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North Korea: Human Rights Concerns

As the UN Commission on Human Rights discusses the human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), Amnesty International today expressed its concerns about continuing serious human rights violations in the country and the lack of effective action to reduce widespread malnutrition among the population.

Amnesty International's long-standing concerns about human rights violations in North Korea include the use of torture and the death penalty, arbitrary detention and imprisonment, inhumane prison conditions and the near-total suppression of fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression and movement.

While these concerns are long-standing, in recent years many human rights abuses in North Korea have been linked directly or indirectly to the famine and acute food shortages which have affected the country since the mid-1990s. These have led to widespread malnutrition among the population and to the movement of hundreds of thousands of people in search of food - some across the border with China - many of whom have become the victims of human rights violations as a result of their search for food and survival.

In this context, Amnesty International believes that guaranteeing equitable distribution of food to all without discrimination is a key priority which the North Korean government must address urgently, in line with its international obligations, with appropriate assistance from the international community. The government must also introduce other measures to immediately put an end to other serious human rights abuses, such as torture and summary and arbitrary executions.

Freedom from hunger and malnutrition

North Korea continues to rely on international aid to feed its population, but many people in the country are suffering from hunger and malnutrition. According to a study published last year by the Food and Agricultural Organization, 13 million people in North Korea -- over half of the population -- suffered from malnutrition. Aid agencies have estimated that up to two million people have died since the mid-1990s as a result of acute food shortages caused by natural disasters and economic mismanagement. Several million children suffer from chronic malnutrition, impairing their physical and mental development. Many people in the country also lack adequate medical care due to lack of medical personnel and supplies.

Freedom from hunger and malnutrition is one of the most fundamental rights enshrined in the International Bill of Human Rights. The right to food is guaranteed under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), to which North Korea is a State Party. The provision of food where humanitarian assistance is needed is both a joint and individual responsibility. The expert

Committee set up to monitor the Covenant has concluded that all State Parties, individually and through international cooperation, are under an obligation to ensure "an equitable distribution of world food supplies in relation to need".

North Korea must ensure that international food aid and other food supplies are distributed equitably to all among its population, without discrimination. If its population is in need of food supplies it cannot provide, the government must seek outside assistance, and must refrain from using food as a negotiating issue. Foreign states able to help must also provide the necessary food aid, without tying this to particular political goals. Food should never be used as an instrument of political and economic pressure. There must be no embargoes on food.

Restrictions on access

There is little detailed information on the extent of human rights violations in North Korea due to the restrictions on access to the country for independent human rights monitors. Information and access to the country remain tightly controlled, hampering the investigation of the human rights situation on the ground. However, reports from a variety of sources suggest a pattern of serious human rights violations, such as those described below.

Executions

Amnesty International has received reports of public executions carried out at places where large crowds gather, with advance notice given to schools, enterprises and farms. Some prisoners have reportedly been executed in front of their families. Executions are carried out by hanging or firing-squad.

Freedom of expression

Opposition of any kind is not tolerated. According to reports, any person who expresses an opinion contrary to the position of the ruling party faces severe punishment, and so do their family in many cases. The domestic news media is strictly censored and access to international media broadcasts is restricted.

Any unauthorized assembly or association is regarded as a "collective disturbance", liable to punishment. Religious freedom, although guaranteed by the constitution, is in practice sharply curtailed. There are reports of severe repression of people involved in public and private religious activities, through imprisonment, torture and executions. Many Christians are reportedly being held in labour camps.

Torture and ill-treatment

Reports from a variety of sources suggest that torture and ill-treatment are widespread in prisons and labour camps, as well as in detention centers where North Koreans who have been forcibly returned from China are held for interrogation pending transfer to other places. Conditions in prisons and labour camps are reported to be extremely harsh. Inmates are made to work from early morning till late at night in farms or factories, and minor infractions of rules can be met with severe beatings. According to some reports, however, more deaths are caused by lack of food, harsh conditions and lack of medical care than by torture or ill-treatment.

Returned asylum seekers

Many North Koreans continue to cross the border into China. Some sought asylum in diplomatic compounds and foreign schools in China and were allowed to leave, travelling to South Korea via third countries. Hundreds of others were reportedly apprehended in north east China and forcibly returned to North Korea.

Those forcibly returned are held for interrogation in detention centers or police stations operated

by North Korean security agencies. Depending on who they are and the result of interrogation, they may be sent back to their home province, or to labour camps for up to six months. A few, particularly former officials or returnees found with religious literature, are assigned long terms of imprisonment with hard labour or in some cases face execution. Those sent back to their home province are ostracized within their community and subjected to surveillance. Many flee the country again. Some have fled and been returned several times, reportedly facing increasingly severe punishments with each failed escape attempt.

Recommendations

Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the North Korean government to take measures to increase respect for human rights in the country, including to:

- ensure the right to freedom from hunger and malnutrition to every North Korean citizen without discrimination
- abide by the principles laid out in the international human rights treaties it has ratified (such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) and incorporate these principles into domestic law;
- abolish the death penalty;
- release all people detained or imprisoned for the peaceful exercise of fundamental human rights;
- guarantee freedom of expression and freedom of movement for all North Koreans;
- review existing legislation to ensure it conforms with international human rights standards and introduce safeguards to provide citizens with protections and remedies against human rights violations;
- invite the UN human rights mechanisms to visit North Korea;
- grant free access to independent human rights monitors.

Public Document

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