

PRESS RELEASE**Institutionalised forced labour in North Korea constitutes grave violations of human rights – UN report**

GENEVA (16 July 2024) – The use of forced labour by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) against its citizens has become deeply institutionalised and raises a broad range of serious human rights concerns, according to a report by the UN Human Rights Office released today.

The report is based on various sources, including 183 interviews conducted between 2015 and 2023 with victims and witnesses of forced labour who managed to escape and now live abroad.

“The testimonies in this report give a shocking and distressing insight into the suffering inflicted through forced labour upon people, both in its scale, and in the levels of violence and inhuman treatment,” said UN Human Rights Chief Volker Türk. “These people are forced to work in intolerable conditions – often in dangerous sectors with the absence of pay, free choice, ability to leave, protection, medical care, time off, food and shelter. They are placed under constant surveillance, regularly beaten, while women are exposed to continuing risks of sexual violence,” he said.

“If we didn’t meet the daily quota, we were beaten and our food was cut,” said one victim. Another recalled: “One of my acquaintances, who was a woman and older than me, was sexually abused by one of the heads. She suffered.”

The report looks at six distinct types of forced labour: labour in detention, compulsory State-assigned jobs, military conscription, the use of revolutionary “Shock Brigades”, work mobilisations and work performed by people sent abroad by the DPRK to earn currency for the State.

The report concludes that people in North Korea are “controlled and exploited through an extensive and multi-layered system of forced labour” that is “directed towards the interests of the State rather than the people.” The system “acts as a means for the State to control, monitor and indoctrinate the population,” the report says.

Most serious concerns arise particularly in places of detention, where forced labour victims are systematically compelled to work under the threat of physical violence and in inhumane conditions. Within this context, given the almost total control by the State over the civilian population of detainees, the widespread extraction of forced labour in DPRK prisons may in some instances reach degrees of effective “ownership” over individuals which are characteristic of enslavement, a crime against humanity, the report says.

After completing school or military service, every North Korean is assigned to a workplace by the State. This also dictates where people must live. The absence of free choice of work, the lack of ability to form trade unions, the threat of imprisonment for failure to attend work and the continuous non-payment of wages paint a picture of institutionalised forced labour in the country, according to the report.

Military conscripts, required to serve 10 years or more, are routinely forced to work in agriculture or construction. The report describes their work as “hard and dangerous, without adequate health and safety measures”.

“Most soldiers with malnourishment also came down with tuberculosis, since they were physically weak and tired,” said a former nurse, who treated soldiers during her compulsory service time.

Other forms of mobilisation include “Shock Brigades”, which are State-organised groups of citizens forced to carry out “arduous manual labour”, often in construction and agriculture, says the report. A project could last for months or even years, during which workers are required to live on site, with little or no remuneration. Being drafted into work mobilisations has a greater impact on women who are often the main income earners for families, the report says.

The Government of the DPRK also sends selected citizens overseas to work and earn foreign currency for it. Workers reported losing up to 90 per cent of their wages to the State, being under constant surveillance, with no freedom of movement, their passports confiscated, cramped living quarters, almost no time off, and extremely limited possibilities to contact their families.

This institutionalised labour system starts at school, the report finds. Schoolchildren are often forced to do work like clearing riversides or planting trees. “From an early age, you have to make yourself available to serve,” a witness said.

The report calls on the North Korean Government to “abolish the use of forced labour and end any forms of slavery”.

To ensure accountability, the report urges the international community to investigate and prosecute those suspected of committing international crimes. It also calls on the UN Security Council to refer the situation to the International Criminal Court.

“Economic prosperity should serve people, not be the reason for their enslavement,” the High Commissioner said. “Decent work, free choice, freedom from violence, and just and favourable conditions of work are all crucial components of the right to work. They must be respected and fulfilled, in all parts of society,” he added.

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