



CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Press Statement by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea Korea Press Centre, 14 December 2017

Good afternoon,

I have just completed a four-day visit to the Republic of Korea - the third since I started this mandate - and I would like to thank the Government of the Republic of Korea for facilitating it. I would also like to extend my thanks to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for its support in arranging this visit, which included meetings with a wide range of interlocutors from the Government, civil society, the diplomatic community, and the media. I have met with the officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Unification, the Supreme Court of Korea and the National Assembly. The Government of the Republic of Korea presented me with a comprehensive strategy that seeks to reshape inter-Korean relations on the basis of the establishment of permanent peace, the provision of humanitarian aid, and the promotion of economic cooperation as an engine of growth. I have also had discussions with members of the diplomatic community in the Republic of Korea, as well as a variety of actors in the non-governmental sector, including the President of the Korean Red Cross and leaders of human rights and peacebuilding organisations. In addition, I interviewed men and women who left the DPRK this year.

A range of issues emerged from these various interactions, pointing to the need to step up our advocacy efforts to protect human rights in the DPRK. Let me start with a quote from a young North Korean in response to my enquiry about the reasons he left his country: "I used to work at a factory without pay from 8am to 10 pm, and I became a smuggler in the evening. That was the only way for me to make a living as the State did not provide anything". All other interviewees portrayed a grim picture of everyday life in North Korea, where workers do not receive any salary, where access to basic healthcare is only offered to those who are able to pay, and where the Public Distribution System of food rations no longer operates in the provinces where it is most needed. The



informal economy continues to be the only way for ordinary citizens of the DPRK to access the resources they need to secure food and other necessities for themselves and their families. The ideal of self-reliance that the DPRK was founded upon - the Juche Idea - seems in reality to have moved away from collective action of the masses to an individualised form of self-reliance and survival where people must find a way to secure their basic necessities, while being periodically mobilised to work for the State. This is what the picture looks like outside Pyongyang, particularly in the countryside. It seems that the social and economic structures of the State in DPRK, which were conceived to fulfil the rights and needs of the people, have disappeared in these areas, and what remains intact is the comprehensive system of control and surveillance over the population. People with political power and influence, on the other hand, are said to have unhindered access to public services.

These observations do not come as a surprise to me. Discrimination in access to economic and social rights is a well-known pattern in the DPRK that has been highlighted by various monitors. But what I find particularly worrisome when I listen to recent testimonies is the widening gap in living standards between Pyongyang residents and the majority of the population. It is also alarming that this situation occurs in a country that is devoting a vast proportion of its resources to its defence budget and to strengthening its border controls in unprecedented ways. The order of priorities in the DPRK requires a major shift that recognises the urgency to fulfil the basic needs of the population.

The security threat posed by the DPRK's ballistic and nuclear programme has led to increased international pressure through the Security Council sanctions regime. At the same time a peaceful diplomatic solution continues to be the main priority and only way forward for all parties concerned and for the international community as a whole.

Let me here recall the need to design and implement international sanctions in a way that considers their potential adverse impact on human rights and on economic livelihoods. For instance, restrictions on international financial transfers should not affect the procurement and programming operations of UN entities in the DPRK that continue to provide essential humanitarian assistance to the population. The DPRK Government, which has condemned UN sanctions, should substantiate its criticism with substantive data on their impact



on the population; provide access for human rights monitors to economic sectors that may have been affected; and open up a regular channel for communication with UN human rights mechanisms and the Security Council on the specific issue of sanctions.

Among the longstanding issues that have been again brought up during this visit is the situation of separated Korean families, with 59,000 elderly relatives that continue to live with the hope of being reunited with their loved ones in the North. The unbearable suffering that these people continue to experience in old age cannot be tolerated or justified, and I would like to urge the two Koreas to resume reunions without delay and regardless of security and political complexities. I am, however, encouraged by the efforts of the Red Cross society to restore family links and I hope that they will bear fruit in the near future. The situation of specific victims of separation in the Republic of Korea, such as those who wish to return to the DPRK, or the group of 12 women restaurant workers who DPRK says were abducted by the ROK, also requires urgent action. I was told that the father of one of these women has recently passed away without meeting his daughter, adding up to a long list of victims who continue to pay the absurd cost of division.

During my visit I was also briefed on developments in the DPRK accountability agenda. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is currently recruiting legal experts who will be tasked with setting up a repository of cases of human rights violations that will inform future prosecutions. Progress has also been made in the Republic of Korea, where testimonies continue to be collected and recorded by the North Korea Human Rights Record Centre established under the 2016 North Korea Human Rights Act. These efforts are a critical component of the DPRK human rights agenda as they serve to not just hold those responsible to account, but also to deter policies that violate human rights, and to provide victims with avenues for seeking legal remedy. I commend these efforts and stand ready to offer additional support to ensure that these projects are successful.

Let me close my press briefing this afternoon with two additional thoughts. In my last report to the UN General Assembly I emphasized the need to make the most of the current openings that have been made available this year to engage in human rights conversations with the DPRK. The visit of the Special



Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities as well as the reviews by the women and children rights committees have all offered valuable channels to examine DPRK's record in these areas and offer practical advice on ways to improve the situation. The process of the Universal Periodic Review has also helped design practical recommendations for action by the DPRK Government, which I encouraged the international community to follow upon. But engagement should not be limited to diplomatic discussions in Geneva. Rather it should serve to inform concrete conversations with actors on the ground, at all levels of public administration, to ensure that recommendations translate into observable achievements.

While I am encouraged by the possibility that diplomatic talks with the DPRK on the issue of denuclearisation may resume in the near future, I also wish to emphasise that human rights should be an essential part of this agenda. Let me also take the opportunity of my presence in Northeast Asia at this important juncture to call again on the DPRK Government to cooperate with my mandate, and to open up to other offers of support that has been extended to it through the mandate of other Special Rapporteurs, as well as the regular interaction with Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. With so many channels of engagement with the country opening up, the opportunities to promote effective reforms in the country for the benefit of human rights are plentiful, but there is also a need for the DPRK Government to show consistency and sincerity in its conversations with international actors.

Thank you. The floor is open for questions.