



**Forum:** Human Rights Committee (HRC)

**Issue:** The question addressing human rights violations in political prisons in North Korea

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## Introduction

North Korea — officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and sometimes considered "The Hermit Kingdom" because it is so tightly closed off to outsiders — has long been infamous for its brutal human rights violations. At the centre of its repressive nature is a vast political prison establishment, known as kwanliso, in which hundreds of thousands have suffered extraordinary human rights abuses. This report aims to illuminate the horrific conditions in which migrants are held, assess international reactions and provide an analysis on how to deal with these abuses.

For all of its existence North Korea has practised political imprisonment as a means to assert dominance and quash opposition. People who are usually detained include political dissidents, suspected threats to the regime or even family members of those which have already been arrested for their real or perceived offences. Human rights organisations have estimated the number of people currently detained there at between 80,000 and 120,000; frequently in terrible conditions which fall far short of internationally-recognised human rights requirements.

The global community has sought to respond to this, but solutions are far away. In 2014, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea published a landmark report disclosing widespread torture, forced labor and extrajudicial killings. North Korea For its part, North Korea has powerfully criticised as well one response to these concerns -- that is calls for reform and it will not agree. In this context, there is an urgent need for renewed focus and realistic approaches to combat these abuses.

Human rights abuses by North Korea are not just a humanitarian concern, against the background of declining global human rights initiatives and regional stability. Developments have become connected across the globe, human rights elsewhere are increasingly subject to dilemmas arising from strategies used in security



measures. Today, as we convene here in the Human Rights Committee, our focus is on finding a better way forward — one that respects and safeguards the dignity of those ensnared within North Korea's repressive tentacles.

## Background Information

Living conditions in these prisons are horrible. The prisons are massively overcrowded, with prisoners squeezed into tiny squalid cells that help disease to spread like wildfire. The aid from charities comes amid dire shortages of basic necessities, such as food and medical care. Malnourishment is ubiquitous; there are reports of detainees dying from starvation. These rations are usually insufficient, more directed at what is required to continue operating the system than to maintain human life.

Kwanliso are forced labour camps. Prisoners are forced to work long hours in dangerous conditions, often in manual labour such as mining, agriculture, or manufacturing. In many cases, the labour is done in dangerous surroundings which usually results in fatal injuries. Also, routine body and psychological torment. Techniques range from savage physical beatings and sexual abuse to the more refined manner of cockroach drill designed to humiliate detainees, crush their spirits and ultimately gain compliance.

Political prisoners, however, may also encompass their extended family—a practice of collective punishment—and the demographic composition represents a distinct concern as well. This abominable practice punishes entire families for the actions of one member, thus creating an endless cycle of retribution and subjugation that impacts unwanted individuals, even children born within those camps.

Despite well-documented instances of these crimes, as outlined in the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea (UN COI) Report from 2014, meaningful change has escaped the grasp of international powers. Even when global health is at risk, geopolitical dynamics make responses difficult; such issues must be seen through the lens of state sovereignty and regional stability.

## Major Countries and Organisations Involved

### United Nations (UN):

- The UN investigates and documents human rights abuses, including in North Korean prisons. In 2014, it released a detailed report calling for action against North Korean authorities. However, political divides in the UN Security Council often block stronger measures.

### **United States:**

- The U.S. is one of the most outspoken critics of North Korea's human rights record. It imposes sanctions on North Korean officials and entities responsible for abuses and frequently raises the issue internationally.

### **South Korea:**

- South Korea advocates for human rights in North Korea and works with international bodies. However, South Korean governments may take a softer approach depending on diplomatic efforts with North Korea.

### **European Union (EU):**

- The EU leads efforts to condemn North Korea's abuses, supports sanctions, and backs NGOs that help defectors and document prison conditions.

### **Japan:**

- Japan highlights North Korean human rights issues, partly due to unresolved cases of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea. It also supports international resolutions and sanctions.

### **China:**

- China, North Korea's main ally, blocks many UN actions, citing respect for sovereignty and regional stability. It often avoids criticising North Korea publicly and repatriates North Korean defectors, who may then face severe punishment.

### **Russia:**

- Like China, Russia supports North Korea diplomatically and opposes Western pressure, often blocking UN efforts to address human rights issues.

### **Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs):**

- NGOs like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch document abuses, support defectors, and raise awareness internationally. They play a major role in pressuring governments and spreading information.



### International Criminal Court (ICC):

- The ICC could potentially prosecute North Korean leaders for human rights abuses, but it lacks authority without a UN mandate, which China and Russia block.

### ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations):

- ASEAN countries generally stay neutral but maintain diplomatic ties with North Korea, occasionally serving as informal communication channels.

## Timeline of Events

Date	Description of Event
November 18, 2003	First UN Resolution on North Korean Human Rights: The United Nations General Assembly passes its first resolution condemning North Korea's human rights abuses, marking the beginning of official international concern.
March 21, 2013	UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on North Korean Human Rights: The UN Human Rights Council establishes a Commission of Inquiry to investigate and document human rights abuses in North Korea, with strong focus on political prisons.
February 17, 2014	UN COI Report Findings: The COI releases a comprehensive report detailing abuses in North Korean prison camps as "crimes against humanity" and recommending prosecution of North Korean leaders at the ICC. However, China and Russia block this effort, citing sovereignty.

## Challenges and Obstacles

- **Lack of Access and Transparency**

North Korea's refusal to allow international organizations, including the UN, to inspect political prisons hinders accurate assessments of human rights violations. Information is mainly based on defectors' accounts and limited satellite images, making it difficult to fully understand the scope of abuses.

- **Political and Diplomatic Isolation**

North Korea's isolated stance and strained relations with the international community complicate diplomatic efforts. Geopolitical tensions, particularly involving China, South Korea, and the U.S., often prioritize security over human rights, limiting coordinated action.

- **State Propaganda and Control**

The regime's tight control over information and use of propaganda limits public awareness of abuses. Indoctrinated citizens are often unaware of the severity of conditions in political prisons, and the state discourages dissent through severe punishment.

- **Cultural and Social Barriers**

The North Korean concept of collective responsibility means families are punished for individual actions, deterring people from speaking out. Fear of retribution prevents victims and their families from seeking help or exposing human rights violations.

- **Limited Refugee Testimonies**

While defectors provide critical information, their numbers are small, and fear of retaliation against family members prevents many from speaking out. This limits the amount of reliable testimony on conditions in political prisons.

- **Lack of Effective International Pressure**

Despite international condemnation, sanctions and resolutions often fail to affect meaningful change due to the influence of North Korea's allies, particularly China and Russia, on the UN Security Council. This prevents stronger enforcement of human rights measures.

- **Skepticism and Lack of Enforcement**

The North Korean government consistently denies human rights abuses, and evidence is often difficult to obtain. This leads to international skepticism, making it challenging to take effective action and enforce accountability.

## Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

- **United Nations Resolutions and Reports**

The UN has repeatedly condemned North Korea's human rights violations, particularly through the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and the Commission of Inquiry (COI) reports. In 2014, the COI published a landmark report detailing atrocities in North Korean political prisons, recommending accountability and international action. However, these resolutions have largely been symbolic, with little enforcement or follow-up due to the lack of cooperation from North Korea and veto power from China and Russia.

- **Sanctions**

The international community, led by the UN, has imposed a range of economic sanctions on North Korea in response to its human rights abuses and nuclear program. While these sanctions target the regime's resources, they have not led to any significant changes in prison conditions or overall human rights practices, with the North Korean government continuing to deny the existence of the abuses.

- **Diplomatic Engagements**

Efforts to engage North Korea diplomatically on human rights issues have been made by various countries, particularly South Korea and the United States. However, these diplomatic talks are often overshadowed by North Korea's nuclear ambitions. The regime has consistently refused to discuss human rights, framing the issue as an internal matter and pushing back against external criticism.

- **Defector Advocacy and Testimonies**

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and human rights groups, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have played a critical role in raising awareness through the testimonies of North Korean defectors. These efforts have highlighted the realities of political prisons, but defector testimonies alone have not been enough to bring about meaningful international action due to the lack of corroborating evidence and North Korea's ongoing denials.

- **Human Rights Council Special Rapporteurs**

In 2016, the UN appointed a Special Rapporteur on human rights in North Korea, tasked with monitoring the situation and bringing attention to violations. While the rapporteur's reports continue to push for greater international action, the lack of access to North Korea and limited support from powerful UN members has made it difficult for the position to have any substantial impact on the ground.

- **International Court of Justice (ICJ) and Accountability Proposals**

Proposals to bring North Korea before the International Criminal Court (ICC) or the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for crimes against humanity have been discussed in international forums. However, these efforts have been stymied by political complexities, particularly the lack of jurisdiction and opposition from North Korea's allies, making it difficult to pursue legal accountability.

## Possible Solutions

- **Stronger Sanctions**

The international community can impose more targeted sanctions on North Korean officials responsible for human rights abuses, focusing on asset freezes, travel bans, and restricting resources that support political prisons. Enhanced enforcement and coordination are key to making these sanctions effective.

- **Diplomatic Pressure**

Major powers like China and South Korea should increase diplomatic engagement with North Korea, urging the regime to address human rights concerns alongside security issues. Multilateral talks and private negotiations could encourage North Korea to allow international oversight.

- **Support for Defectors**

Providing greater protection and support for defectors would help document abuses in political prisons. Defectors' testimonies should be collected securely and used by international bodies to raise awareness and pressure the regime for reforms.

- **UN Investigations**

Extending the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on North Korean human rights and conducting independent investigations, including satellite monitoring, could provide stronger evidence of political prison conditions, increasing pressure on the regime.

- **International Legal Action**

Referring North Korean officials to the International Criminal Court (ICC) or establishing a special tribunal for crimes against humanity could ensure accountability for political prison abuses, setting a legal precedent for global justice.

- **Humanitarian Aid**

NGOs should be supported in delivering humanitarian aid to families of political prisoners and

others affected by imprisonment, using discrete channels to bypass North Korea's restrictions on aid and communication.

- **Support Civil Society Movements**

Funding human rights organizations and defector groups would amplify their advocacy and help raise awareness of the abuses in North Korea. This would ensure the issue remains in the international spotlight.

- **Track II Diplomacy**

Informal backchannel dialogues with defectors, former officials, and international experts could foster trust and promote discussions on human rights reform, encouraging North Korea to engage without the pressure of formal diplomacy.

- **Awareness Campaigns**

Global media campaigns and educational programs on North Korea's human rights abuses could mobilize public opinion and apply pressure on the international community to take stronger action against the regime.

- **Regional Cooperation**

South Korea, Japan, and other regional actors can collaborate on coordinated sanctions, intelligence sharing, and support for defectors to increase diplomatic leverage and press North Korea for human rights reforms.

## Questions for Considerations

1. **How can sanctions target North Korea's regime without harming civilians?**

What measures ensure that sanctions focus on the leadership while minimizing harm to the general population?

2. **What role can China and Russia play in pressuring North Korea on human rights?**

How can diplomatic efforts leverage their influence to encourage North Korea to address human rights violations?

3. **How can the UN improve access to information and investigations in North Korea?**

What actions can the UN take to secure independent inspections and gather reliable evidence?

4. **How can humanitarian aid be delivered to North Korea while avoiding government restrictions?**

What strategies ensure aid reaches those in need without retaliation from the regime?



5. **What legal actions can hold North Korean officials accountable for human rights abuses?**

Can the ICC or a special tribunal be realistically used to prosecute those responsible for political prison conditions?

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