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UNHRC: Topic #1- Human Rights Violations in North Korea

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North Korea, led by Kim Jong Un, is believed to be one of the most reclusive and oppressive regimes in the world. North Korea is virtually cut off from the rest of the world.¹ The communist party strictly censors and monitors all forms of the internet under the current regime. Foreign travel in and out of North Korea is heavily regulated and practically non-existent. For decades, reports by the United Nations, as well as other international groups and defectors, have documented large-scale human rights abuses perpetrated by the government.²

The United Nations Human Rights Council, UNHRC, has now repeatedly condemned North Korea's continued violations of human rights. In 2013, the UNHRC established a temporary Commission of Inquiry, COI, to investigate reports of human rights violations in North Korea. The commission released a 374-page report in 2014, which documented systematic and widespread abuses of human rights across North Korea. The COI cited numerous examples such as torture and inhuman treatment, arbitrary detention, discrimination, and violations of the right to life.³ In the wake of the COI report, North Korea denied any instances of human rights violations and attacked the report as a fictitious conspiracy by the United Nations.⁴

Ten years after the COI, by the UNHRC, many organizations, including Human Rights Watch, continue to report on “pervasive surveillance, repression, threats, hunger, and pain define the daily lives of millions of North Koreans.”⁵ The U.S. State Department estimates that between 80,000 and 120,000 North Koreans, including children, are forcibly held in political prison

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-15256929>

² <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/rm/2016/263581.htm>

³ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/tenth-anniversary-un-commission-inquiry-report-human-rights-abuses-north-korea>

⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2013/02/11/world/asia/north-korea-seismic-disturbance>

⁵ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/09/16/north-korea-lost-decade-of-rights-abuses>



camps. It is strongly believed that many of the prisoners in such camps have never been formally charged with a crime. Often, people are deported to these camps for spreading or viewing Western media (Movies, TV shows, music) or are family members of people who defected from North Korea. Within North Korean prison camps, prisoners are often forced to work up to 12 hours a day of manual labor. There is documentation of rampant torture, sexual abuse, starvation, and lack of medical care in these prison camps.⁶

The government of North Korea has continued to reject any claims and reports of human rights violations as baseless and false. Despite decades of international pressure and sanctions, little has changed in North Korea. The international community faces an ever-growing challenge in addressing the continued humanitarian rights violations in North Korea while being unsuccessful in making any difference for the lives of North Koreans.

Guiding questions for research:

1. How can the international community hold North Korea accountable for human rights violations?
2. What role should sanctions, international courts, or diplomatic engagement play?
3. How do we balance human rights advocacy with geopolitical concerns like nuclear security?
4. What can the International community do to protect those wanting to leave North Korea?
5. What can the International community do to protect those in North Korea and get them food, medical, etc?

⁶<https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/north-korea/#:~:text=The%20DPRK%20holds%20an%20estimated,member%20is%20accused%20or%20arrested.>



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All the best,

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Chair, United Nations Human Rights Council

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