

Human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea
60th session of the Human Rights Council
UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk
Video message delivered in Geneva on 22 September 2025

Mr. President,
Excellencies,

The report before you today details a lost decade for the people of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Ten years since this Council's Commission of Inquiry issued its findings, the human rights situation in the country has worsened. People are silenced, watched, exploited and every aspect of their lives is controlled.

Public executions are reportedly taking place for more crimes than before, particularly for economic crimes, drug trafficking, distributing foreign media, and crimes perceived to be against the State. Many of these crimes do not meet the threshold requirement for the death penalty under international law.

Forced labour in many forms remains deeply entrenched in the country. The authorities forcibly mobilize people for work in the military, in detention facilities and prisons. People are also forced to work without pay in state-assigned jobs and in so-called shock brigades, often in hazardous conditions. We have reports of people dying during these operations, which the Government publicly glorifies as a sacrifice to the leader. Workers who are sent abroad to generate income for the State are subjected to severe exploitation.

The institutionalized labour of school children – particularly in the agricultural sector – is very concerning.

My Office's monitoring, including satellite imagery, confirms that at least four political prison camps are operating, where people face severe human rights violations, including enforced disappearances and forced labour.

The authorities have criminalized access to unauthorized foreign information, together with linguistic expressions that do not conform with prescribed socialist ideology and culture. These actions carry severe punishments, including the death penalty.

I deeply regret that there has been no progress regarding the fate of foreign nationals

forcibly disappeared by the DPRK, including those from the Republic of Korea and Japan. Many family members are ageing or have passed away without knowing the whereabouts of their loved ones.

Thousands of Korean families are still forcibly separated with no possibility to meet. The DPRK has not allowed family reunions since 2018.

People who are forcibly repatriated to the DPRK are subjected to serious human rights violations. Such refoulements are grave breaches of international law and must stop. The report notes some limited improvements in the country over the past 10 years. For example, the Government has reportedly reformed its laws to better ensure fair trials and protect people in detention, and has made nominal improvements in detention conditions, including a slight decrease in violence by guards.

Nevertheless, my Office continues to receive reports of torture and ill-treatment in detention.

Mr. President,

Over 40 percent of the population of the DPRK is undernourished.

The COVID-19 pandemic was particularly harsh for the people in DPRK. Between 2021 and 2023, many escapees reported a severe lack of food, including in Pyongyang, and that people starved to death.

Malnutrition is passed on from parents to children, generation after generation, condemning families to a cycle of suffering and long-term consequences.

And yet, the authorities continue curtailing people's ability to make a living. Informal markets – which were a means of subsistence for many, especially married women – are increasingly restricted for promoting so-called anti-social behaviour.

Education, health and social services are officially available free of charge. However, in practice, people are required to make unaffordable financial and in-kind contributions to secure these services, essentially rendering them inaccessible for many.

Corruption has infiltrated governance structures, leaving the poor most exposed to further violations.

Discrimination – particularly based on State-assigned social class and birth – continues to pervade society. Gender discrimination is deeply rooted in society, in particular in

state institutions and education. Domestic violence is widespread and under-reported, due to stigma and inadequate legal protection.

While unauthorised travel outside the country has always been a crime, today, the authorities have imposed further restrictions by strengthening the border, increasing surveillance, and imposing severe punishments for those trying to leave.

Mr. President,

My Office is not aware of any accountability measures taken by the DPRK for human rights violations or international crimes perpetrated during the past decade.

Outside of the DPRK, important steps towards accountability have taken place. My Office continues to monitor and document violations and preserve information and evidence in its mandated central repository. Victims' groups and civil society have raised concerns with UN human rights mechanisms; they have engaged the International Criminal Court; they have launched civil cases in the Republic of Korea and Japan; and they have provided support to victims.

But the situation remains one of the most chronic and longstanding human rights crises in the world. A change of course is urgently needed to avoid another decade of suffering.

International human rights law provides the roadmap for improving the human rights situation.

In that regard, I welcome the DPRK's increased engagement with the human rights system, including with my Office, the Universal Periodic Review process, and the treaty bodies. This is a step in the right direction.

But it is meaningless unless it translates into real change in people's lives.

The Government needs to undertake deep institutional reform. Some changes could build momentum and show that the Government is serious about improving the situation. These include abolishing the death penalty; ending torture; closing political prison camps; restarting family connections and addressing cases of enforced disappearance. I urge the Government to continue to draw on my Office's expertise.

The authorities must also investigate and prosecute individuals for international crimes.

The international community also has a crucial role to play.

I urge Member States to refer the situation in the DPRK to the International Criminal Court, to pursue accountability through universal or extraterritorial jurisdiction, and to support victims in their territory.

They also need to examine the unintended consequences of broad sectoral sanctions on people's human rights.

Mr. President,

People in the DPRK are sealed off from the rest of the world more than ever before.

This long-standing isolation fuels human rights violations and weakens regional and international peace and security.

The path out of repression and misery lies in respecting human rights engagement and cooperation.

We must all work together to support the human rights of the people of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

ENDS