the freedom of assembly for citizens, it was not permitted. Unlawful assembly could result in five years of correctional labor.

The WPK purportedly represented the interests of all laborers. The WPK Central Committee directly controlled several labor organizations in the

country, including the General Federation of Trade Unions of Korea and the Union of Agricultural Workers of Korea. Operating under this umbrella, unions were responsible for mobilizing workers to support production goals and for providing health, education, cultural, and welfare facilities, but it did not provide a means for worker advocacy and representation.

The government controlled all aspects of the formal employment sector, including assigning jobs and determining wages. Joint ventures and foreign-owned companies were required to hire employees from government-vetted lists. The government organized factory and farm workers into councils, which purportedly afforded a mechanism for workers to provide input into management decisions.

b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at: <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment

The law prohibited work by children younger than 16 and restricted children ages 16 to 17 from working in hazardous conditions. The law criminalized forced child labor, but there were reports the worst forms of child labor occurred, including forced child labor. NGOs reported government officials

held thousands of children and forced them to work in labor camps with their parents.

The government did not effectively enforce the law against child labor. Penalties were commensurate with those for similar serious crimes such as kidnapping but were not applied against violators. Officials occasionally sent schoolchildren to work in factories or fields for short periods to assist in completing special projects, such as snow removal on major roads or meeting production goals. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child previously noted children were also sometimes subjected to mass mobilizations in agriculture away from their families, with long working hours per day, sometimes for periods of a month at a time, and worked under hazardous conditions. For example, in June RFA reported authorities required each secondary school student in Chagang Province to gather 22 pounds of dried bracken, an edible fern, over summer vacation, or pay a fine if they failed to meet the quota.

In 2021 the OHCHR noted children ages 16 and 17 were not legally protected against hazardous labor and cited August 2021 state media reporting that more than 200,000 youth league officials and members took part in “youth shock brigade activities” in the prior four months. Citing state media reporting in 2021 that more than 160 orphans who graduated from secondary school volunteered to work at coal mines and farms to “repay the love the Workers’ Party of Korea showed for taking care of them over the

years,” the OHCHR expressed concern orphans had to volunteer to work to “repay” the care they had received from the state.

Reports from prior years noted authorities subjected children in political prison camps to forced labor for up to 12 hours per day and did not allow them to leave the camps. Prisons offered them limited access to education.

d. Discrimination (see section 6)

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

Wage and Hour Laws: There was no statutory minimum wage in the country. No reliable data were available on the minimum wage paid by state-owned enterprises. Wages were sometimes paid at least partially in kind rather than in cash.

The law stipulated an eight-hour workday, although some sources reported laborers worked significantly longer hours, often including additional time for mandatory study of state ideology. In February RFA reported North Koreans had “come to dread February” because they were required to attend mandatory work lectures and other events in advance of back-to-back national holidays. In April RFA reported authorities had ordered citizens to “read 10,000 pages of propaganda” during the year, with factory workers in South Pyongan Province told to focus on Kim Jong Un’s speeches and transcripts of WPK meetings and to keep logs of their progress for

review by WPK officials, and members of the Socialist Women's Union in North Pyongan Province told to "keep personal reading journals, summarizing the key feelings and thoughts from what they read."

The law provided all citizens with a "right to rest," including one day's rest per week (Sunday), paid leave, holidays, and access to sanitariums and rest homes funded at public expense. No information was available, however, regarding whether the state provided these services.

Mandatory participation in mass events on holidays and practice sessions for such events sometimes compromised leave or rest from work. Workers were often required to "celebrate" at least some part of public holidays with their work units and were able to spend an entire day with their families only if the holiday lasted two days. Failure to pay wages was common and reportedly drove some workers to seek income-generating activity in the informal or underground economy.

Occupational Safety and Health: The law recognized the state's responsibility for providing modern and hygienic working conditions. The law criminalized the failure to heed occupational safety and health (OSH) "labor safety orders" pertaining to worker safety and workplace conditions only if the conditions resulted in the loss of lives or other "grave loss." NGOs, defectors, media, and UN officials reported unsafe working conditions across a variety of sectors, particularly in heavy industries such as mining and manufacturing. Workers did not have a designated right to

remove themselves from hazardous working conditions.

Many worksites were hazardous, and the industrial accident rate was high. Managers were often under pressure to meet production quotas and often ignored training and safety requirements.

Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement: No information was available on enforcement of wage, hour, and OSH laws. Some defectors reported workdays of 15 to 16 hours in fields such as mining and military manufacturing. In other cases, defectors reported workdays of eight hours or less (in some instances due to inadequate supplies of electricity or raw materials) and the ability to take advantage of the 15 days of annual leave stipulated by law.

The economy included an informal sector, but there were no reliable estimates regarding its size or composition, and there were signs that government efforts to recentralize economic decision-making and control resulted in its reduction. Many citizens depended on the informal economy for their survival since state-sector wages and rations were not sufficient. There were few if any legal protections for workers in the informal sector.

Endnote: Note on Sourcing

The United States did not have diplomatic relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The DPRK did not allow representatives of

foreign governments, journalists, or other invited guests the freedom of movement that would have enabled them to assess fully human rights conditions or confirm reported abuses. Harsh border restrictions imposed at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic continued. As a result, few diplomatic missions and aid organizations operated in the DPRK during the year, and the number of defectors remained well below prepandemic levels, further limiting the amount of reliable information regarding conditions in the country.