

NORTH KOREA TENSIONS

# North Korea forced labor system widespread, U.N. report says

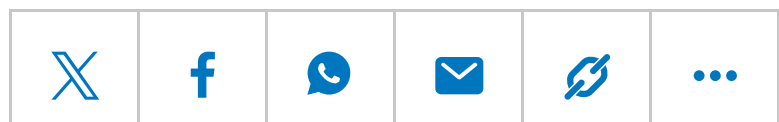
Pyongyang urged to end system of compulsory state-allocated employment



The North Korean flag flies at the country's consular office in Dandong, China. © Reuters

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SEOUL -- North Korea conscripts much of its citizenry into a system of forced labor in which they endure harsh, dangerous conditions and are vulnerable to various forms of abuse, according to a United Nations report.

The U.N. Human Rights Office in Seoul has identified several forms of forced labor that North Koreans perform, including work carried out while in detention, work performed as part of the system of compulsory state-allocated employment and workers who are sent overseas to earn foreign currency, it said in the report, released on Tuesday.

North Korea has a moribund economy and is subject to a web of strict economic sanctions that strangle its ability to conduct trade or import items as basic as petroleum products. The sanctions are intended to restrict Pyongyang's ability to develop dangerous arms such as nuclear weapons and high-powered missiles.

"This new report reinforces the conclusion that forced labor remains a central concern" over North Korea, said Eleanor Fernandez, a human rights officer at the U.N. office in the South Korean capital.

"The use of forced labor against [North Korean] citizens has become deeply institutionalized, raising serious human rights concerns, touching nearly everyone's lives," Fernandez added.

North Korea has not commented on the report but has decried previous international criticisms of its human rights conditions as attempts to meddle in its internal affairs. It has also accused bodies such as the U.N. of hypocrisy, claiming that human rights abuses are rampant in the West.

The report is based on 183 interviews conducted between 2015 and 2023 with North Korean escapees who suffered or witnessed forced labor. It builds on previous studies of human rights violations in North Korea, including a landmark 2013 Commission of Inquiry by the U.N. that remains the most extensive documentation of human rights conditions in the country.

Workplaces can contain various potential dangers for those made to toil in them, the report finds. Fernandez said North Koreans "are forced to work in intolerable conditions, often in dangerous sectors with the absence of pay, free choice, ability to leave, protection, medical care, time off, adequate shelter or food."

One male interviewee quoted in the report told of being assigned to a unit making false eyelashes and metal clasps for necklaces. "There was a daily quota. If we didn't meet the daily quota, we were beaten and our food was cut," he said.

The report also found that scenarios of forced labor put women at heightened risk of falling victim to sexual violence.

Early this year, an investigation by the Outlaw Ocean Project, published in The New Yorker magazine, uncovered evidence of North Koreans being dispatched to work in squid factories in China. "Many companies in China rely on a vast program of forced labor from North Korea," and such workers endure abuses such as beatings, sexual violence and wage theft, the project's investigation concluded.

The program that organizes such labor activities abroad is also involved in operations that include money laundering and cyberattacks to generate income to fund Pyongyang's weapons development, the investigation found.

The authors of the U.N. report do not specify the number of people, out of North Korea's population of 26 million, who are engaged in forced labor or give an approximate monetary value of their labor.

James Heenan, representative of the rights office in Seoul, said North Korea has major state bodies, such as its large military and system of state-allocated employment, that funnel most able-bodied people into various forms of forced labor. "It really is the vast majority of people in the country," Heenan said.

"The aim of this report is to make it people-centered, to show what happened to people, what was the impact on them and where does that lie in terms of international law," Heenan said, adding that the findings could eventually form part of the basis for seeking to prosecute North Korea's leadership under international law for crimes against humanity.

The authors said that North Korea is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which confer on human rights obligations on Pyongyang.

The report ends with a series of recommendations to North Korea's leadership, including ending all forms of forced labor and implementing existing laws that allow for choice of employment.

"We hope to promote a change in approach by the government ... so that the North Koreans can enjoy the human rights to which they are entitled by reason of being human beings," Fernandez said.

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