

## **People in North Korea trapped in vicious cycle of deprivation, corruption and repression – UN human rights report**

GENEVA (28 May 2019) – People in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) are trapped in a vicious cycle, in which the failure of the State to provide for life’s basic necessities forces them to turn to rudimentary markets where they face a host of human rights violations in an uncertain legal environment, according to a new UN human rights report.

The report, published by the UN Human Rights Office on Tuesday, highlights how the public distribution system in the DPRK has been broken for over two decades and how, as people seek to eke out a living in a legally precarious parallel economy, they are exposed to arbitrary arrest, detention, and extortion.

Based on 214 first-hand accounts of escapees gathered by UN Human Rights staff in South Korea in 2017 and 2018, the report describes how the most fundamental rights of ordinary people in the DPRK are widely violated because of economic mismanagement and endemic corruption.

“The rights to food, health, shelter, work, freedom of movement and liberty are universal and inalienable, but in North Korea they depend primarily on the ability of individuals to bribe State officials,” said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet.

Since the economic collapse of the 1990s, people have been unable to survive through a State-led model of centralized economic planning and distribution, which includes State-assigned jobs and the dispensation of food, clothes and other rations. As a result, working in the informal sector has become an essential means of survival – or else, as one interviewee put it: “If you just follow instructions coming from the State, you starve to death.”

However, when people try to engage in rudimentary market activity, they face arrest and detention, including for travelling within the country, for which a permit is required. This situation invariably leads to a series of further serious human rights violations, due to absence of rule of law and due process guarantees. People often experience inhumane and degrading treatment in detention, and are sometimes subjected to torture during interrogation and disciplinary procedures.

The whole system is based on the informal but pervasive practice of bribing State officials who are in a position to enable people to side-step State requirements and regulations in order to work in the private sector and avoid arrest.

The constant threat of arrest and prosecution provides State officials with a powerful means to extort money and other favours from people desperate to avoid detention in inhumane conditions, the report says. In addition, the living conditions and treatment of detainees can also depend on the payment of bribes.

As another escapee said to UN human rights officials: “I felt it unfair that one could bribe one’s way out of [detention], when another suffers much more as a result of being unable to bribe. Bribery is effective in North Korea. One cannot lead a life in North Korea if he or she does not bribe his or her way.”

The report also details how women seeking ways to make ends meet are particularly vulnerable to further abuse at the hands of third parties, including brokers and traffickers.

The UN Human Rights Chief called for far-reaching changes: “Our report is a stark illustration of how important it is that the Government tackles the country’s profound human rights problems. Only then can the endemic system of corruption which pervades all aspects of life be effectively dismantled,” she said.

The report stresses how the State has not fulfilled its obligations under international human rights law to realize the right of its citizens to an adequate standard of living. It has neither sought to modify a failed public system, nor helped to establish a functional and legal private sector to alleviate the economic destitution facing much of the population.

Meanwhile, huge resources continue to be directed towards military spending. The country maintains one of the world’s largest standing armies, representing the world’s highest ratio of military personnel to the general population. This has also resulted in the removal of over one million young men and women from the workplace and into the armed forces.

According to UN entities operating in the DPRK, in 2019 around 10.9 million people (over 43 per cent of the total population) are undernourished and suffer from food insecurity. Almost 10 million people do not have access to safe drinking water and 16 percent of the population does not have access to basic sanitation facilities, increasing the risk of disease and malnutrition. People living in northeastern and rural provinces suffer most from the lack of basic services, and the 2018 Global Hunger Index classified the level of hunger in the country as “serious” and “bordering on alarming.” “These are extraordinary and appalling figures,” said Bachelet. “You rarely find this level of deprivation even in countries wracked by conflict. I am concerned that the constant focus on the nuclear issue continues to divert attention from the terrible state of human rights for many millions of North Koreans. Not just civil and political rights, but also social, cultural and economic rights which are just as important.”

The full picture of the standard of living in the DPRK is far from clear due to the scarcity of data and the lack of access to the country by UN human rights staff, as well as experienced NGOs. This is compounded by the oppressive domestic environment, in which there is no space for people to express their views, for independent civil society organizations to operate, or for journalists to report freely on the situation.

The report recommends drastic reforms, including reviewing the criminal code and other relevant legislation to end prosecutions for engaging in legitimate market activities, and to respect the right to freedom of movement within the country and across its borders. The report highlights that, underlying such legislative changes, there is an imperative to establish the rule of law, with due process and fair trial rights guaranteed.

“People must not be arrested, detained, prosecuted or subjected to extortion simply for trying to acquire an adequate standard of living,” Bachelet concluded. “Addressing these issues could open a path to tackling the wider range of human rights concerns that exist in the DPRK today. A significant set of reforms would be in everybody’s interests, including those of the Government and of the international community.”

ENDS

To read the full report: “The price is rights: the violation of the right to an adequate standard of living in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea” in **English**:

[https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/KP/ThePriceIsRights\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/KP/ThePriceIsRights_EN.pdf)

To read the full report “The price is rights: the violation of the right to an adequate standard of living in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea” in **Korean**:

[https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/KP/ThePriceIsRights\\_Korean.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/KP/ThePriceIsRights_Korean.pdf)

To read the 2019 accountability report of the High Commissioner for Human Rights:

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session40/Pages/ListReports.aspx>

*For more information and media requests, please contact: Rupert Colville - + 41 22 917 9767 / [rcolville@ohchr.org](mailto:rcolville@ohchr.org) or Ravina Shamdasani - + 41 22 917 9169 / [rshamdasani@ohchr.org](mailto:rshamdasani@ohchr.org) or Marta Hurtado - + 41 22 917 9466 / [mhurtado@ohchr.org](mailto:mhurtado@ohchr.org)*

**Tag and share - Twitter: [@UNHumanRights](https://twitter.com/UNHumanRights) and Facebook: [unitednationshumanrights](https://www.facebook.com/unitednationshumanrights)**