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Situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the General Assembly the report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Elizabeth Salmón, in accordance with Assembly resolution [79/181](#).

* [A/80/150](#).



Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Summary

The present report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Elizabeth Salmón, is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [79/181](#). In the report, the Special Rapporteur provides an update on the human rights situation and introduces the pattern of human rights violations committed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea beyond its borders, through international abductions and enforced disappearances of foreign nationals, forced labour of overseas workers, the deployment of military personnel to participate in the armed conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, cyberthreat activities and the repression of escapees.

I. Introduction

1. Traditionally, the international community has focused on a State's human rights obligations to individuals within its own territory or in its jurisdiction. While affirming the core significance of this approach, in the present report the Special Rapporteur brings attention to the transnational dimension of human rights violations and its implications.
2. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has been employing and continues to employ a range of extraterritorial repressive practices, through illegal means, to silence dissent, generate revenue and strengthen militarization. The preamble to the Charter of the Workers' Party of Korea states that its current goal is to build a powerful socialist nation in the "northern half of Korea" and to implement the task of national liberation and democratic revolution throughout the nation.
3. In November 2022, the President of Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Kim Jong Un, said that the ultimate goal was to possess the world's most powerful nuclear force. Shifting policy in early 2024 from pursuing reunification to designating the Republic of Korea as the country's principal enemy, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has been further militarizing the country in an unprecedented level of isolation and expanding cross-border activities and human rights violations outside its territory.

II. Current situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

4. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea continues its isolation from the international community while tightening restrictions on basic rights and freedoms of its people inside the country. International diplomatic staff of some embassies have returned to Pyongyang and resumed their operations. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea held the first Pyongyang International Marathon in six years in April 2025, and has allowed its athletes to participate in global sports events.
5. Yet international staff of the United Nations and humanitarian and development organizations have not been able to return to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The State has continued to maintain the high-level border controls put in place in early 2020 related to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, even after the partial opening of the borders in August 2023. The number of escapees arriving in the Republic of Korea continues to be significantly lower than the period prior to the border closure.¹ In 2024, 236 escapees arrived in the Republic of Korea, and 38 in the first three months of 2025, the vast majority of whom were already outside of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea before the border closure.
6. As the Special Rapporteur stated in her report to the Human Rights Council,² people's access to basic services such as food, health, water and sanitation and education remains limited. Access has further deteriorated among some populations under the stricter control of fundamental freedoms and in the absence of humanitarian assistance or international development cooperation. Available resources for development and the realization of economic, social and cultural rights face significant constraints due to the State's policies on extreme militarization, nuclearization and related sanctions, limited partnerships and a lack of broader international cooperation. In November 2024, for example, the Director General of

¹ Over 1,000 escapees arrived every year until 2019. See www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/whatwedo/support/%3B.

² A/HRC/58/65.

the International Atomic Energy Agency reported that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was advancing its nuclear programme by continuing to commission a light-water reactor and enriching uranium at a second undeclared facility which requires resources. People's economic, social and cultural rights should not be compromised by a lack of targeted measures and investment resulting from the Government's budget allocation decisions on military spending or its refusal to receive international assistance.

7. On 6 November 2024, the Special Rapporteur and other mandate holders sent a joint allegation letter to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea regarding the reported public trial on 31 August 2024 of 11 women who had been forcibly repatriated from China.³ Allegedly, 2 of the 11 women had been sentenced to death on charges of trafficking in persons, operating adult entertainment establishments, prostitution and "insulting the dignity of people". Both women were reportedly executed on the same day. The other nine women were sentenced to life imprisonment for allegedly being involved in the trafficking of persons in China. The mandate holders requested the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to share information on the fate and whereabouts of the women but have not yet received a response.

8. During the reporting period, 25 June 2025, marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the start of the Korean War, during which, from 1950 to 1953, approximately 100,000 civilians from the Republic of Korea were estimated to have been kidnapped and relocated to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Since the end of the Korean War, at least 50,000 prisoners of war from the armed forces of the Republic of Korea have not been repatriated, and approximately 500 survivors were estimated to be held as of 2010, although it is difficult to understand the current status of the survivors as no prisoner of war has returned since 2011. Abductions and enforced disappearances were carried out even after the conclusion of the Korean Armistice Agreement. The Government of the Republic of Korea officially recognizes 516 of its citizens as post-war abductees. Six citizens of the Republic of Korea continue to be detained in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Thousands of families have been separated between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Republic of Korea and other countries.

9. In November 2024, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea participated in its fourth universal periodic review of the Human Rights Council, during which several States Members of the United Nations made a wide range of recommendations. In March 2025, of the 294 recommendations made during the review, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea accepted 143 and partially accepted 7. On 11 and 12 August 2025, the State is scheduled to be reviewed for the first time by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

10. Human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea continue to be on the agenda of the international community. On 20 May 2025, the President of the General Assembly held a high-level plenary meeting to address the human rights abuses and violations being committed in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, pursuant to Assembly resolution 79/181. At the meeting, the Special Rapporteur shared concerns on the interlinkages between human rights, peace and security. Since the Special Rapporteur has been unable to visit the country, she has continued to visit other countries to discuss the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. In November 2024, she visited the headquarters of the European Union, where she exchanged views with members of the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, the Diplomatic Services of the European Union and other relevant actors. In July 2025, she visited Japan and met with government officials, families of

³ Communication PRK 3/2024, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=29428>.

abductees and missing persons probably related to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea,⁴ as well as escapees from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, including victims of the so-called "Paradise on Earth" campaign.

11. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation strengthened their military and strategic cooperation, including through the signing in June 2024 of the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. At the above-mentioned high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly, the representative of the Russian Federation referred to its cooperation with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea as the two countries "developing relations in every area", and "acting in line with international law, in particular the 2024 bilateral agreement, which provides for swift assistance if attack on another party occurs".

12. On 4 June 2025, in a message to the people after taking the oath of office, the new President of the Republic of Korea, Lee Jae Myung, stated that "[t]he administration will make efforts to heal the wounds caused by the division and the war and build a future of peace and prosperity. Peace, no matter how much it costs to maintain it, is better than a war. It is better to win without waging a war, than win a war". The President of the United States of America also said there was communication with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The Special Rapporteur wishes to remind the entire international community of the importance of integrating human rights issues into any interaction with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea from the very beginning. The international community should be prepared to place human rights at the centre of any possible negotiations.

III. Human rights violations beyond the border

13. In transnational repression, the practice of crossing borders to control and punish not only exiles and diaspora members outside of the country, but also criticisms or human rights advocacy,⁵ is increasingly recognized as a global threat to human rights and democracy. Conventional repression through arrest, detention, threats with violence and enforced disappearances has developed to tactics including the use of online and physical repression, surveillance, harassment and disinformation. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea uses transnational tactics to have absolute control over its population, strengthen absolute leadership and generate revenue even outside of the country. In the 1970s and 1980s foreign nationals were forcibly abducted and disappeared by the State or in operations sponsored by the State, and their whereabouts are still unknown. Since the 2000s, the State has been strengthening cyberwarfare capacities by providing specialized education and training and has been dispatching groups abroad to operate cyberthreat activities. Since 2024, the State has dispatched its military personnel to participate in the armed conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine.

14. In the present section, the Special Rapporteur will look into the pattern of human rights violations that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has committed beyond its borders, through international abductions and enforced disappearances of foreign nationals, forced labour of overseas workers, the deployment of military personnel to participate in the armed conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, cyberthreat activities and the repression of escapees.

⁴ The Investigation Commission on Missing Japanese Probably Related to North Korea carries out research and investigation on missing Japanese people probably related to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

⁵ See www.ohchr.org/en/documents/tools-and-resources/civic-space-brief-tracking-civic-space-trends.

A. International abductions and enforced disappearances

15. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea historically abducted foreign nationals overseas before and even after the Korean War,⁶ in order to obtain labour forces and skills, steal identities for their spy agents, train their spy agents, train abductees as agents and provide spouses to abducted foreign nationals. Victims have included fisherfolk of the Republic of Korea, Japanese nationals, and women from China, France, Lebanon, Malaysia, Romania, Singapore and Thailand. In 2002, at the first summit of Japan and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Kim Jong Il, then Chairman of the National Defence Commission, admitted the abduction of Japanese citizens and apologized.⁷

16. The sufferings of families continue to date. Female family members are often at the forefront of searching for their loved ones and tend to suffer social and economic difficulties.

17. At the same time, victims and their family members are ageing. In total, 60 per cent of the victims of missing Japanese probably related to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea are over 70 years old, and another 30 per cent are already over 80. On 2 July 2025, one of the prisoners of war of the Republic of Korea died, leaving only six prisoners of war who have returned and are currently living in the Republic of Korea. The prisoner of war who died had been taken by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea during the Korean War and mobilized to work at a collective farm until the time he escaped the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to the Republic of Korea in 2009.

18. On 20 February 2025, several special procedures mandate holders sent an allegation letter to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea concerning the alleged recurrence of transnational repression, including abduction often followed by enforced disappearance, of Japanese nationals by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea since 1950 as a matter of State policy.⁸ During her country visit to Japan in July 2025, the Special Rapporteur met with families of abductees and missing persons probably related to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The pain of the families has not faded at all. They are determined to bring their beloved ones back while they are still alive. Sakie Yokota, the mother of Megumi Yokota, who was abducted when she was 13 years old, said "I only want to say welcome back". Families of missing persons probably related to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea stated that they have been searching for information and evidence of their beloved ones, but it has been difficult.

19. The Special Rapporteur also met with victims of the resettlement programme and the so-called "Paradise on Earth" campaign, by which approximately 93,340 ethnic Koreans living in Japan and some of their Japanese spouses moved to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea based on false promises. In October 2023, the Tokyo High Court found that Japanese courts have jurisdiction over the claims of five plaintiffs against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea seeking monetary damages for illegal solicitation and detention in connection with their relocation.⁹ The District Court is still re-examining the case. Two of the original plaintiffs have died during the course of the litigation, again highlighting the urgency of resolving such cases. During their meetings with the Special Rapporteur, the plaintiffs expressed

⁶ See <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/korea-dpr/These-ounds-do-not-heal-EN.pdf>.

⁷ See www.mofa.go.jp/a_o/na/kp/page1we_000069.html.

⁸ See communication AL PRK 1/2025, available at <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=29704>.

⁹ See A/HRC/55/63, para. 26.

their strong desire to receive justice while they are alive. There has also been some development in civil claims seeking justice for enforced disappearances in third States. In May 2023, for example, the Seoul Central District Court ruled in favour of three male prisoners of war from the Republic of Korea, ordering the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and its President to pay each victim 50 million won.

B. Overseas workers

20. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has dispatched a large number of its overseas workers to China, the Russian Federation and other foreign countries to generate foreign currency.¹⁰ Despite poor working conditions, tight controls and long working hours without proper remuneration, these workers pay bribes to the authorities in order to be selected for these positions because it is a rare opportunity to earn money. According to information received, thousands of overseas workers could not return due to COVID-19-related border closures in early 2020. Many were faced with very difficult conditions as their workplaces had closed due to quarantine measures or lack of business. They were nonetheless still required to meet their quota to be paid to the State.¹¹ Protests organized by overseas workers over unpaid wages were reported during the COVID-19 period, with some escalating into violence.¹² The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported that "overseas work represents an extension of the State's system of forced labour abroad", noting that workers "are merely used as a means to earn foreign currency for the State, with most of the money earned by workers going to the Government".¹³

21. Overseas workers live in groups and under strict surveillance by dispatched officers of the Ministry of State Security or managers of their affiliated companies of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.¹⁴ Their belongings are inspected by the officers or manager twice or three times a week. Workers who break rules, for example by possessing a mobile phone or watching dramas on Republic of Korea television, can be punished or forcibly repatriated.

22. In paragraph 17 of its resolution 2375 (2017) and paragraph 8 of its resolution 2397 (2017), the Security Council decided that all Member States should not provide work authorizations for Democratic People's Republic of Korea nationals in their jurisdictions, and decided that Member States should repatriate workers by the end of 2019. However, the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 1874 (2009),¹⁵ reported that more than 100,000 workers were still working overseas in about 40

¹⁰ According to Korea Institute for National Unification, after the strengthened sanctions in 2017 and before the COVID-19 pandemic, it had been estimated that over 100,000 workers and approximately 40,000 workers had been sent to the China and the Russian Federation, respectively. See Korea Institute for National Unification, "White Paper 2023", p. 647, available from www.kinu.or.kr/eng/module/report/view.do?idx=125351&nav_code=eng1674806000.

¹¹ The Democratic People's Republic of Korea imposes on its people a quota of goods and labour to contribute to the State. Overseas workers have to submit a quota of foreign currency.

¹² See Korea Institute for National Unification, "White Paper 2024", pp. 622–675, available from www.kinu.or.kr/eng/module/report/view.do?nav_code=eng1674806000&category=74&idx=128276.

¹³ See OHCHR, "Forced labour by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea" (Geneva, 2024). Available at www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/korea-republic/forced-labour-democratic-peoples-republic-korea-en.pdf, para. 4.

¹⁴ See Korea Institute for National Unification, "White Paper 2024", p. 616.

¹⁵ In March 2024, the Security Council did not extend the mandate of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 1874 (2009) to monitor United Nations sanctions implementation, by a veto of the Russian Federation. In October 2024, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the United States and other States established a multinational sanctions monitoring team to monitor implementation of sanctions imposed on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

countries in a variety of areas, including sewing, construction, medicine, information technology and food services, generating an annual revenue of approximately \$500 million for the State.¹⁶

23. It has also been reported that Democratic People's Republic of Korea companies have partnered with overseas companies whereby people, in particular women forcibly repatriated from other countries, are subjected to forced labour in detention facilities to produce unsanctioned items such as wigs and eyelashes to generate foreign currency. In a prison near the border with China, manufactured products are reportedly exported from the State agencies of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to their overseas partners as products falsely labelled as "made in China".¹⁷

C. Deployment of military personnel to participate in the armed conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine

24. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has deployed its military personnel to participate in the armed conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine after it signed the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with the Russian Federation in June 2024. On 28 April 2025, the President of the Russian Federation thanked the Democratic People's Republic of Korea for the deployment of its troops to the Kursk area of the Russian Federation. The Central Military Commission of the Workers' Party of Korea of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea praised combat subunits for "performing heroic feats",¹⁸ admitting their military personnel's involvement in the armed conflict.

25. On 28 May 2025, the Special Rapporteur sent a letter to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation and Ukraine respectively and asked about the deployment of military personnel of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to the armed conflict between Russian Federation and Ukraine. The Special Rapporteur received a response from Ukraine on 12 June 2025, but has not yet received a response from either the Democratic People's Republic of Korea or the Russian Federation.

26. According to Ukraine, about 12,000 military personnel from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea have been deployed, including 500 officers and 3 generals. The soldiers were deployed to Russian territory in Kursk to participate actively in the armed conflict after receiving "tactical training under the guidance of Russian Armed Forces instructors". In its resolutions, the Security Council prohibits all Member States from providing military training or assistance to or from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.¹⁹ Ukraine further stated, in its reply to the Special Rapporteur, that these soldiers in the Kursk region use "Russian-style military uniforms and Russian small arms", and they are issued "military identify cards of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation without photographs and with the nationality indicating 'Buryat'".²⁰ The number of military personnel from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea killed or wounded in the Kursk region is estimated to be

¹⁶ See S/2024/215, para. 149.

¹⁷ Citizens Alliance, *Made in China: How Global Supply Chain Fuels Slavery in North Korea's Prison Camps* (Seoul, 2024), available from https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JZv0ogapIn0fLpJOX3L_KU7sjyk2vI8/view.

¹⁸ See <https://kcnawatch.xyz/newstream/1745791650-244094225/wpk-central-military-commission-highly-praises-combat-sub-units-of-armed-forces-of-dprk-for-performing-heroic-feats-in-operations-to-liberate-kursk-area-of-russian-federation/>.

¹⁹ See Security Council resolutions 1718 (2006), 1874 (2009) and 2270 (2016).

²⁰ Buryats are a Mongolic ethnic group native to some parts of Siberia.

3,000 to 4,000.²¹ On 1 July 2025, the national broadcast of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea showed footage of President Kim Jong Un kneeling and choking back tears in front of a coffin draped in the flag of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea together with several other coffins.

1. Human rights concerns regarding mandatory military services

27. The deployment of military personnel of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea raises several concerns regarding human rights and international humanitarian law. Under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Labour Organization Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), compulsory military service is not regarded as forced labour. However, the conditions under which military services are performed may render it forced labour. Conscripts receive little to no remuneration for years for military-unrelated labour, such as construction and agriculture, without safety measures, in the military in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. OHCHR raised concerns that "the forced labour of conscripts in some instances, may amount to slavery under international human rights law".²² Regarding the deployed soldiers, however, there are some reports that they have been sent "in exchange for oil and technology related to North Korea's nuclear and weapons and missile programmes",²³ and that the Russian Federation might be paying an estimated \$2,000 per soldier.²⁴

28. In addition to the risk of forced labour, soldiers reportedly suffer from malnutrition and health issues, including tuberculosis, in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.²⁵ This is particularly the case with low-rank conscripts.²⁶ Soldiers work long shifts without proper rest or holiday. During the long-service period, currently 10 years for men, they are not allowed to go home or communicate with their families. The conditions in which soldiers perform military service can constitute violations of the human rights to food, health, life and security, and work, among others, in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

29. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea does not allow conscientious objection to military service, which is based on the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.²⁷ The State does not provide in law for alternative services for those who object to military service, and the authorities reportedly have been strengthening punishment for evading military service.

30. In addition, in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, information, including all media outlets, is fully controlled by the authorities. People do not have access to full and unbiased information that directly affects their lives. The

²¹ See <https://x.com/ZelenskyyUa/status/1871216838585016699>.

²² See OHCHR, "Forced labour", para. 72.

²³ See www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/north-korea.

²⁴ See www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/korean-peninsula/addressing-challenges-emboldened-north-korea.

²⁵ See OHCHR, "Forced labour", para. 74.

²⁶ See A/77/247, para. 30.

²⁷ The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights does not explicitly refer to a right of conscientious objection to mandatory military service, but the Human Rights Committee believes that such a right can be derived from article 18, in as much as the obligation to use lethal force may seriously conflict with the freedom of conscience and the right to manifest one's religion or belief. The Committee had recommended that States Parties ensure that the law clearly stipulates that individuals have the right to conscientious objection to military service, which they should be able to exercise before the commencement of military service and at any stage during military service.

Government did not inform its population for several months of the deployment of military personnel to participate in the armed conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Mothers of conscripts reportedly started searching for information through their informal channels as to whether their sons had been sent to the armed conflict. They have not been informed of the whereabouts of their sons.

2. Human rights of military personnel during the armed conflict

31. In a time of peace, a State has obligations accepted under human rights treaties to all those within its jurisdiction, regardless of whether they are soldiers or civilians. During armed conflict, the human rights of soldiers can be restricted, but they are still entitled to fundamental human rights, in particular non-derogable rights, including the right to freedom from torture and inhuman or degrading treatment, the right to freedom from slavery and servitude, and the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

32. The Special Rapporteur asked both the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation who is responsible for ensuring the human rights of the military personnel of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea while in service. Article 6 (1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights protects the right to life. As the Human Rights Committee has stated, all States should, as members of the United Nations, make utmost efforts to avert the risk of armed conflicts as the "most important safeguards of the right to life" in the first place. On acts of aggression, and referring to the right to life, the Human Rights Committee has stated that "States Parties engaged in acts of aggression as defined in international law, resulting in deprivation of life, violate ipso facto article 6 of the Covenant".²⁸ Both the Russian Federation and Ukraine state their military operations are based on self-defence. The General Assembly has called the situation a "full-scale invasion of Ukraine" and deplored "the dire human rights and humanitarian consequences of the aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine".²⁹ The International Court of Justice ordered the Russian Federation to "immediately suspend the military operations that it commenced on 24 February 2022 in the territory of Ukraine".³⁰ The conduct of military personnel of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in Kursk is attributable to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea,³¹ and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is responsible for the conduct of the deployed military personnel.

33. The armed forces of a State are required to "take reasonable steps to protect the lives of its soldiers", including training and equipment.³² It is not clear whether there is reasonable safeguard put in place to protect the lives of the soldiers of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea; however, it is concerning that soldiers who had suffered from human rights violations potentially for many years as conscripts have been deployed to participate in the armed conflict. Malnutrition among conscripts is widespread in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and their physical and mental health is possibly not in a good state after spending years in harsh conditions, as described above. Moreover, soldiers deployed from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea are reportedly

²⁸ See Human Rights Committee general comment No. 36 (2018) on the right to life, paras. 69-70.

²⁹ See General Assembly resolution [ES-11/6](#).

³⁰ See *Official Records of the General Assembly, Seventy-seventh Session, Supplement No. 4 (A/77/4)*, paras. 189-197.

³¹ See art. 4 of the International Law Commission Articles on the Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts.

³² See Peter Rowe, "Members of the Armed Forces and Human Rights Law", in *The Oxford Handbook of International Law in Armed Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 2014), eds Andrew Clapham and Paola Gaeta, p. 538.

instructed to commit suicide to avoid capture.³³ This information has not been verified, but if that is the case, ordering suicide is a violation of the right to life. The Special Rapporteur believes that the States should take reasonable measures to protect the lives of their soldiers, including to prevent the suicide of soldiers,³⁴ which could also include the protection of basic human rights, such as the rights to health, food and water and sanitation.

3. Concerns regarding international humanitarian law

34. On 9 January 2025, Ukraine captured two wounded soldiers of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the Kursk oblast of the Russian Federation. In terms of the legal status of soldiers from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the captured soldiers held by Ukraine should meet the definition of "prisoners of war" as outlined in article 4 A (1) of the Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (Third Geneva Convention).³⁵ Ukraine confirmed, in its reply to the Special Rapporteur, that "[t]he Ukrainian side grants the status of prisoners of war to the captured [Democratic People's Republic of Korea] military personnel in accordance with all the requirements of international humanitarian law. In addition, prisoners who were injured are provided with qualified medical care by the Ukrainian side". The Special Rapporteur is reassured by this confirmation.

Protection from public curiosity

35. Ukraine released photographs and video footage of the two prisoners of war from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea following their capture by Ukrainian forces, and has disseminated information about their capture via television and social media.³⁶ Ukraine also gave media of the Republic of Korea access to these prisoners of war.

36. Article 13 (2) of the Third Geneva Convention requires that prisoners of war be safeguarded against acts of violence, intimidation, insults and public curiosity. The widespread circulation of photographs and videos showing the prisoners' identities appears to contravene these fundamental protections. Moreover, this exposure puts the families of these prisoners at risk of reprisals, and these prisoners themselves now might face a real risk of serious violations of rights if returned to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Principle of non-refoulement

37. The relevant authorities should interpret the Third Geneva Convention combined with non-derogable human rights even at a time of war, including the right of freedom from torture. They must ensure compliance with the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits the return of individuals to countries if there are reasonable grounds to believe that they may face persecution or torture, and provide comprehensive protection in accordance with international law standards. Considering the well-documented torture and enforced disappearances of forcibly repatriated escapees, it is reasonable to believe that prisoners of war repatriated to the Democratic People's

³³ See www.reuters.com/world/north-koreas-suicide-soldiers-pose-new-challenge-ukraine-war-with-russia-2025-01-14/.

³⁴ Jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights has established that armies that rely to some extent on conscription must take reasonable steps to guard against suicides where they know that a particular soldier is at risk of taking his or her own life. While the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights is not binding on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, it can be taken as interpretive guidance on the substantive content of the right to life of soldiers.

³⁵ See <https://lieber.westpoint.edu/public-curiosity-north-korean-pows/>.

³⁶ Ibid.

Republic of Korea face significant risks of torture, enforced disappearance and execution. In such cases, forcible repatriation would breach the customary international law prohibition on non-refoulement and the obligations of Ukraine as a Party to the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Prisoners of war should be given information on options and risks in order to be able to make decisions of their free will.³⁷ Based on their wishes, Ukraine could transfer prisoners of war of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to a third State. Ukraine could also grant asylum to prisoners of war from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The International Committee of the Red Cross states that "where the repatriation of a prisoner of war would be manifestly contrary to the general principles of international law for the protection of the human being, the Detaining Power may, so to speak, grant him asylum".³⁸

38. Ukraine responded to the Special Rapporteur that "[t]he Ministry of Defense of Ukraine has no information on possible persecution and torture of servicemen from the [Democratic People's Republic of Korea] who were in captivity. Given the high ideological influence of the North Korean regime on the subconscious of the military, all of them are waiting to be returned to the [Democratic People's Republic of Korea] ... However, the risk of persecution and torture against them cannot be ruled out. Therefore, repatriation of these prisoners of war to North Korea is deemed inappropriate". The Special Rapporteur takes as a first step the Ukraine authorities' recognition of the risk of persecution and torture against the prisoners of war once repatriated. It is also important that the authorities of Ukraine stated that the prisoners of war are given access to representatives of the United Nations and the International Committee of Red Cross. The Special Rapporteur requests the Government of Ukraine to make a thorough assessment of the will of the prisoners of war and the risks and rights of the prisoners of war, in cooperation with such independent bodies, and find solutions to preserve the safety of the prisoners of war.³⁹

D. Cyberthreat activities

39. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has been increasingly carrying out a wide range of cyberthreat activities, mainly for the following purposes: (a) to generate revenue through illicit activities; (b) to disturb institutions of certain States; and (c) to obtain foreign intelligence.⁴⁰ On generating revenue, some States estimate that the revenue from cyberattacks consists of 40 to 50 per cent of its foreign currency income that funds the development of weapons.⁴¹ In December 2024, Japan and the United States jointly raised the alarm that Democratic People's Republic of Korea cyberthreat actors, TraderTraitor, stole cryptocurrency worth approximately 48.2 billion yen from the cryptocurrency company, DMM Bitcoin. In a single recent case in February 2025 alone, a group of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea stole \$1.4 billion in cryptocurrency from the company Bybit, based in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, which was the biggest heist in history.⁴² The Lazarus Group appears to be

³⁷ The principle of "voluntary repatriation" was recognized by the General Assembly at the time of the Korean War.

³⁸ See <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gciii-1949/article-118/commentary/1960>, p. 548.

³⁹ See <https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irrc-871-droege2.pdf>.

⁴⁰ See S/2024/215, para. 129.

⁴¹ Ibid., para. 180.

⁴² See DTEX, "Exposing DPRK's Syndicate and Hidden IT Workforce" (2025), p. 24, available at <https://reports.dtexsystems.com/DTEX-Exposing+DPRK+Cyber+Syndicate+and+Hidden+IT+Workforce.pdf>.

behind the theft in May 2025 of \$11.5 million from the cryptocurrency exchange BitoPro.

40. On collecting intelligence and disturbing institutions, for instance, in July 2024, the Government of the United States issued an advisory concerning a cybergroup of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea that conducts a global espionage campaign to advance the State's military and nuclear programmes.⁴³ On disturbing institutions, in the Republic of Korea, for instance, cyberattack attempts on public institutions by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea have been rising. In the first eight months of 2024 alone, 2,313 cyberattack attempts reportedly targeted the Ministry of Unification, the North Korean Refugees Foundation and the Inter-Korean Exchange and Cooperation Support Association. Such acts of obtaining information could violate the right to privacy guaranteed under article 17 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

41. In relation to the objective of obtaining intelligence, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea appears also to collect information on escapees living in the Republic of Korea, the United States and elsewhere through cyberattacks. In 2018, the personal information of 997 escapees was leaked after a computer at the Hana Center, a regional resettlement support centre in North Gyeongsang Province, was hacked.⁴⁴ Escapees living in the Republic of Korea, human rights organizations that often record confidential information on human rights violations and activists constantly experience cyberattack attempts through phishing emails, texts, social media and others. According to a survey conducted by a civil society organization in December 2024, 54 escapees out of 198 surveyed had been identified as victims of hacking.⁴⁵ While the objective of hacking information on escapees is not reported, some escapees reported to the Special Rapporteur that their own and their families' personal information had been compromised, affecting their lives, including their rights to health, to privacy and to work.

Information technology workers

42. Apart from cyberthreat operators, there are reportedly thousands of information technology workers outside and inside the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, often using false identities, who together generate millions of dollars, thereby allowing the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to evade sanctions imposed by the Security Council.⁴⁶ These information technology workers and cyberthreat operators are strategically educated, trained, dispatched, managed and controlled in a large labour system of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea designed to serve the State. Primary school students who are talented in mathematics and sciences are selected to go to specialized secondary schools and then to top universities to learn programming and receive training to become information technology specialists. Then are they recruited into the Korean People's Army and assigned to the Reconnaissance General Bureau or are hired by information technology organizations and companies.⁴⁷ Since 2021, in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the National Science and Technology Committee has been reportedly managing human resources of science technology specialists, categorized according to specialized area, region and others.

⁴³ See www.cisa.gov/news-events/cybersecurity-advisories/aa24-207a.

⁴⁴ See <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20181228003300325>.

⁴⁵ See People for Successful Corea Unification (PSCORE), "Decoding Crimes: Unveiling North Korea's Cyber Threats", pp. 39–40.

⁴⁶ See S/2024/215, para. 152.

⁴⁷ See PSCORE, "Decoding Crimes", pp. 73–74; and DTEX "Exposing DPRK's Syndicate and Hidden IT Workforce", p. 12.

43. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea cyberthreat operators and groups working for the organizations and companies are expected to self-fund their activities, are given quotas like other overseas workers, and work under enormous pressure to meet those quotas. They work in small rooms with other workers for long hours and receive about 10 per cent of their revenue as a salary,⁴⁸ although the income they can receive is still higher than other overseas workers, typically in the construction or service sectors.

E. Repression of escapees

44. At the General Assembly high-level plenary meeting on 20 May 2025, the representative of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea called the escapees who spoke at the meeting as "the scum of the Earth who do not care about even their parents and families".⁴⁹ The Special Rapporteur condemns such insulting language used against the escapees and a potential threat of reprisal, given that it is the practice that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea authorities strengthen the surveillance of escapees' families left in the country and treat them in a discriminatory manner.

45. While the highest number of escapees from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea reside in the Republic of Korea, at 34,078, escapees also reside in many other countries, including Japan, the United States, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Canada and Germany. In the absence of civic space in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, escapees and victims have acted as an alternative civil society, conducting research and advocacy. For example, the Special Rapporteur met with a group of female researchers in the Republic of Korea, who were drafting a report on women's rights to be submitted to a human rights mechanism as a shadow report. Some escapees have engaged at high levels of political engagement in the Republic of Korea, the United States, Japan and other places.

46. As stated above, many escapees have been subjected to hacking and hacking attempts, which causes stress in terms of their safety and the safety of their families left in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. In the State, those who escape to the Republic of Korea are considered traitors, and their families are subject to reprisals. A female escapee who is an activist in the Republic of Korea shared her experience of receiving threats. As described in the previous report of the Special Rapporteur, the majority of escapees suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder owing to psychological trauma experienced during the process of repatriation to and escaping from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.⁵⁰ According to research, such psychological stress can be exacerbated by intrusion on their privacy through online bullying and cyberattacks; many escapees and victims feared reprisal from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, but when they faced it first-hand, the consequences were even more severe than they had anticipated.⁵¹

47. It is interesting to note that the International Criminal Court is developing a policy on cyber-enabled crimes under the Rome Statute.⁵² The draft policy published in March 2025 aims to clarify that "numerous crimes under the Rome Statute may be

⁴⁸ See S/2024/215, para. 152; and PSCORE, "Decoding Crimes", p. 80.

⁴⁹ See https://statements.unmeetings.org/statements/10.0010/2025052010000000/QqbudmLM/mHCYDWauKLnyE_nyc_en.pdf.

⁵⁰ See A/79/235, para. 16.

⁵¹ See PSCORE, "Decoding Crimes", p. 63.

⁵² See www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/2025-03/250306-OTP-Policy-on-Cyber-Enabled-Crimes-for-public-consultation.pdf.

committed or facilitated by cyber means, and that the Court's jurisdictional framework can apply to them".

IV. Conclusions

48. There is a pattern that human rights violations committed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea do not stay inside the country but extend beyond its borders. The State has historically, through its agents and collaborators, abducted foreign citizens for the interest of its leadership, and forcibly disappeared them. The whereabouts of most of the victims remain unknown to their families. The State has used a large number of overseas workers, in forced labour conditions, in order to generate foreign currency revenue. Since the 2000s, the State shifted from traditional transnational criminal activities to strengthening cyberwarfare capacities. It has dispatched many information technology workers, both as cyberattackers and as information technology overseas workers, to obtain foreign intelligence and to generate revenue. Since 2024, the State has dispatched its military personnel to participate in the armed conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine based on a treaty signed with the Russian Federation. This raises several concerns on human rights and international humanitarian law, in particular the conditions under which military service is performed in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the protection of the rights of military personnel while in armed conflict.

49. Transnational repression serves the leadership by generating revenue and other gains, and by silencing dissent. Economic, political and technical gains contribute to the further militarization of the State. By contrast, the deployed overseas workers, including information technology workers, suffer from human rights violations, and many Democratic People's Republic of Korea soldiers have been killed or injured in the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation. Meanwhile, people inside the Democratic People's Republic of Korea have to keep meeting their quotas to be paid to the State. As such, militarization places a high "military burden" on the people, and disproportionately affects the most vulnerable, including children and women. As the country becomes more militarized, resources are further reduced, the exploitation of labour to finance militarization becomes rampant and, as a result, the protection of fundamental freedoms and human rights is often overlooked.⁵³

50. The consequences of transnational human rights violations are large and long-lasting. It is challenging for the victims to seek justice. There remains no information about or family contact from the victims of abductions and enforced disappearance from other countries. According to international human rights law, the families of enforced disappearances are also victims, and the sufferings of those families amount to torture. Escapees who have worked hard to resettle in the Republic of Korea or other countries suffer psychological stress from cyberattacks and other reprisals, which makes their resettlement harder. Revenue gained through overseas workers and cyberactivities enables the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to advance its nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles programmes, despite Security Council sanctions, thereby threatening international peace and security. In parallel, people in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea increasingly suffer from hardship, without freedom or access to basic services, and in further isolation from the outside world. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea should make a

⁵³ See [A/78/526](#), para. 10.

fundamental shift in its approach: the State needs to put people first, not militarization.

V. Recommendations

51. The Special Rapporteur recommends that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea:

(a) Provide detailed information on the fate and whereabouts of the victims of enforced disappearances, including foreign abductees, to allow them to communicate freely with their relatives and to repatriate them to their home countries as soon as possible or, in the event of their death, to locate, respect, identify and return their remains;

(b) Allow communication between separated family members, including through the exchange of letters, videoconferencing technology and the resumption of family reunions;

(c) Carry out a comprehensive reform of the labour system, including overseas workers, and ensure the right to work and labour rights in accordance with international law;

(d) End the repression of escapees, including through cyberthreat activities;

(e) Make every effort to respect peace and protect the right to life of people, including military personnel;

(f) Provide alternatives to military conscription to ensure the right to conscientious objection, in accordance with the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion;

(g) Relax the restriction on information and respect freedom of expression and access to information;

(h) Recognize the fundamental right to leave and enter the country, both in law and in practice, and ensure that those who are repatriated are not subjected to punishment, such as torture, enforced disappearance and imprisonment, upon repatriation;

(i) Review its budget allocation to prioritize the realization of the economic, social and cultural rights of its people, including the rights to food; healthcare, such as maternal and reproductive care; education; and water and sanitation;

(j) Resume diplomatic engagement and grant access to United Nations agencies and other humanitarian actors, to allow them to return to the country;

(k) Strengthen engagement with the United Nations human rights mechanisms, including on technical cooperation in the implementation of the recommendations made during the fourth universal periodic review of the Human Rights Council.

52. The Special Rapporteur recommends that international community:

(a) Strengthen measures to prevent transnational human rights violations and to protect escapees from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea who have settled in their countries;

(b) Continue to engage with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea on the return of and the clarification of the whereabouts of the victims of enforced disappeared;

(c) Adopt a victim-centred approach in the development of a legal framework and mechanism for providing reparations, including fair and adequate compensation, and the fullest possible rehabilitation, such as medical and psychological care and legal and social services, to victims of human rights violations, including families of the victims of enforced disappearance, committed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea who are living under their jurisdiction;

(d) Support and encourage the role of escapees in peace and human rights in the host countries;

(e) Continue to support civil society organizations that have been working on human rights issues in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and supporting victims' groups outside of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea;

(f) Protect prisoners of war from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea from acts of violence, intimidation, insults and public curiosity; and refrain from and regulate the circulation of photographs and videos showing the prisoners' identities;

(g) Respect the principle of non-refoulment of escapees and prisoners of war from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea;

(h) Find solutions to preserve the safety of prisoners of war from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in cooperation of independent bodies;

(i) Follow up on the recommendations accepted by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea during its fourth universal periodic review and encourage their implementation;

(j) Discuss in advance how to place human rights front and centre in any possible negotiations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, making the most of the existing international human rights mechanisms.
