

### Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea Risk: Very high/Ongoing

The DPRK continues to commit widespread and gross violations of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, which the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights has reported as recently as February 2021 could constitute crimes against humanity.<sup>1</sup> In October 2020, the UN's special rapporteur on human rights in North Korea reported that the human rights situation remained "very severe" and that there were no signs of progress in any respect. Human rights violations are compounded by regime-induced malnutrition which the UN reports now affects 40% of the population or more than 12 million people. There is pervasive discrimination in the distribution of food as a result of which many citizens, including even farmers, do not receive adequate food. There has also been little to no progress on reducing political prison camps where torture and killing are commonplace. The UN estimates that there are 200,000 people held in political prisons. There has been no discernible reduction for some time. Large numbers of people are also routinely forced to perform unpaid labour. The UN found that this can amount to enslavement, a crime against humanity.<sup>2</sup>

None of this is new. In 2019, the UN General Assembly expressed "very serious concern" over continuing reports of, inter alia: torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment; political prison camps; enforced and involuntary disappearances; the forcible transfer of populations and severe limitations on the freedom of movement; the situation of refugees and asylum seekers; "all-pervasive and severe restrictions" on civil and political rights; violations of economic, social and cultural rights; and gross violations of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of women and girls.<sup>3</sup>

However, international pressure on the DPRK to address its pervasive culture of impunity has waned in the past few years. The UN's OHCHR reported that other political priorities, principally nuclear issues, had led to 'decreased emphasis' on human rights. Although the UN General Assembly resolution condemning DPRK's systematic abuse and repression passed by consensus without a vote, for the first time since 2008, the Republic of Korea (ROK) declined to co-sponsor the resolution. For the second consecutive year, in early December the US government refused to endorse a formal UN Security Council debate on the human rights situation in DPRK, which effectively blocked the discussion. China and Russia also steadfastly oppose using the UN Security Council as a forum to discuss human rights concerns in the DPRK, arguing that it only serves to harden Pyongyang's position.

Pyongyang's extreme sensitivity to international condemnation of its human rights record and routine threats to cut diplomatic ties if human rights concerns are raised creates dilemmas with regard to the best approach to addressing ongoing crimes against humanity in the DPRK. Pyongyang has proven adept at using human rights as a bargaining tool in its relations with the US, Japan and ROK. Even actors who have previously led efforts to shed light on the regime's crimes and pursue accountability are divided on how to move forward on improving the human rights situation. Yet, caving to Pyongyang's demands that human rights remain off the diplomatic agenda if nuclear talks are to resume has thus far yielded little progress on either front. Furthermore, DPRK's persistent refusal to cede any ground on engaging with the UN Special Rapporteur or grant access to special mandate holders undercuts the rationale that adopting a more conciliatory approach in the UN can open channels for deeper engagement with UN human rights bodies. In this vein, Quintana continues to call on the ROK and US (as well as Russia and China) to stop sidelining human rights concerns from denuclearization, sanctions relief and peace talks, and to start clearly sending the message that improving the human rights situation is integral to headway on these issues.<sup>4</sup>

A longstanding recommendation in this regard is for any proposal for sanctions relief to be tied to: (1) Pyongyang allowing the UN country team free and unimpeded access to all parts of the country in order to assist in meeting the needs of vulnerable persons, and (2) DPRK authorities engaging with the

UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and accepting the UN Special Rapporteur's request for a country visit. The latter could help open a parallel track for dialogue on human rights alongside denuclearization and peace talks, or, in the very least, stress to Pyongyang that its severe human rights abuses are not a negotiating tool that can be leveraged in nuclear talks in the absence of meaningful concessions or reforms aimed at safeguarding its population from atrocity crimes.

It is imperative that renewed emphasis is given to human rights. Regional security and the improvement of human rights in the DPRK are indivisible. Under the Trump administration, US policy on human rights in the DPRK fell into disarray. With the US failing to lead multilateral efforts through the UN Security Council, Human Rights Council, Japan and South Korea also stood back, failing to co-sponsor resolutions in either the Council or the UN General Assembly. As a result, multilateral efforts have floundered in the past few years. There are hopes that the Biden administration might assume leadership on this by re-appointing a special envoy on human rights in North Korea and spearheading efforts through the UN.<sup>5</sup>

### Recommendations

It is imperative that all actors give renewed attention to the protection of human rights in the DPRK.

The government of the DPRK should:

- Immediately cease the commission of crimes against humanity, and engage constructively with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Special Rapporteur and the OHCHR field office in Seoul to develop plans to faithfully implement human rights treaty obligations.

The US should:

- Appoint a Special Envoy on Human Rights in North Korea.

The UN Security Council should:

- Revive its informal dialogue on human rights in North Korea;
- Ensure that human rights concerns are integrated into any proposal for sanctions relief, including conditioning sanctions relief on DPRK authorities.

The UN Human Rights Council:

- Review what meaningful steps might be taken to achieve compliance with its previous recommendations.

China and the Republic of Korea should:

- Recognise DPRK citizens as refugees *sur place* and respect the principle of non-refoulement. China should adopt measures to protect the rights of DPRK citizens residing in or transiting through China, particularly women and girls who are systematically subjected to sexual violence, exploitation and abuse.

The OHCHR should:

- Monitor patterns of abuse that may amount to crimes against humanity in the DPRK, investigate unresolved human rights issues, raise awareness and visibility of the human rights situation, and work with civil society and other governments to continue to press for accountability and an end to impunity.

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<sup>1</sup> *Promoting Accountability in the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea*, Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 11 January 2021, A/HRC/46/52.

<sup>2</sup> *Situation of Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea*, A/75/388, 14 October 2020.

<sup>3</sup> See A/C.3/74/L.26, United Nations General Assembly, 31 October 2019, <https://undocs.org/A/C.3/74/L.26>

<sup>4</sup> Jacob Fromer, "North Korea may become 'more isolated' without a deal with U.S., UN envoy warns", *NK News*, 24 October 2019. <https://www.nknews.org/2019/10/north-korea-may-become-more-isolated-without-a-deal-with-u-s-un-envoy-warns/>

<sup>5</sup> Roberta Cohen, "Why the US needs a special envoy for North Korean human rights", *38North*, 26 January 2021, <https://www.38north.org/2021/01/why-the-united-states-needs-a-special-envoy-for-north-korean-human-rights/>