



Human Rights and Democracy: The 2012 Foreign & Commonwealth Office Report - Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)

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We have seen little improvement in the human rights situation in the DPRK in 2012. There continue to be reports of widespread and systematic human rights abuses, including the use of the death penalty and the arbitrary manipulation of the judicial system. Fundamental freedoms, including freedom of speech, remain severely curtailed. The continued use of political prison camps remains of particular concern. In his report to the UN General Assembly in September, the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the DPRK highlighted that there continue to be an estimated 150,000-200,000 people in prison camps in the DPRK. Evidence from defectors and NGOs, collected over a number of years, suggests that severe human rights violations take place within the camps, including the use of forced labour, torture, starvation, sexual violence against women and executions for dissent. It is difficult to assess fully the extent of the human rights abuses because the DPRK government refuses to allow independent human rights observers access to the country. This includes the UN Special Rapporteur. Despite continued lobbying, the DPRK authorities have continued to insist that they will not cooperate with either the UN or the EU on human rights.

The World Food Programme assessment is that people in the DPRK remain chronically malnourished. A rise in the production of basic carbohydrates, rice and corn, was countered by falling production of protein, fats and other essentials for a healthy diet. The DPRK leader, Kim Jong Un, has been in power for over a year and has promised publicly to improve the living standards of people. The UK would welcome efforts by the DPRK to develop its economy, but we have not yet seen any concrete measures which would achieve this. Military spending remains a national priority. While at the same time as seeking international aid, the DPRK spent hundreds of millions of dollars on two satellite launches in April and December. It has also devoted significant resources to civic amenities such as amusement parks in Pyongyang, when it lacks the infrastructure to allow for effective food production or distribution in the rest of the country.

Throughout 2012, the UK continued to pursue a policy of critical engagement with the DPRK government. We have repeatedly raised our concerns about the most severe human rights abuses,

including the use of political prison camps. We have also pressed for DPRK engagement with the UN, and particularly with the Special Rapporteur, on the human rights situation in their country. Human rights also remain a key focus of visits to the UK by DPRK officials sponsored by the British Embassy in Pyongyang. During a visit by officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in September, we discussed the UK's approach to reporting for the UN Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review, and the importance of transparency. We also arranged a visit by DPRK officials to a UK magistrates' court to facilitate understanding of the UK justice system. In November, we provided funding for training in the UK in English language and culture for DPRK junior government officials, including members of the Korean Workers' Party and the Ministry for People's Security. This included exposure to many aspects of the UK relevant to human rights, including the political system, the media and the judicial system.

The UK has continued to raise its concerns about the DPRK's human rights record in multilateral forums. We supported the annual resolution on the DPRK in the Human Rights Council, which was passed unopposed for the first time. We also co-sponsored the annual General Assembly Resolution, which was also passed without a vote. The UK has been active in participating in debates on the UN Special Rapporteur's reports on the DPRK, and we have brought his reports to the attention of the DPRK government.

We have also undertaken work aimed at improving the lives of vulnerable groups in the DPRK. With assistance from the British Embassy in Pyongyang, the DPRK sent their first athlete to the Paralympic Games in London. We hope that this will help to raise awareness and improve the status and treatment of disabled people in the DPRK. We also supported two small-scale projects which improved the facilities in schools for disabled people. In February, the British Embassy in Pyongyang facilitated a visit by a DPRK delegation working with people with spinal injuries to the UK. The delegation has shared their learning from this training with others in the DPRK.

The British Embassy in Seoul also works towards improving the human rights of the DPRK defector community in the Republic of Korea through its "English for the Future" programme. By providing English-language training, internships and Chevening scholarships, the programme helps to tackle some of the barriers which prevent defectors from integrating successfully into Korean society. Given the lack of progress on the major human rights issues, we will continue to raise our concerns with the DPRK government at every opportunity. We will also continue to co-sponsor UN resolutions on the human rights situation in the DPRK until we see concrete improvements. In addition, the UK with the EU and Japan will propose to the Human Rights Council that the UN introduces a Commission of Inquiry to report on some of the worst human rights abuses in DPRK, including those in political prison camps. We will continue to press the DPRK on the importance of transparency and cooperation with the UN. Given the positive progress on disability issues, we will continue to work with the DPRK authorities on improving support for disabled people. We will continue to seek increased access by British diplomats to areas of the DPRK outside Pyongyang, so that we can increase our understanding of the human rights situation outside the capital. We will encourage the DPRK government to deliver on its promise to improve the living standards of all its people.

Elections

Kim Jong Un was formally announced as Supreme Leader of the DPRK within days of his father dying on 17 December 2011. This happened without any clear democratic process. It was not until April that he was formally elected by the Supreme People's Assembly. This suggests that the DPRK has no plans to change its policy of appointing hereditary, lifetime leaders. The Supreme People's Assembly is the only significant state organ that appears to be directly elected, although the selection of its members is far from democratic: only one candidate stands in each constituency and voting is not secret.

Freedom of expression, movement and assembly

There is little evidence of freedom of movement or assembly; and the general population is required to attend political gatherings in support of the DPRK leadership at regular intervals. The DPRK government maintains tight control over media, and access to foreign broadcasting is strictly limited. Reports suggest that people found accessing foreign media without authorisation are subject to punishment, including imprisonment.

Human rights defenders

The security apparatus is ubiquitous in the DPRK and we have no evidence that there are any human rights defenders in the country. Some people who have defected have provided first-hand accounts of the human rights abuses. A number now work with NGOs to campaign for the improvement of human rights in the DPRK.

Access to justice and the rule of law

The juridical system is not independent. The constitutional changes made in April confirmed that its prime function is to protect the existing, socialist, political system.

Death penalty

There are 22 crimes that are officially punishable by death, but which are ambiguously defined in law. The DPRK does not provide statistics on the use of the death penalty, but reports suggest that its use continues.

Torture

There is a substantial body of evidence from defectors that the DPRK government routinely uses torture in the criminal justice system. The DPRK denies this, but the volume of testimonials claiming that the practice continues is significant. The British Embassy in Seoul produced a Korean version of the Essex University *Human Rights Centre/Foreign and Commonwealth Office Torture Reporting Handbook* in March 2012. The handbook has been translated into many languages over the last 15 years, but this is the first time it has been produced in Korean. The Embassy will be working with NGOs in the Republic of Korea to make sure that the testimonies of defectors from the DPRK are properly documented and reported to the multilateral agencies.

Freedom of religion or belief

The DPRK has a small number of state-controlled churches and other places of worship, and reportedly 500 house churches. There are many reports, however, that people who are involved in religion outside these state-controlled organisations have been imprisoned for practising their beliefs.

Women's rights

Despite formal equality, there is evidence that the traditional subservient view of women is pervasive. Consistent reports suggest that sexual abuse and domestic violence is common. Conditions in the DPRK have also led thousands of women to cross the border into China illegally every year, where they are vulnerable to human-trafficking gangs and sexual exploitation.

The British Embassy in Seoul is currently funding a research project to assess the DPRK's implementation of its obligations in the area of women's rights, including women with disabilities and mothers of children with disabilities. This will contribute to the formulation of recommendations by the international community for the DPRK's next Universal Periodic Review in 2014 and to its review under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Minority rights

The DPRK authorities deny that lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people exist. There is consequently neither legal nor practical protection for their rights.

Children's rights

Children are formally entitled to free education and healthcare. In September, the DPRK extended the period of compulsory education from 11 to 12 years. Over the past year, however, children have been removed from school for a substantial amount of time to participate in national events, for example the annual (mass gymnastics and cultural) Arirang Festival. There is also evidence that children have been forced to participate in military drills and are used for child labour. Given the level of malnutrition and poor healthcare facilities in the DPRK, many children do not have the basic necessities to enjoy their economic and social rights.

The British Embassy in Pyongyang supported several small projects to improve nutrition for young children. These included one which supplied a secure source of soybean milk to young children, two which funded greenhouses to support food growth for childcare centres, and one which provided freezers to a fish production unit supplying 261 welfare facilities. All of these projects were aimed at improving the diet of children outside Pyongyang who suffer from a particularly poor diet.

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