

UN experts call for an international inquiry into North Korea human rights abuses

GENEVA (27 February 2013) – A group of United Nations independent human rights experts* today voiced support for the implementation of an international inquiry into human rights abuses in North Korea, which would shed light on the country’s extensive political prison camp system, where hundreds of thousands of prisoners and their families are believed to suffer.

“I call on the UN Member States to set up an inquiry into grave, systematic and widespread violations of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, and to recommend ways to ensure accountability for possible crimes against humanity,” said the Special Rapporteur on human rights in the DPRK, Marzuki Darusman, who will present a detailed report on the human rights situation in the country to the UN Human Rights Council, on 11 March 2013.

The rights experts stressed that reports coming from North Korea are extremely serious and disturbing and that the time has come to shine a light of truth on these allegations by appointing a robust independent international inquiry into the situation. They also recalled that the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, recently took a stand in favour of the creation of a full-fledged international inquiry.

In October 2012, the group sent a joint allegation letter to the North Korean Government expressing concern and seeking answers to the apparent use of labour camps for political prisoners, also known as *kwan-li-so*, referred to by some as *Gulags*. To date, there has been no response from the Government.

The experts said the prison camp system, reportedly in operation since the 1950s, is believed to comprise of at least six camps, each one covering 400 square miles or more: (1) Kaechon, South Pyongan Province (Camp 14); (2) Yodok, South Hamgyong Province (Camp 15); (3) Hwasong, North Hamgyong Province (Camp 16); (4) Bukchang, South Pyongan Province (Camp 18); (5) Hoeryong, North Kamgyong Province (Camp 22); and (6) Congjin, North Hamgyong Province (Camp 25). It is estimated that these camps currently hold at least 150,000 prisoners.

“Many prisoners have been declared guilty of political crimes such as expressing anti-socialist sentiments, having unsound ideology, or criticizing the Government,” said human rights expert El-Hadji Malick Sow, who currently chairs the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. “But all it takes to be sent to the camps is reading a foreign

newspaper, expressing exasperation with the living conditions in the country, or engaging in religious practices inconsistent with the State-authorized *juche* ideology.”

According to experts, up to three generations of family members of detainees are sent to the camps in North Korea, on the basis of guilt by association or collective responsibility or *yeonjwa je*.

The Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, noted that detainees are often not told the reasons for their detention or whether they will ever be released. No information regarding their whereabouts is provided to friends, neighbours, co-workers or more distant relatives who inquire about them.

“Escape attempts are allegedly punished by executions, mostly by firing squad or by hanging, which prisoners are frequently made to watch at close range,” added the Special Rapporteur on summary, arbitrary and extrajudicial executions, Christof Heyns.

The experts highlighted that prisoners are reportedly given no access to healthcare and very limited food rations, about 20 grains of corn per day per inmate, resulting in near starvation. Prisoners are allegedly commonly forced to work seven days a week in mining, logging, farming or manufacturing, with only one day of rest a month and on the three national holidays, and sometimes in dangerous conditions, causing some prisoners to lose toes, fingers, limbs or develop physical deformities.

“Torture is purportedly inflicted on prisoners for breaking camp rules such as eating unauthorized food, failing to meet production quotas, losing or damaging equipment, or even complaining about camp life,” said the Special Rapporteur on torture, Juan E. Méndez. “Female prisoners are reportedly subjected to rape or sexual exploitation by prison guards in return for food or less dangerous work assignments, and resultant pregnancies are met with forced abortion or killing.”

While the experts are still waiting for a response to their joint allegation letter, they urge the Government of North Korea to cooperate fully with the international human rights mechanisms, including any inquiry mechanism appointed by the Human Rights Council.

(*) The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Marzuki Darusman; the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Christof Heyns; the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, Juan E. Méndez; the Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, El-Hadji Malick Sow; and the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances.

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