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Head of state: **Kim Jong-un**

Head of government: **Choe Yong-rim**

Systematic human rights violations remained widespread. The food crisis persisted, with chronic and widespread malnutrition still a public health concern. Millions faced continued food insecurity and remained dependent on food aid. Despite reports that one political prison camp had closed, tens of thousands remained detained in such camps where they were subjected to sustained violations of their human rights, including extrajudicial executions, forced labour and torture and other ill-treatment. There were reports of executions, including of those purged in the leadership transition. Severe restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression, association, opinion and assembly persisted. The media remained under strict control.

Background

Kim Jong-un, North Korea's Supreme Leader following the death of his father in 2011 was elected to the newly created position of First Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea on 11 April and promoted to Marshal of the Korean People's Army in July. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) successfully launched an Unha-3 rocket on 12 December, sending a satellite into space, after a number of failed attempts.

State media announced a prisoner amnesty in January, due to begin 1 February, marking the anniversary of the birth of the late North Korean leader Kim Jong-il; however, no information about the releases was made public.

In July, floods resulted in severe damage to housing, infrastructure and public buildings. According to government figures, at least 212,200 people were left homeless and 169 people were killed.

Food crisis

Despite reports that harvests had improved for a second year, food insecurity remained widespread. In November, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization and World Food Programme Crop and Food Security Mission report stated that although household food consumption had improved, "serious gaps remained between recommended and actual nutrient intake. The predominant share of the population remains food insecure". Chronic malnutrition continued to plague most people, with several reportedly dying of starvation.

Arbitrary arrests and detention

Hundreds of thousands remained arbitrarily detained, or held for indeterminate periods without charge or trial in political prison camps and other detention facilities. Detainees faced systematic and sustained violations of their human rights, including extrajudicial executions and long hours of forced hard labour with no rest days. Torture and other ill-treatment appeared to be widespread in prison camps. Many detainees died due to forced labour in perilous conditions, including inadequate access to food or medical care.

In October, there were reports that Political Prison Camp 22 in Hoeryong, North Hamkyung province, had been closed. It was not clear when the prison camp closed and where the prisoners, estimated at between 20,000 and 50,000, had been transferred. The camp, one of five of its kind, was a total control zone where inmates were held for life, without reprieve. Many of those held in political prison camps had not committed any crime, but were related to those deemed hostile to the regime and were held as a form of collective punishment.

- In response to a query from the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the government stated in April that Shin Sook-ja, last known to have been held with her two daughters in Political Prisoner Camp 15 at Yodok, had died of complications linked to hepatitis. They also claimed that her daughters did not want any contact with their father Oh Kil-nam, now based in the Republic of Korea. This information could not be verified and it was not clear when Shin Sook-ja died or where. The fate and whereabouts of her two daughters remained unknown.
- In December, North Korea announced that it had detained Kenneth Bae, a US national of Korean origin, on charges of committing "hostile acts against the Republic". Kenneth Bae ran a travel company that specialized in taking tourists and prospective investors to North Korea. He had entered the country on 3 November and was reportedly detained after security officials found he had a computer hard disk that they believed contained delicate information about the country.

Enforced disappearances

The authorities continued to refuse to acknowledge cases where North Korean agents carried out abductions on foreign soil of people from countries including Japan, Lebanon, the Republic of Korea and Thailand.

- In July, Fujita Takashi attended a meeting of the UN's Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances where he raised the case of his brother Susumu, feared abducted by North Korea from Japan in February 1976.

Freedom of expression

The authorities continued to impose severe restrictions on freedoms of expression, opinion and assembly. Strict media controls were believed to have been imposed to prevent challenges to the government during its period of transition. There appeared to be no independent civil society organizations or independent political parties.

Freedom of movement

The authorities reportedly further tightened controls along the border with China and threatened individuals crossing it without permission with severe punishment on their return.

- In February, 31 people who left North Korea without permission were detained by Chinese authorities. According to news reports, in March, China forcibly returned some members of this group back to North Korea where they risked detention, torture and other ill-treatment, forced labour and death.

Death penalty

Executions of political opponents were reported, but this information could not be verified.

- According to unconfirmed reports received in October, Army Minister Kim Chol was executed in early 2012 for drunkenness and inappropriate behaviour during the mourning period of former leader Kim Jong-il.

International scrutiny

In October, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights stated that the "use of political prison camps, frequent public executions and severe food shortages, coupled with the extreme difficulty of gaining access, make DPRK [North Korea] singularly problematic." For the first time, both the UN Human Rights Council and the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly passed resolutions without a vote in March and November respectively. Both expressed serious concerns at continuing reports of systematic, widespread and grave violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights in North Korea.

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