



North Korea Crushes Its People as Nuclear Capacity Expands

Doug Bandow

September 14, 2022

North Korea's chief notoriety is its nuclear program. Another nuclear test is expected soon. The Rand Corporation and Asan Institute predict that by 2027, the North "could have 200 nuclear weapons and several dozen intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and hundreds of theater missiles for delivering the nuclear weapons." With such an arsenal, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) will be an even more fearsome presence in northeast Asia.

Also terrible is the DPRK's human rights record. It falls near the bottom of Freedom House's rankings. In almost every way—political rights, civil liberties, religious freedom—Pyongyang oppresses its citizens. Today the regime even imprisons high school students who sing K-Pop songs.

A new report details the horrors of the North Korean detention system and its role in the commission of crimes against humanity. According to the International Bar Association and Committee for Human Rights in North Korea:

This Inquiry finds that there are reasonable grounds to conclude that the following ten of the eleven crimes against humanity listed in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court adopted in 1998 ("Rome Statute") have been, and continue to be, committed: (1) murder, (2) extermination, (3) enslavement, (4) forcible transfer, (5) imprisonment or severe deprivation of physical liberty, (6) torture, (7) sexual violence, (8) persecution, (9) enforced disappearance, and (10) other inhumane acts.

That is quite a record. Unsurprisingly, Pyongyang declined an invitation to participate in the inquiry.

North Korea has created an unprecedented communist totalitarian state, even far more absolutist than Western Marxist-Leninist states, based on the *suryong* principle of complete submission to the leader, who is supposed to reign supreme. Kim Jong-un's title of Supreme Leader has practical meaning, as subservience is institutionalized and taught to all. One witness explained: "Not only do the Ten Principles of Monolithic Ideology serve as the guidebook for all party members, security services, government leaders, and personnel with regards to violations of

loyalty and political ideology, [they are] also used as a standard to which every leader, manager, and department Director is held in the performance of their respective duties.”

The security services are particularly important in this regard, since “education” is increasingly insufficient to ensure blind loyalty to the regime. Kim, who cohosted a K-Pop concert just five years ago, has since launched a crackdown on anyone imbibing foreign, especially South Korean, culture. For this, enhanced coercion is necessary: “As such, the DPRK criminal justice system and its facilities do not serve a legitimate purpose; instead, they form an integral part of a State system to maintain the population’s absolute obedience to the political system and its leadership,” explains the International Bar Association report.

The resulting practice of arbitrary arrest and brutal punishment is intended to create a climate of fear. Toward this end, “the DPRK systematically uses torture, sexual violence, forced labor, inhumane detention conditions, and deliberate starvation as means of interrogation, control, and punishment.” The report’s findings are detailed—and appalling.

Investigators found a long list of crimes:

- “Arbitrary executions, infanticide, and forced abortions are commonplace in detention centers.”
- “Detainees are intentionally deprived of food as a “weapon of punishment and control.”
- “Detainees are regularly subjected to beatings and other forms of torture.”
- “Sexual violence against detainees was common.”
- “Many detainees were arrested and detained for the exercise of basic human rights, such as attempting to leave the country or practicing religion.”
- “Christians, in particular, were targeted for detention and particularly grave treatment in detention.”
- “Detainees were subjected to grueling forced labor and abhorrent living conditions in detention facilities.”

This system is reinforced by “the DPRK’s elaborate socio-political classification system, or *songbun*, [which] permeates every aspect of North Korean life and is a significant motivating force for the country’s detention system.” There are three basic classes: loyal, wavering, and hostile, divided into 56 categories. This rating “plays a critical role in determining whether an individual is targeted for detention, as well as the type of detention facility they are sent to, the degree and type of punishment they are subject to, their treatment and living conditions while detained, and the length of their detainment.”

There are three general levels of detention: pre-trial centers, holding centers, and labor camps. All are essential to the imprisonment process and violate the human rights of those imprisoned. The report provides this horrifying inside look:

Pre-trial detention and interrogation can last for months in these facilities, where detainees are kept in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions with grossly inadequate food rations and are subjected to beatings, systematic torture, and forced abortions. Once interrogation is complete,

detainees are often sent to holding facilities for trial and sentencing or directly to labor-training camps without judicial process.

Detention facilities are distinct from camps for political prisoners, though both are “integral parts of official State efforts to suppress opposition, highly secretive, and managed by a chain of command that traces its way to the very top of the DPRK leadership.” Most such prisons are either along the Chinese border or the coast, for the purpose of isolating prisoners. It should come as no surprise that Pyongyang rejects criticism of its practices: “The DPRK regime has repeatedly denied that these detention facilities are anything but labor-reform institutions where individuals are held for ‘reform through labor,’ and are ‘remunerated for their efforts.’”

Much of the report provides evidence for the charges made against the DPRK. The terrible examples of brutality and cruelty are unrelenting and leave no doubt that North Korea deserves its dismal human rights rating. What the analysis does not offer is an effective strategy to change Pyongyang’s behavior.

The brutally frank document concludes with what can only be deemed a wan wish for addressing North Korea’s human rights abuses:

In addition to criminal prosecution for these crimes, the full range of mechanisms for accountability and redress should be considered to achieve a comprehensive set of objectives. Ultimately, justice should be pursued in the most comprehensive and victim-oriented manner as possible, in line with the wide range of human rights and international humanitarian law violations that have been and continue to be committed in the DPRK.

True, but so long as the Kim dynasty remains in power, heavily armed though impoverished, there appear to be no effective “mechanisms for accountability and redress.” However, the report remains useful, a reminder of the need to confront North Korea’s security threats, especially its growing nuclear arsenal. Absent some resolution of the challenge posed by the latter, it is difficult to imagine addressing the regime’s terrible human rights record.

Now is the time to plan for a better, though yet unrealized, future. We mustn’t allow a focus on nukes to obscure the fact that freeing the oppressed will be critical in promoting a democratic and prosperous North Korea and stable northeast Asia.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of several books, including *Foreign Follies: America’s New Global Empire*.*