Statement by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea
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Mr. Chair,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates, and
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to present my second report to this Committee. This report aims to provide a comprehensive assessment of the current human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), with a particular focus on the relationship between human rights, militarization, and gender equality.

1) **Overview of the Current Human Rights Situation**

After more than three and a half years, in August 2023, the DPRK partially reopened its borders, allowing its citizens to return. While this marks a first step to review the Government's restrictions on freedom of movement, it also raises concerns about an imminent forced repatriation of escapees, of whom the majority are women. Their return will expose them to torture, sexual violence or extrajudicial killings. Every State has an obligation under the principle of *non-refoulment* to halt these repatriations and protect DPRK nationals within their jurisdictions.

Using the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext the DPRK has isolated the country on an unprecedented scale. This border shutdown exacerbated the humanitarian crisis by restricting people's access to food, medicines and health care, and has aggravated multiple human rights violations, including enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests, and curtailments of essential freedoms. These actions disproportionately affect groups in vulnerable situations, notably women and children.

Excellencies

2) **Human Rights dimensions to peace and security**

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the Korean Armistice Agreement, which ceased hostilities in the Korean War. Yet, the DPRK persists in a protracted state of conflict. Its *Songun*, or "military-first" policy, prioritizes the military in both governance and resource allocation. This emphasis on militarization further deteriorates the state of human rights.

A. Implications of Militarization

First, under the guise of militarization, the government exerts extreme surveillance over its citizens. Extreme militarization in the DPRK cannot be explained without the politics of repression resulting in violations of human rights. Those who watch or listen to foreign media, criticize the state, or attempt to leave are deemed as criminals or traitors, facing severe punishment. Beyond its borders,

the DPRK commits systematic abduction, denial of repatriation, and enforced disappearance of people from other countries. Additionally, escapees and those separated by the Korean War have been unable to reconnect with family in the DPRK, fearing reprisals.

B. The Role of Forced Labor

Second, the DPRK's militarization exploits its labor force through a state-controlled labor system that allows it to finance its military ventures. Upon completing their education or military service, North Koreans are consigned to these workplaces without salaries or adequate rations. Women, who make up the majority of traders, are vulnerable to corruption, abuse, and sexual exploitation by authorities. Additionally, the DPRK exports labor overseas under forced labor conditions, generating foreign currency.

C. Socioeconomic Deprivation

Third, prioritizing military spending has led to underinvestment in social welfare, which has resulted in large segments of the population lacking basic necessities like food, healthcare, water, and sanitation. Furthermore, the sanctions imposed on the DPRK due to its development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles has restricted the importation of necessary items for agricultural production.

D. Gender Disparities

Finally, the militarization of the DPRK disproportionately affects women and girls. Women's already undervalued socioeconomic status hampers their ability to protect themselves and constrains their political participation. Women remain confined to traditional roles and are vulnerable to exploitation in informal markets. Women crossing borders are often victims of trafficking networks and those repatriated endure harsh punishments.

Excellencies

3) **The WPS Agenda and the Mitigation of the Human Toll of Endless Conflict in the Korean Peninsula**

The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda offers a framework to address the complex challenges laid out in my report. Grounded in the multi-dimensional concept of peace, it encourages a multi-party, multi-pronged and gender-responsive approach to militarization and human rights.

As party to various human rights treaties, including CEDAW, and as a member of the United Nations, the DPRK must implement Security Council Resolution 1325 and its sequels fully. This includes integrating gender-sensitive policies in the peace and security agenda and guaranteeing women’s active involvement in diplomatic and peace processes.

Conclusion

Excellencies,

The human rights situation in the DPRK is closely tied to the state of conflict. This Committee must recognize that sustainable peace requires that human rights are fully guaranteed in the DPRK, and this will not be achieved if women's rights continue to be undermined. The necessity to address human rights, peace and security is an international obligation is grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Charter.

My report makes concrete recommendations for all parties to act in coordination. This shared responsibility requires collective engagement. I welcome any form of constructive dialogue, contributions, and partnerships to fulfil these recommendations.

Thank you for your attention.