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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, **

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 55/21. It provides an update on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea since 2014 and a stocktaking of the implementation of the recommendations of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, along with conclusions and recommendations.

* The present document was submitted to the conference services for processing after the deadline so as to include the most recent information.

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I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 55/21, in which the Council requested the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to submit a comprehensive report containing an update on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea since 2014, when the report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was published, and take stock of the implementation of the commission's recommendations. The report covers the period from 1 January 2014 to 31 May 2025. The report should be read in conjunction with previous reports submitted by the High Commissioner and the Secretary General since 2014, and with thematic reports published by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) on the situation in the country (see annex). Since June 2015, OHCHR has maintained a field-based structure in Seoul, as recommended by the commission of inquiry[1] and mandated by the Council.[2]

2. In preparing the present report, OHCHR consulted widely with victims, civil society organizations and thematic experts and reviewed their public reports; engaged with Member States; and conducted interviews with 314 victims and witnesses who had left the country during the reporting period. The Office thanks the interviewees, those who facilitated interviews and those who provided other information. All information received has been stored in the mandated OHCHR central repository. In response to a request for input, the Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea rejected resolution 55/21 but referred OHCHR to the State's input for its examination, in November 2024, under the universal periodic review. Unless otherwise stated, information in the present report was drawn from first-hand information gathered and assessed by OHCHR in accordance with the OHCHR monitoring methodology and public reports of the United Nations (see annex). Reports from other sources have been taken into consideration to corroborate the information.

II. Context

3. On 17 February 2014, the commission of inquiry made its report public. Despite rejecting the mandate and report of the commission, the Government initially showed increased willingness to engage with the international community to address human rights concerns. This included the holding of family reunions, engaging on the issue of Japanese abductees, proposing high-level meetings with the High Commissioner and the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, extending invitations to the High Commissioner to conduct a country visit, opening dialogue with OHCHR on technical assistance and ratifying an optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These positive developments were short-lived; a number were reversed after the inclusion of an item on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the Security Council agenda in December 2014.

4. Following the assumption of office by Kim Jong Un as Head of State in December 2011, escapees reported a sense of hope for an improved situation in the country, with the new leader promising in April 2012 that citizens would not have to "tighten their belts" again and setting forth a new national policy of advancing economic development in parallel with nuclear development ("Byungjin" policy). Fairly quickly however, from mid-2013, purges in the Government and the military started (reportedly resulting, inter alia, in several executions), and further repressive measures were introduced. By the decade's end, the Government's control over all aspects of citizen's lives was the most absolute in decades. This increase in control accelerated during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic closures. Surveillance technology has assisted in increasing this control, and there has been a marked increase in the past seven years in the adoption of laws, policies and procedures that provide a legal framework for repression.

[1] A/HRC/25/63, para. 94 (c).

[2] See, among others, resolutions 25/25 and 55/21.

5. In addition, the State's isolation deepened, including with the imposition of international sanctions, the most recent of which were adopted in 2017.[3] Starting in 2019, after the failure to reach an agreement in negotiations with the United States of America, the State took steps to sever links with the Republic of Korea and the broader international community. The reinforcement of the State's border with China, which started some years earlier, intensified from 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of individuals crossing that border without authorization decreased significantly over the decade.[4] At the same time, the flow of information into the country was dramatically restricted. The State has not returned to pre-pandemic levels of interaction with the outside world.

6. From 2014, exports and imports were increasingly constrained by international sanctions, which, by 2017, affected all major export sectors. State sources of income included trade in sanctioned and unsanctioned goods and services, wages from overseas workers and, reportedly, proceeds from cybercrime. The Government embarked on large-scale public spending on housing and factories, seeking to reduce disparities between urban and rural development. By 2021, the State acknowledged that economic goals were not being met.[5] Limited private commercial activity had allowed citizens to provide for themselves and their families, where State-assigned jobs provided inadequate wages or rations, or in many cases, none at all. Over the decade, the Government increasingly limited private enterprise by law and in practice, most notably by severely limiting private trade in grain and medicine. Rather than reverting to the comprehensive public distribution system of the past, the Government became the retailer of grain and medicine in the country. With the partial lifting of the border closure in mid-2023, imports, particularly from China, rose.

7. The State reported military spending of 15.6–15.9 per cent of the national budget during the decade,[6] with heavy investment in new weapons and related technology. During the reporting period – except the 2018–2019 period of international summits – the State engaged in high levels of testing of nuclear, missile and other military technology. During the periods 2016–2017 and 2020–2023, it conducted three nuclear tests, tested new ballistic and cruise missiles, launched satellites and unveiled submarines and ships, with a peak in 2022. In 2025, the State confirmed it had sent soldiers to the Russian Federation under a mutual defence treaty in the context of the latter's conflict with Ukraine.[7] Transfers of munitions to the Russian Federation have been reported since 2023.[8]

8. This high level of military spending contributed to a worsening of the security situation on the Korean Peninsula. While an inter-Korean agreement to lower tensions was reached in 2015, the subsequent two years were marked by continued nuclear tests and successive Security Council sanctions, which constrained the economy and had an impact on the humanitarian situation in the country. The series of international summits in 2018 and early 2019 resulted in a dramatic drop in tensions and several conciliatory actions.[9] While the summits addressed issues such as separated families, human rights issues were otherwise not addressed. The rapprochement ended in 2020, with a return to missile testing by the Government and joint military exercises by the Republic of Korea and the United States. In 2024, the Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea abandoned the long-held policy goal of reunification.

[3] See Security Council resolutions 2270 (2016), 2321 (2016), 2371 (2017), 2375 (2017) and 2397 (2017).

[4] See https://unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/.

[5] See www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/kju_8th_party_congress_speech_summary.pdf/file_view.

[6] See http://kcna.co.jp/item/2025/202501/news24/20250124-04ee.html.

[7] See https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1745791650-244094225/wpk-central-military-commission-highly-praises-combat-sub-units-of-armed-forces-of-dprk-for-performing-heroic-feats-in-operations-to-liberate-kursk-area-of-russian-federation/.

[8] See, for example, https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15945.doc.htm.

[9] See A/73/308.

III. Developments in the human rights situation

A. Civic space and fundamental freedoms

9. Over the past 10 years, the Government continued to exercise total control over the population and severely restrict the enjoyment of fundamental rights and freedoms, leaving people unable to fully make their own political, social or economic decisions. Significant changes were made in governance, leadership and oversight structures in that direction.

10. Although the Government has committed to protecting freedom of opinion and expression, criticism of the Government and behaviour not conforming to Government ideology are considered political acts or threats to national security and result in serious repercussions. Since 2015, the Government has adopted several laws or amendments to laws, including the amendment of 2015 to the Criminal Law, the Law on Rejecting Reactionary Thought and Culture (2020), the Youth Education Guarantee Law (2021) and the Law on Protecting the Pyongyang Cultural Language (2023), that criminalize access to unauthorized foreign information and prohibit the consumption or dissemination of information (through, for example, publications, music and movies) from "hostile" nations and the use of linguistic expressions that do not conform with prescribed socialist ideology and culture. These laws raise serious concerns of unlawful restrictions on the right to freedom of opinion and expression. They also provide for severe punishments, including the death penalty, for protected speech. The application of the death penalty under these laws is broader than for intentional killings or "anti-State" crimes under other legislation, and contrary to the right to life.

11. Crackdowns against foreign information reportedly intensified from 2018 and became harsher from 2020, resulting in several public executions. Despite restrictions that were in place even before the COVID-19 pandemic, people could bribe authorities to avoid punishments for consuming unauthorized media. However, with more advanced surveillance technology and greater determination to prohibit the use or dissemination of foreign media, authorities are cracking down on such cases more rigorously. The Government has organized public trials and public executions to instil fear in the population and as a deterrent.

12. A government task force (Group 109), comprising officials from security agencies, the Office of the Prosecutor and the Workers' Party of Korea, increasingly carried out inspections of computers, radios and televisions and house searches without prior notice or warrants, aimed at finding "anti-socialist" materials. The Government justifies these measures as necessary to curb "anti-socialist" behaviour and to protect national security. Escapees reported that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, people arrested for consuming foreign media were released after receiving "revolutionary" education. However, penalties have become increasingly severe in recent years. Reports suggest that the population continues to consume information that is prohibited under domestic law, despite the growing risks.

13. The use of mobile phones has grown substantially since 2014, with potentially 50 to 80 per cent of the population owning a mobile phone by 2022[10] and access to cellular networks in almost all areas of the country. Although mobile applications are limited to those authorized by the Government, mobile phones have been useful for communication, market activities, digital payments, weather reports and gaming. Access to the Internet is almost totally unavailable to the public. A tightly controlled national intranet is available, primarily for research institutions and government officials.

14. All media is controlled by the Government and any independent news or opinion piece contrary to the State's official position is treated as "counter-revolutionary" and as a punishable crime under the country's broadcasting and publishing laws. There are no independent civil society organizations in the country. People are required to join one of the organizations affiliated with the Workers' Party of Korea, such as the women's union, whose role is to propagate government ideology, undertake surveillance and mobilize the public for

[10] Martyn Williams and Natalia Slavney, "Twenty years of mobile communications in North Korea", 38 North (15 November 2022).

government-initiated construction, farming and labour. Every person is required to participate in weekly self-criticism sessions, primarily aimed at collective surveillance and indoctrination.

15. Elections are held every four to five years for the Supreme People's Assembly and for local people's assemblies. However, these are mostly symbolic, with more than 99 per cent voter turnout and no independent candidates. There is often a single candidate seeking election. In August 2023, the Government amended the Law on the Election of Deputies to People's Assemblies at All Levels to allow multiple candidates to stand for deputies' positions in local elections, but the local elections held in November 2023 still had single candidates for the positions.

16. Freedom of movement in the country is more restricted now as compared to a decade ago, when thousands of people were crossing international borders without permission.[11] In response to those crossings, in 2014 the Government started reinforcing its international border control, including with shoot-on-sight orders during the COVID-19 pandemic. A travel permit system controls all travel between provinces; obtaining permits often requires bribes or personal connections. International travel remains severely restricted and unauthorized travel is a punishable crime.

17. Women and girls who leave the country are often vulnerable to trafficking for forced marriage, forced labour and sexual exploitation, and to abuse and violence. Those with no legal status rarely seek help even if abused, particularly for fear of repatriation. COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in China exacerbated their vulnerabilities, as they were unable to access essential services such as medical care or public transport, or meet daily needs, without official identification, highlighting the need for better protection.

18. The Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea formally refers to religion as a possible "pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the State or social order" (art. 68). Restrictions on religious activities have not softened over the past decade. Since 2018, crackdowns against shamanism and other practices, such as predicting the future and identifying burial sites for religious purposes, have intensified. For example, in 2018 a man from South Hamgyong Province was sentenced to life imprisonment for identifying such burial sites. Contact with Christians outside the country has led to severe punishment upon repatriation.

B. Justice and rule of law

19. In its oral statement for its examination in 2024 under the universal periodic review, the Government's delegation reported that the Government had enacted or amended laws relating to the treatment of persons deprived of liberty and fair trial guarantees, including with regard to rights to access to legal representation and appeal, and accountability for misconduct by public officials, in order to align with international human rights standards.[12] Despite the reported legislative changes, arrests without warrant, proper investigation or evidence persist, as do fair-trial concerns. Most trials are brief, with detainees routinely denied meaningful access to defence counsel and presumed guilty before the conclusion of formal investigations, and judicial decisions are often based on coerced confessions. The Workers' Party of Korea regularly intervenes in trials. However, escapees have reported that judges increasingly acknowledge detainees as individuals, addressing them by name rather than by number. Crimes considered "anti-State" or "threats to national security" carry the death penalty and continue to be vaguely defined, allowing the misapplication and misuse of these charges for political purposes.

20. Former detainees reported that torture and other forms of ill-treatment in detention facilities had continued since 2014. Many reported that they had witnessed deaths in detention, primarily as a result of torture and ill-treatment, overwork, malnutrition and suicide. Reportedly, officials regularly falsified documents to record deaths as natural or resulting from pre-existing medical conditions. Severe lack of food and medical care was

[11] See https://unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/.

[12] A/HRC/58/11, paras. 71, 83 and 84; and https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1s/k1siu17x8h (01:53:20).

reportedly common in the detention facilities, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when several detainees died from malnutrition, as they were unable to receive food from their families. Former detainees reported that the harsh conditions and violence in detention facilities were intended to serve as a deterrent to committing crimes in the future.

21. At least 12 foreign nationals were detained by the Government during the reporting period. Of those, six nationals of the Republic of Korea, who have been detained in the country since 2013[13] without consular access or information on their status or whereabouts, have not yet been released. In November 2024, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that the detention of three nationals of the Republic of Korea was arbitrary and violated their rights; it recommended that they be released immediately and provided with reparations.[14]

22. A notable aspect of the past decade is the reporting by escapees of nominal improvements in the treatment of detainees during the judicial process and in detention facilities, including a slight decrease in violence by guards. Former detainees reported that law enforcement officials had demonstrated more awareness of the standards for the treatment of persons deprived of liberty and their conditions of detention. In that regard, they reported that procedures had been established for detainees to file complaints about mistreatment or abuse of power by junior officials to senior government and party officials, closed-circuit televisions (CCTVs) had been installed in detention facilities, and senior officials were required by law to carry out regular inspections of detention facilities. The Government reported that it had enacted the Law on the Treatment of Reform Institution Inmates in May 2022, setting standards for the treatment of detainees and providing for the monitoring of misconduct committed by guards. OHCHR had requested, but not yet received, a copy of that law as at the time of writing. Despite these changes, filing complaints against officials reportedly remains dangerous, with many detainees fearing retribution. Conditions regarding food, sanitation and healthcare have reportedly not improved.

23. Information on political prison camps is very limited. However, OHCHR monitoring, including satellite imagery, shows the continued operation of at least four political prison camps, following closures and expansions of different facilities over the decade. The Government has denied the existence of these facilities; however, it confirmed that people who commit "anti-State" offences are detained in "reform institutions" and kept separate from ordinary prisoners.[15] Political prison camps are the site of severe human rights violations, including enforced disappearance, forced labour, summary execution and starvation. Family members of those accused of crimes are also incarcerated, through "guilt by association", although this practice has reportedly been less rigorously applied in recent years. While people are generally detained for life in these camps, there are some reports of children and grandchildren of accused persons being released and sentences being shortened.

24. The application of the death penalty has significantly expanded since 2015, with at least six new laws[16] expanding such application, including for offences, such as those relating to drug trafficking and "anti-State" propaganda, that do not meet the threshold requirement under international law of "most serious crimes".[17] In 2014 and 2015, several senior officials were reportedly executed for "anti-State acts". While this trend subsequently decreased, escapees reported that, from 2020, executions increased for the distribution of unauthorized media, drug-related crimes, economic crimes, prostitution, pornography, trafficking in persons and murder. The Government has claimed that the death penalty is used for "crimes against the State" and "extremely serious crimes that were unpardonable", and is not imposed on persons who were under 18 years of age at the time of committing the offence or on

[13] See https://unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/news/releases/?boardId=bbs_0000000000000034&mode=view&cntId=54307.

[14] Opinion No. 59/2024.

[15] A/HRC/58/11, para. 85.

[16] The Emergency Quarantine Law, the Law on Rejecting Reactionary Thought and Culture, the Law on Protecting Pyongyang Cultural Language, the Law on the Prevention of Drug-related Crimes, the Law on Handling Enemy Objects and the Law on Disaster Prevention, Rescue and Recovery.

[17] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, art. 6.

pregnant women.[18] Several interviewees reported witnessing public executions over the past decade. The Government reported that public executions were an exception, used in cases of "heinous" murder without remorse, in cases where the criminal had committed repeated crimes, causing serious harm to others, and in cases where the victim's family requested such an execution.[19] Since 2020, public executions have reportedly been undertaken for cases involving, inter alia, the distribution foreign media and the violation of epidemic prevention laws. Executions are reportedly carried out by firing squad after trials that do not meet fair trial standards.

25. Despite some government campaigns, corruption has deeply infiltrated governance, including the judiciary, since at least 2014. Bribery has become essential in practice for citizens, who must resort to it to defend their legal rights and avoid being charged with violations. The criminalization of fundamental rights, such as to move, to communicate and to earn a living, has given officials significant leverage to demand bribes. Detention and judicial processes are heavily influenced by an individual's ability to pay bribes, thus exposing poor and vulnerable individuals to severe rights violations if they are unable to pay. Almost all former senior officials interviewed by OHCHR admitted that accepting bribes was unavoidable, owing to low State salaries and an obligation to generate income for their State organization. At the same time, given the restrictions imposed by the State over its population, reducing corruption would further restrict the limited possibilities, often accessible only through bribes, for people to travel, seek employment or avoid harsh treatment.

26. Throughout the past decade, repatriated individuals were subjected to serious human rights violations, including arbitrary detention, torture, ill-treatment, enforced disappearance and sexual and gender-based violence. Many were separated from their children. Escapees allegedly intending to flee to the Republic of Korea were treated as committing serious crimes against the State and thus subjected to particularly harsh punishment. Former government officials revealed to OHCHR that special arrest teams were dispatched to capture and repatriate escapees from other countries. Punishments for illegal border crossing have increased since 2020; suspects who intended to defect are sentenced to a minimum of five years in prison. After the partial opening of the borders in 2023, hundreds of people were repatriated from China, at variance with its non-refoulement obligations.

27. During the period under review, there was no resolution on the issue of enforced disappearance and abductions. According to reports, disappearances in the country, and cases of abduction, of foreign nationals continue to remain unresolved, despite continued investigations in the countries of origin. The victims are aging and some of their family members have passed away. In the Stockholm Agreement of 2014, the Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea agreed to conduct investigations on all nationals of Japan in the country, including abductees, but in 2016 it announced that it would halt those investigations. Since then, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has reverted to its claim that the abductions issue had been resolved.[20] The Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances has regularly raised concerns about the scale of enforced disappearance in the country. By 2025, it had communicated 450 cases to the Government,[21] involving, inter alia, abductions of foreign nationals, including of the Republic of Korea and of Japan; former prisoners of war; repatriated persons; victims of the 1969 Korean Air Lines hijacking; and victims of the Paradise on Earth campaign. The Working Group has noted that the Government had failed to provide substantive information to clarify those cases.[22]

28. During the period under review,[23] three reunions of families separated by the Korean War were held, involving 526 families.[24] The United Nations has regularly called for more family reunions and long-term contact options to reduce the anguish for these families. The

[18] A/HRC/58/11, para. 87.
[19] A/HRC/58/11, para. 87; and https://webtv.un.org/en/asset/k1s/k1siu17x8h (02:06:38).
[20] A/HRC/58/11, para. 123.
[21] See A/HRC/57/54.
[22] A/HRC/54/22, para. 72.
[23] February 2014, October 2015 and August 2018.
[24] See https://reunion.unikorea.go.kr/reuni/home/pds/reqststat/list.do?mid=SM00000129 (in Korean).

Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has not agreed to video calls. Of the 134,291 people listed by the Republic of Korea in its registry of separated families, 97,350 have died. Of the remaining 36,941, more than 65 per cent are over 80 years old.[25] This underlines the urgency and tragedy of the current situation.

C. Development and economic, social and cultural rights

29. Since the 1990s, informal markets (*jangmadang*) have provided a means for economic opportunities for livelihoods, particularly for married women in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The Government tolerated those markets and facilitated their expansion until 2020, after which private commercial activities were labelled "anti-socialist behaviour" and thus limited. While informal markets remain in operation, reports suggest that the Government has reduced their operating hours, made it more difficult to obtain authorization to trade, and reduced the volume of goods being traded, thereby reducing any viable opportunities for livelihoods for many families.

30. Unless serving in the military, all men and unmarried women are required to work at State-owned workplaces, with any absence punishable by law. These workplaces often pay poorly, if at all. Many of these companies were not operating, or were operating at a low capacity, during the past decade due to a lack of electricity and raw materials as a result of sanctions. To survive, employees pay a certain amount to be absent from their workplaces and engage in other money-making activities. Married women who are exempted from State-assigned jobs are often targeted for mobilization for government projects. In late 2023, the Government increased the salary of workers and public officials by as much as 50 times the previous rate. As most workers receive none or very little of their wage entitlement, this salary increase is likely to have scant impact on living standards.

31. Forced labour has become deeply institutionalized over the past decade, through forced mobilizations in the prison system, in the military, in "shock brigades", in neighbourhood watch units and other community groups, in the school system and among overseas workers. The large prison population is required to carry out physically demanding tasks, such as paving roads, cutting trees and harvesting crops, or work in other physically demanding sectors, such as manufacturing and construction. Former detainees reported being forced to produce goods for export, such as wigs, fake eyelashes and hats. Shock brigades are forced mobilizations for specific tasks, usually in physically demanding and hazardous sectors, such as mining and construction. Workers join shock brigades to increase their chances of becoming party members or to improve their social status. Shock brigade members often come from poorer families. In recent years, the Government has used thousands of orphans and street children for labour in coal mines and other hazardous environments, where they work long hours. Deaths are reportedly frequent during these mobilizations; however, rather than providing health and safety measures, the Government publicly glorifies deaths as a sacrifice to the leader. In its resolution 2397 (2017), the Security Council required the repatriation, by 2019, of all nationals of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea who were working overseas. While this reduced their numbers, such overseas workers, including in the information technology, construction and hospitality sectors, are still deployed, reportedly as "students". There are no credible reported figures of the number of overseas workers from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea who currently remain abroad.

32. Education remains free and compulsory from primary to secondary level, with nearly universal enrolment rates. Students are, however, required to make monetary contributions for books, supplies and facility upkeep, which prevents children from lower-income families from regularly attending school. A focus on political ideology remains a central feature of education and has been further strengthened in recent years. Young people have reported that they no longer see the value in studying and attending universities, as education does not guarantee a better life. The Government has stated that it aims to make education more

[25] See https://unikorea.go.kr/books/whitepaper/whitepaper/white_2025/index.html#p=1 (in Korean).

modern and technology-based;[26] however many schools lack electricity and other basic services and facilities.

33. In the 2024 Global Hunger Index, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea ranked 118th out of 127 States. The indicators used to calculate the score reflected extremely alarming rates of undernourishment, serious levels of child wasting and moderate child mortality rates in the country.[27] Chronic food insecurity persisted during the decade due to inadequate domestic production, floods and natural disasters, lack of arable land, insufficient State investment in agriculture and, to a certain extent, sanctions. The country has been facing intergenerational undernourishment since the collapse of its public distribution system in the 1990s, which reduced food accessibility and weakened the Government's ability to provide food. Over 40 per cent of the population in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was undernourished.[28] Almost all the people OHCHR interviewed mentioned not having adequate food, and that detainees and older persons faced severe food insecurity. Eating three meals per day is a luxury for most people in the country. Within the family, women receive less and worse quality food. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened food insecurity; the senior leadership warned of a food crisis, and many escapees reported that there was a severe lack of food (including in Pyongyang) and that people had died of hunger between 2021 and 2023.

34. During the past decade, the Government did not provide rations through its public distribution system, except to select groups, such as veterans with disabilities, soldiers and senior officials. Since 2015, several laws have been amended to centralize grain procurement, management and distribution. Since 2020, the Government has centralized grain management to stabilize prices, leading to an increase in subsidized public grain shops and a drastic reduction in private grain sellers in markets. These measures have strengthened the Government's control of food production, management and distribution.

35. The Government states that medical care is free, and publicizes new hospitals. Accounts from escapees reveal that access to essential health services is limited and depends on one's ability to pay. Hospital patients are required to bring their own drugs, medical supplies, fuel and food to receive treatment. COVID-19 exacerbated the shortages in the health system. A 2022 law centralized the distribution of medicines and imposed strict punishments for illegal sales. This has affected much of the population who had relied on medicine sold privately in markets.

36. National immunization rates in the country exceeded 96 per cent before the COVID-19 pandemic, but dropped to below 42 per cent by mid-2021. In 2022, no children or pregnant women received routine vaccinations, due to a lack of stock. An estimated 500,000 children missed routine immunizations during COVID-19. In 2023 and 2024, the Government, supported by United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), conducted a nationwide catch-up vaccination campaign for mothers and children who had missed vaccinations during the pandemic.

37. A feature of the decade has been the Government's focus on large-scale housing and manufacturing projects, announcing plans in 2021 to build 50,000 new apartments in Pyongyang by 2025. In 2024, the "20×10" rural development initiative was launched to build 20 new factories annually in rural counties for the next 10 years to enhance regional economies, improve living standards and address rural-urban disparities. In the past, similar infrastructure projects raised serious human rights concerns, including the use of forced labour, lack of workplace health and safety and forced evictions.

D. Equality and non-discrimination

38. OHCHR interviews reveal that discrimination based on *songbun*, a system of classification of people based on State-assigned social class and birth,[29] continued to be

[26] See https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/kimjongun_2019_newyearaddress.pdf/file_view.
[27] See https://www.globalhungerindex.org/korea-dpr.html.
[28] See https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/b08bed4d-75d3-4dfe-8ef1-ce806bc11229/content and https://www.wfp.org/countries/democratic-peoples-republic-korea.
[29] A/HRC/25/63, paras. 32, 33 and 37.

pervasive during the past decade, despite Government claims that the concept does not exist.[30] The system of resident registration and movement restrictions is also discriminatory, as it reserves residence in Pyongyang, or even visits to the city, for political elites. The stark differences in the socioeconomic indicators between rural and urban regions reflect this socioeconomic discrimination.

39. In December 2016, the State ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This was followed by an official visit from the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, in 2017 – the only visit ever to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea by a Special Rapporteur. A new law on the protection and promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities was adopted in 2023. About six per cent of citizens have disabilities, with more women than men living with disabilities. OHCHR noted some improvements in the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities. For example, in the past, persons with disabilities were expelled to rural areas from cities, whereas now they can live in Pyongyang and other cities. The Government, in its initial report to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,[31] outlined several policies and structural reforms to protect and promote the rights of persons with disabilities. Despite these commitments, significant gaps remain. Persons with disabilities continue to face stigmatization and discrimination. Inclusive education is limited, with low enrolments of children with disabilities. Little infrastructure is accessible, including public buildings built recently.

40. Children are subjected to various forms of forced labour, ideological indoctrination and chronic malnutrition. Students are regularly mobilized for farm work during the planting and harvest season, without any compensation. The Government has claimed that forced labour is forbidden and that student work on farms is for educational purposes, noting that a 2016 law on the implementation of educational programmes prevents the forced mobilization of school children outside of the educational programme.[32] Children lack access to independent information, and their rights to freedom of opinion and expression are not respected. Children under the age of 5 face chronic food insecurity, with malnutrition rates consistently over 40 per cent for the past decade. In 2023, UNICEF reported that in some provinces, over 4 per cent of children screened at treatment facilities were affected by severe or moderate acute malnutrition.[33] During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were reports that increased food shortages had led to a rise in the number of children in street situations.

41. The Government has held that that gender equality has long been achieved, citing constitutional and legal guarantees.[34] In practice, gender discrimination is deeply rooted in State institutions, education, employment and the private sphere. Women are underrepresented in leadership, public institutions and senior positions in the Workers' Party of Korea. With the national decrease in childbirth, the role of women has been shaped in recent years as the "mother hero": women are encouraged to have more children and are cast solely as caregivers, which limits women's full economic and social participation.

42. The exemption of married women from State employment allows them to engage in private commercial activities. During the past decade, married women have been shouldering the dual responsibility of domestic care and household economic activities. While this has brought welcome economic empowerment to women, it has left them vulnerable to abuse by authorities, as private commercial activities are not fully legal. Women were hit hardest during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the Government placed restrictions on private markets, their main source of income.

43. Most women interviewed by OHCHR reported that domestic violence against women and girls was widespread, but was largely unreported due to cultural stigma and inadequate legal protection. Authorities typically fail to investigate these incidents, perceiving them as private matters. The findings of the 2017 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey indicated that around 10 per cent of women and 8 per cent of men believed there were justifications for

[30] A/HRC/58/11, para. 77.
[31] CRPD/C/PRK/1.
[32] A/HRC/58/11, paras. 78 and 82.
[33] See https://www.unicef.org/media/152111/file/Democratic-Peoples-Republic-of-Korea-%28North-Korea%29-2023-COAR.pdf.
[34] See https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282482021_VNR_Report_DPRK.pdf.

men to beat women.[35] In 2017, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women recommended that the Government eliminate discriminatory stereotypes and patriarchal attitudes about gender roles.[36]

44. OHCHR has documented cases of sexual and gender-based violence by law enforcement officials. Over the past decade, as more women engaged in commercial activities in informal markets, they faced increased inspections and exploitation by officials under threats of detention, fines, bribes and sexual violence. Women usually remained silent to avoid worsening their situation and were unaware of complaint procedures, which were not victim-centred or efficient. In detention facilities, women were not provided with essential gender-specific healthcare services and hygiene materials, which violated their sexual and reproductive rights. Reports indicate that strip searches and invasive cavity searches continued in places of detention after repatriation; such practices could constitute gender-based violence and, in some cases, torture. Authorities demanded sexual favours in exchange for better food and less demanding jobs. Detainees reported that the treatment of pregnant women in detention had improved in the past years, although they still faced inadequate medical care, malnutrition and unsanitary conditions.

45. OHCHR lacks sufficient information about the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer persons to assess their situations.

IV. Accountability

46. The commission of inquiry drew a number of conclusions and made detailed recommendations on accountability for systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations perpetrated in the country that it had identified; in many instances, the violations constituted crimes against humanity.[37] OHCHR and the group of experts on accountability for human rights violations in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, established by the Human Rights Council in its resolution 31/18, followed up on the implementation of the recommendations.

47. The Government has the obligation to investigate and prosecute serious human rights violations, in particular those amounting to crimes against humanity, and to provide effective remedies to victims. OHCHR is not aware of any accountability measures taken by the State during the past decade. OHCHR has continued to document patterns of ongoing gross human rights violations, some of which may amount to crimes against humanity.[38]

48. The primary responsibility for ensuring accountability for international crimes rests with the State. The High Commissioner has called on the Government to investigate and prosecute individuals responsible for alleged crimes against humanity; to accede to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court; and to ensure that victims of such crimes, and their families, are provided with adequate, prompt and effective reparation. Applicable international law establishes that such crimes are not subject to any statute of limitations or amnesty and that criminal liability may attach to representatives of the State authority as direct or indirect perpetrators of such crimes, including for the failure to act upon subordinates' unlawful conduct.

49. Given the gravity, scale and seriousness of the violations, and the State's inability or unwillingness to pursue accountability, OHCHR continues to monitor and document violations and possible crimes and preserve information and evidence in its mandated central repository. It has urged the international community to take steps to assume responsibility for ensuring accountability. Accountability efforts over the past decade by victims, civil society and the international community have included the collection and analysis of information; criminal and civil litigation; the adoption of universal jurisdiction legislation by some Member States; communications to the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court under article 15 of the Rome Statute; reparations measures; support for

[35] See https://www.unicef.org/dprk/media/156/file/MICS.pdf.
[36] CEDAW/C/PRK/CO/2-4, para. 24.
[37] See A/HRC/25/63.
[38] See A/HRC/46/52.

victims; and engagement with United Nations human rights mechanisms. Such positive steps to pursue both judicial and non-judicial forms of accountability have been reported regularly by the OHCHR.

V. Conclusions

50. **Information gathered by OHCHR shows that, despite the isolated steps taken, the human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has not improved overall since 2014 and, in many instances, has degraded. Since 2014, control by the Government over its citizens has tightened increasingly. Under laws, policies and practices introduced since 2015, citizens have been subjected to increased surveillance and control in all parts of life. As one escapee told OHCHR: "To block the people's eyes and ears, they strengthened the crackdowns. It was a form of control aimed at eliminating even the smallest signs of dissatisfaction or complaint." No other population is under such restrictions in today's world.**

51. **The majority of the 19 recommendations made by the Commission of Inquiry to the State have not been implemented. Accountability for human rights violations is minimal and accountability for international crimes remains non-existent. The profound institutional reform recommended by the Commission has not materialized. Political prison camps continue to operate. The fate of the hundreds of thousands of disappeared persons, including abducted foreign nationals, remains unknown. Meetings of separated families have not been held in the past seven years. Communication and the sending of remittances between separated families is now extremely difficult. Citizens continue to be subjected to unremitting propaganda by the State. Freedom of religion continues to be extremely curtailed, particularly for "superstitious activity". Discrimination continues to pervade society, including through the system of *songbun*, which determines people's lives even before they are born. The Government's claim that gender equality has long been achieved masks serious problems, including sexual and gender-based violence in the public and private spheres. The right to food continues to be violated, with State policies exacerbating hunger, which has been a constant feature of people's lives over the past decade.**

52. **In some areas referred to in the report of the commission of inquiry, the situation has become markedly worse. The death penalty is more widely allowed by law and implemented in practice. There have been significant regressions regarding freedom of expression and access to information, with the implementation of severe new punishments, including the death penalty, for a range of acts, including the sharing of foreign media. The general surveillance of the population is more pervasive, aided by advances in technology. People are less able to bribe their way out of arbitrary punishments. Forced labour in many forms has increased over the decade, particularly in shock brigades. The right to freely leave, return and move inside one's own country has become more limited with the reinforcement of international border control and a more comprehensive internal permit system. In the second half of the reporting period, people's ability to provide for themselves eroded with the return of State control of the economy, closing key aspects of the nascent market economy, such as the ability of many to trade in local markets. With few other sources of income, the results are devastating for people's enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights.**

53. **In limited areas, OHCHR has received reports of isolated improvements. Several laws have been enacted or amended, reportedly strengthening fair trial guarantees and protection against ill-treatment of persons deprived of liberty. The country engaged with the international human rights system, ratified two more human rights treaties, complied with some treaty bodies' reporting obligations, engaged in the universal periodic review, sought technical assistance from OHCHR and accepted the visit of a thematic special rapporteur in 2017. However, the disconnect between the State's international obligations and the lives of its citizens remains stark.**

54. **Recommendations made by the commission of inquiry to the international community have been only partially implemented. The human rights situation in the**

State remains on the agenda of the Security Council, which establishes the link between human rights and peace and security on the Korean Peninsula. Much has been achieved in the form of preparation for future judicial accountability processes, judgments in civil cases in third-State jurisdictions, truth-telling, memorialization and long-overdue movement towards reparations measures for victims. To date, the situation in the country has not been referred to the International Criminal Court. The OHCHR presence in Seoul is well established, with strong mandates on human rights and accountability, and OHCHR has reported regularly over the decade. Forced repatriations continue, despite the real risks of serious human rights violations. Inter-Korean dialogue (including person-to-person contact), and investments in peace efforts, fluctuated, with the current situation possibly at the lowest level of the past decade.

55. **The human rights landscape cannot be divorced from the broader isolation that the State is currently pursuing. In 2025, the country remains more closed and isolated than at almost any other time in its history. The flow of people into and out of the State is curtailed, Internet is not accessible and there is a blackout on most information emanating from abroad. While trade and exchanges with some countries have expanded, the country is, overall, far less connected with the broader international community. Links with the Republic of Korea have been almost entirely severed, and the long-standing national policy of peaceful reunification abandoned. The presence and support of the United Nations has been significantly reduced, with no international staff allowed back into the country since 2020.**

VI. Recommendations

56. **The current trajectory in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea will bring more suffering to a population that has endured much for decades. To this end, the High Commissioner makes the following proposals to complement the hundreds of specific recommendations addressed to the Government by United Nations human rights mechanisms, including the commission of inquiry, over the past decade.**

57. **The State has voluntarily ratified five core human rights treaties. International human rights law provides the road map for improving the situation in the country. Moving to end violations, including the intense repression of fundamental freedom, is essential to unlocking the potential of the people of the country, most importantly the younger generation.**

58. **The gravity of the situation requires accountability, including for violations of human rights that amount to international crimes. This is primarily the task of the State. Small steps have been taken in legal frameworks towards holding State officials, particularly in the justice sector, accountable, but much more is needed.**

59. **Peace is closely linked with human rights, particularly on the Korean Peninsula. The Government has stated its security concerns and the impact of sanctions. However, peace requires de-escalation and dialogue. The State's current extreme isolation is a major barrier to efforts to improve the lives of its people. In today's highly interconnected world, this situation is an anomaly. Isolation needs to give way to engagement.**

60. **Immediate steps that would build momentum and provide credibility include:**

(a) **Ending the system of political prison camps and guilt by association;**

(b) **Ending the use of the death penalty;**

(c) **Restarting family connections, including meetings;**

(d) **Ending torture and ill-treatment in places of detention;**

(e) **Providing information on persons who have been abducted or forcibly disappeared by the State;**

(f) **Distributing information about human rights to the population;**

(g) **Inviting the High Commissioner and other human rights mechanisms to visit the country;**

(h) **Accepting OHCHR technical assistance on upholding rights in detention.**

61. **The international community has a role to play towards the goals of improving the human rights situation, ending isolation and furthering peace. This requires efforts from third States, particularly those with the capacity to influence and that maintain relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The links between peace and human rights on the Korean Peninsula need to be addressed in a holistic manner, including with regard to the negative impact of sanctions on the enjoyment of human rights of the population. Accountability for international crimes and the rights of victims to effective remedies must be pursued, including through a referral to the International Criminal Court and by other States under accepted principles of universal jurisdiction, in accordance with international standards. States must fully respect the principle of non-refoulement and consistently refrain from carrying out forcible repatriations in the light of the real risk of serious human rights violations.**

62. **These recommendations are made to improve the almost sui generis human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and to give the people hope for a path towards a future of greater freedom in equality and rights. Interviews conducted by OHCHR reveal a strong desire for change, particularly among young people. The international community has a shared responsibility to keep the situation in focus, to pursue every opportunity to ensure accountability and to work towards sustainable improvements by which all citizens can fulfil their aspirations and enjoy the full spectrum of human rights and fundamental freedoms.**

Annex

Documents submitted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Secretary-General, or issued by human rights mechanisms, on the situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, A/HRC/25/63

Reports of the Secretary General on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea: A/79/277, A/78/212, A/77/247, A/76/242, A/75/271, A/74/268, A/73/308, A/72/279, A/71/439, A/70/393, and A/69/639

Reports of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on promoting accountability in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and on the role and achievements of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights with regard to the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea: A/HRC/58/61, A/HRC/52/64, A/HRC/46/52, A/HRC/40/36, and A/HRC/31/38

Reports of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to the Human Rights Council and to the General Assembly: A/HRC/58/65, A/79/235, A/HRC/55/63, A/78/526, A/HRC/52/65, A/77/522, A/HRC/49/74, A/76/392, A/HRC/46/51, A/75/388, A/HRC/43/58, A/74/275/Rev.1, A/HRC/40/66, A/73/386, A/HRC/37/69, A/72/394, A/HRC/34/66, A/71/402, A/HRC/31/70, A/70/362, A/HRC/28/71, A/69/548, and A/HRC/26/43

Report of the group of independent experts on accountability under Resolution 31/18, A/HRC/34/66/Add.1

The Report of Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities on her visit to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, A/HRC/37/56/Add.1 (2017)

Reports of Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review Democratic People's Republic of Korea: 2024 4th cycle A/HRC/58/11, 2019 3rd cycle A/HRC/42/10, 2014 2nd cycle A/HRC/27/10

Annual Reports of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances: 2024 para. 65-66 A/HRC/57/54, 2023 para. 72-73 A/HRC/54/22*, 2022 para. 52-54 A/HRC/51/31, 2021 para. 77-79 A/HRC/48/57, 2020 para. 15, A/HRC/45/13, 2019 para. 60, A/HRC/42/40, 2018 para. 90-92 A/HRC/39/46, 2017 para.74-76, A/HRC/36/39, 2016 para. 88, A/HRC/33/51, 2015 para. 66, A/HRC/30/38, 2014 para. 72, A/HRC/27/49

Annual Reports of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention: 2020 A/HRC/45/16, 2019 A/HRC/42/39, 2018 A/HRC/39/45, 2016 A/HRC/33/50, Opinion No. 59/2024 concerning Chun-gil Choi, Kook-kie Kim and Jung-wook Kim (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) para.19 A/HRC/WGAD/2024/59 (2025)

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women:Concluding observations on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, CEDAW/C/PRK/CO/2-4 (2017)

Committee on the Rights of the Child: Concluding observations on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, CRC/C/PRK/CO/5 (2017)

Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Report of the State Party CRPD/C/PRK/1 (2018), Replies of the State Party to the List of Issues CRPD/C/PRK/RQ/1 (2024), List of Issues CRPD/C/PRK/Q/1 (2022)

Thematic Reports of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

- Forced labour by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, OHCHR, 16 July 2024.
- "These wounds do not heal" – Enforced disappearance and abductions by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, OHCHR, 28 March 2023.

- Implications of the Right to Development for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and other United Nations Member States, OHCHR, 26 August 2021.
- Laying the human rights foundations for peace, OHCHR, 8 September 2020.
- "I Still Feel the Pain": Human rights violations against women detained in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, OHCHR, 28 July 2020.
- The price is rights: The violation of the right to an adequate standard of living in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, OHCHR, 28 May 2019.
- Torn Apart: The Human Rights Dimension of the Involuntary Separation of Korean Families, OHCHR, 7 December 2016.