News Service 247/95

AI INDEX: ASA 24/15/95

EMBARGOED UNTIL 0001 HRS GMT 20 DECEMBER 1995

DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA: SECRECY OF GOVERNMENT HIDES REAL SITUATION TO OUTSIDE WORLD

The human rights situation in North Korea largely remains a blind spot thanks to the government's almost complete monopoly on information about victims of violations, Amnesty International said in a report published today.

The North Korean authorities go to great lengths to prevent the dissemination of information. These include restriction on the freedom of movement of foreign visitors and journalists and censorship of correspondence with the rest of the world. In addition, ordinary North Korean citizens cannot mix with foreigners.

"The little information the North Korean authorities are willing to provide is often unsatisfactory and raises further concern about the fate and whereabouts of many of the individuals," Amnesty International said.

An example of the lack of information is the case of Kim Duk Hwan, a North Korean engineer who studied in the USSR in the 1950s and married a Russian woman. After living in North Korea for several years, Kim's wife and son returned to Russia, on account of the hostile treatment that Soviet citizens received in North Korea. The North Korean government did not allow Kim to accompany his wife and pressured him to divorce her. Following his refusal to do so, he was sent to a re-education camp in 1961 or 1962. Letters from Kim stopped reaching his wife in 1966. Since then, Kim's wife has tried unsuccessfully to obtain information about his fate. The North Korean authorities claim that he was never detained and that he died of lung cancer in 1985.

"This situation is completely unacceptable in 1995. North Korea's unwillingness to answer fully on human rights concerns runs counter to its desire to be more accepted by the international community," Amnesty International said.

Even ethnic Koreans living abroad are often not allowed to meet their relatives when visiting the country as tourists. North Korean refugees have been blackmailed into keeping silent about the human rights situation in their home country. In some cases, North Korean officials have threatened them with repercussions for their relatives living in North Korea.

North Korea remains one of the few countries of the world to punish its citizens for trying to live elsewhere. Under the North Korean Criminal Code, a North Korean who defects to a foreign country may face prison terms and even the death penalty. Some North Korean refugees handed over against their will to the North Korean authorities by Russian and possibly also Chinese officials, have been ill-treaded. In most of the cases, their whereabouts are unknown from the moment they are handed over.

One example is the case of Choi Gyong Ho, a North Korean who worked at a logging site in the far East of the Russian Federation. In 1992, he left the logging site and started a business

with a Russian associate. In 1993 he married a Russian woman and tried all possible ways of getting a residence permit. Choi wrote several letters to the North Korean General Consulate asking for permission from the North Korean government to stay in Russia. On 13 March 1995, he went to the passport department of the Russian Internal Affairs, on the advice of a policeman who had said that he would help him to obtain permission to stay from the Russian authorities. Choi was arrested on the spot and, a few days later, was handed over to his former superior of the logging site. Since then, the whereabouts of Choi Gyong Ho are unknown. Despite the total secrecy surrounding the case, Amnesty International believes that he may currently be detained as a prisoner of conscience solely for his intention not to return to North Korea and that he may face the death penalty.

An unspecified number of North Korean workers who have decided not to return to their country are hiding in Russia. They may be the subject of pursuit by the North Korean security service, which operates even beyond their national boundaries sometimes with the co-operation of Russian officials. If apprehended, they are believed to be forcibly returned to North Korea. Once again, the secrecy surrounding these cases has not allowed Amnesty International to establish all the facts.

Amnesty International urges the North Korean Government to:

- treat the issue of human rights with openness and as matter of international responsibility and accountability;

- refrain immediately from harassing and threatening North Korean refugees and other North Koreans abroad; and

- bring the Criminal Code into line with international standards, particularly with respect to the punishment of people for attempting to leave North Korea.

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For further information refer to:

"DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA; HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS BEHIND CLOSED DOORS" - AI INDEX: ASA 24/12/95

Update on report:

In one case mentioned in the report, Amnesty International has been able to confirm the whereabouts of three brothers of North Korean origin who had been deported from China to North Korea on June 1995, with the collaboration of the Chinese Foreign Affairs Office. The latest news received by the organization is that the North Korean authorities arranged the return of the Hwang brothers to China, where they are currently living safely. Amnesty International welcomes the outcome of this particular case, but remains concerned about the many other North Koreans whose rights are not respected and who are affected by the secrecy and protective policies of the government.