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2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: North Korea

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KOREA, DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF (Tier 3)

The Government of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so; therefore, the DPRK remained on Tier 3. The government did not demonstrate any meaningful efforts to address human trafficking. During the reporting period, there was a government policy or pattern of human trafficking in political prison camps and “labor training centers” as part of an established system of political repression, as well as mass mobilizations of adults and children and the imposition of forced labor conditions on North Korean workers overseas. The government used proceeds from state-sponsored forced labor to fund government operations.

PRIORITIZED RECOMMENDATIONS:

End the use of state-sponsored forced labor, including that performed in prison camps, through mass mobilizations of adults and children, and among North Koreans dispatched as overseas workers in violation of UNSCR 2397. * End the use of forced labor as punishment for DPRK citizens involuntarily repatriated from other countries. * Eliminate coercive tactics to monitor and limit movements and communications of North Koreans dispatched as overseas workers in violation of UNSCR 2397. * Cease garnishing wages of overseas workers

for the purposes of subsidizing the state budget. * Provide assistance to victims exploited in the DPRK and to victims returned from abroad. * Criminalize sex trafficking and labor trafficking. * Investigate and prosecute trafficking cases and convict traffickers in accordance with the rule of law. * Increase transparency by allowing international human rights monitors to evaluate living and working conditions of workers, both domestically and abroad. * Forge partnerships with international organizations and NGOs to combat human trafficking. * Allow all North Koreans to choose their form of work and leave their employment at will. * Accede to the 2000 UN TIP Protocol.

PROSECUTION

The government did not report any trafficking-related law enforcement efforts. The government did not report laws criminalizing sex trafficking or labor trafficking. Fair trials did not occur in the DPRK, and the government did not report what provisions of law, if any, it used to prosecute trafficking crimes, if it did so. The government did not provide trafficking-related law enforcement data. There has been scattered media reporting over the years that the government may have punished a small number of officials for involvement in the recruitment and facilitation of cross-border human trafficking, but this reporting could not be independently verified. Civil society reports indicated the government typically sentenced those accused of human trafficking to prison camps.

PROTECTION

The government did not report any protection efforts. Government authorities did not report identifying any victims or providing protective services, nor did they permit NGOs to provide these services. Authorities penalized trafficking victims for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. Authorities consider repatriated victims as criminals for departing the DPRK without authorization, as reported in previous reporting periods. The government sends North Koreans, including potential trafficking victims forcibly returned by the People's Republic of China (PRC) government, to detention and interrogation centers, where the government subjects them to forced labor, torture, forced abortions, and sexual abuse by prison guards; in some cases, authorities allegedly sent them to prison camps. DPRK defectors

previously reported instances of the government executing forcibly repatriated trafficking victims.

PREVENTION

The government did not report any efforts to prevent trafficking. Political repression and economic deprivation in the DPRK often prompted North Koreans to flee the country in ways that heighten their risk of trafficking in destination countries. The government did not report any efforts to raise awareness of human trafficking. The government did not report making efforts to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts, nor to provide anti-trafficking training to its diplomatic personnel. The DPRK is not a party to the 2000 UN TIP Protocol.

TRAFFICKING PROFILE:

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers – including government officials – exploit North Koreans in the DPRK and abroad. Forced labor is part of an established system of political repression and a pillar of the economic system in the DPRK. The government subjects its nationals to forced labor in DPRK prison and labor camps, through mass mobilizations, and in overseas work. The law criminalizes defection and attempted defection, and individuals, including children, who cross the border for the purpose of defecting or seeking asylum in another country are subject to a minimum of five years of “reform through labor.” In “serious” cases, the government subjects asylum-seekers to indefinite terms of imprisonment and forced labor, confiscation of property, or death. Within the DPRK, traffickers exploit women and children in sex trafficking. In at least one case, female college students unable to pay university fees became vulnerable to sexual exploitation and were sent to labor camps for their alleged involvement in a commercial sex ring serving Pyongyang elites.

The DPRK holds an estimated 80,000 to 120,000 persons in political prison camps and an undetermined number of persons in other forms of detention facilities, including “re-education through labor” camps. In many cases, these prisoners have not been charged with a crime or prosecuted, convicted, and sentenced in a fair judicial hearing. In prison camps, inmates, including children, are subject to forced labor, including in logging, mining, manufacturing, or farming for long hours under harsh conditions. In many cases, the

government also detains multiple family members if one member is accused or arrested. Authorities in some cases subject children to forced labor for up to 12 hours per day, do not allow them to leave the camps, and offer limited access to education. The government subjects prisoners to unhygienic living conditions; beatings; torture; sexual exploitation, including rape; a lack of medical care; and insufficient food, including reduced food rations for not meeting work quotas. In December 2020, the government adopted a “Law on Rejecting Reactionary Ideology and Culture” stipulating sentences include forced labor in re-education through labor camps for adults or children discovered to be consuming or distributing media from the Republic of Korea (ROK). For example, in November 2021, authorities sentenced six high school students to five years’ hard labor for watching a South Korean drama series.

The DPRK government also operates regional, local, and sub-district level labor camps and forces detainees to work for short periods doing hard labor while receiving little food and being subjected to abuse, including regular beatings. The law requires all citizens of working age to work and “strictly observe labor discipline and working hours.” Authorities reportedly send people to these camps if they are suspected of engaging in simple trading schemes or are unemployed; North Koreans who were unemployed or absent from work could be punished with internment in labor camps and other harsh measures.

Officials forcibly mobilize adults and schoolchildren to work in various sectors, including manufacturing, agriculture, logging, mining, infrastructure, IT, and construction. The government reportedly withholds food rations or imposes taxes against adults who do not participate in these forms of forced labor. In October 2021, an international organization also reported the government mobilized urban residents, discharged military personnel, married women, and orphans to work on farms. Some farms and factories do not pay wages or provide food to their workers. During implementation of short-term economic plans, factories and farms increase workers’ hours and ask workers for contributions of grain and money to purchase supplies for renovations and repairs. By law, failure to meet economic plan goals may result in two years of “labor correction.” Schools receive compensation from the government for labor conducted by children, and officials occasionally sent schoolchildren to work in factories or fields for short periods to complete special projects such as snow removal on major roads or meeting production goals. Schools also require students under the minimum working age to work to raise funds for faculty salaries and maintenance costs for school facilities. In addition, school principals and teachers exploit students for personal gain by forcing them to work on farms or construction sites. The government mobilizes children, including orphans, those who are unable to join the military, or those whose families are unable to bribe authorities, to participate in work groups or military-style shock brigades. They

are forced to work for extended periods without pay and subjected to long working hours and hazardous work at construction sites, coal mines, farms, and factories. Authorities also sometimes subject children to mass mobilizations in agriculture away from their families, with excessive daily working hours, sometimes for periods of a month at a time.

DPRK workers sent by the government to work abroad, including through bilateral agreements with foreign businesses or governments, also face conditions amounting to forced labor. Many North Koreans working overseas are subjected to excessive working hours, sometimes in hazardous conditions, with restricted pay for up to three years at a time, and without access to their passports. They reportedly work an average of 12 to 16 hours a day, and sometimes up to 20 hours per day, and are allowed only one or two rest days per month. North Koreans work in a range of industries overseas, including, but not limited to, apparel, construction, footwear manufacturing, hospitality, information technology services, logging, medical, pharmaceuticals, restaurant, seafood processing, textiles, and shipbuilding. NGOs report the government manages these workers as a matter of state policy, and they are under constant and close surveillance by government security agents. Workers often reside in shared dormitories under poor living conditions with limited freedom of movement, and DPRK government officials confiscate their passports. These workers face threats of government reprisals against them or their relatives in the DPRK if they attempt to escape or complain to outside parties. Workers' salaries are appropriated and often deposited into accounts controlled by the DPRK government, which justifies its retention of most of the money by claiming various "voluntary" contributions to government endeavors. Workers receive only a fraction of the money paid to the DPRK government for their work and face punishment if they fail to meet production or work targets. The government withholds up to 90 percent of wages from overseas workers, who generate annual revenue for the DPRK government of hundreds of millions of dollars. Wages of some DPRK workers employed abroad reportedly are withheld until the workers return home, increasing their vulnerability to coercion and exploitation by authorities. Traffickers coerce some female North Koreans in the PRC working in seafood processing plants, restaurants, or coffee shops into commercial sex acts with PRC national customers.

In 2017, UNSCRs prohibited UN Member States from issuing new or renewed work authorizations to DPRK overseas workers and required States to repatriate DPRK nationals earning income overseas by December 22, 2019, subject to limited exceptions. The vast majority of North Koreans employed outside the country continue to be in Russia and the PRC. There are an estimated 20,000-100,000 North Koreans working in the PRC, primarily in restaurants and factories. According to one media report that cited figures from PRC officials,

as of 2022 there were 80,000 North Koreans working just in the city of Dandong. Observers noted the Government of Russia continued to allow North Korean workers to enter the country in violation of UNSCRs, in some cases by issuing them tourist or student visas. In 2023 DPRK workers were also reportedly in other countries, including Algeria, Angola, Benin, Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, Indonesia, Iran, Libya, Niger, Oman, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Syria, United Arab Emirates, Uganda, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. While some may have removed most or all of these workers, reports suggested that some governments either took no action or issued work authorizations or other documentation, allowing these individuals to work.

North Koreans seeking to leave the DPRK without authorization are vulnerable to sex and labor trafficking, particularly in the PRC. Many female North Korean refugees and asylum-seekers living without authorization in the PRC are particularly vulnerable to traffickers who lure, drug, detain, or kidnap them upon arrival. Traffickers operate networks that recruit women and girls in the DPRK to be smuggled into the PRC. For example, in border towns traffickers approach women with false promises of profitable employment that would enable them to pay broker fees to be smuggled to the PRC. These women are subjected to physical abuse and sexual exploitation by traffickers, forced into commercial sex in brothels or through Internet sex websites, or compelled to work as hostesses in nightclubs or karaoke bars. Traffickers also sell North Korean women to PRC national men for forced marriages, whereby they are often subsequently forced into commercial sex, domestic service, agriculture, or other types of work. These victims often lack identification documents and bear children with PRC national men, which further hinders their ability to escape. As many as 30,000 children born in the PRC to DPRK women and PRC national men have not been registered upon birth, rendering them stateless and vulnerable to possible exploitation. If found by PRC authorities, trafficking victims are often forcibly returned to the DPRK, where they are vulnerable to harsh punishment, including forced labor in labor camps, torture, forced abortions, or death.

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