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2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: Democratic People's Republic of 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. 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, in the mass mobilizations of adults and children, and in 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 used 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. During the reporting period, there were also media reports the

government inappropriately used trafficking charges to prosecute and execute at least two women for assisting fellow citizens defect the DPRK.

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 inappropriately penalized trafficking victims solely for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. Authorities consider repatriated victims as criminals for departing the DPRK without authorization. The government systematically sent North Koreans, including potential trafficking victims forcibly returned by the Chinese government, to detention and interrogation centers as well as to prison camps, where the government subjected them to internment, forced labor, torture, malnutrition, forced abortions, infanticide, and sexual abuse by prison guards. 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:

Trafficking affects all communities. This section summarizes government and civil society reporting on the nature and scope of trafficking 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.

The DPRK holds an estimated 80,000 to 200,000 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. Observers report DPRK authorities facilitate a system through which Chinese companies partner with DPRK state-owned enterprises to outsource some operations to DPRK prison camps; through these agreements, DPRK citizens are forced to produce goods that are then transported to DPRK special economic zones along the border, exported to China, and labeled as having been produced in China. The government’s “Law on Rejecting Reactionary Ideology and Culture” stipulated sentences including 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). According to the ROK Ministry of Unification, persons convicted of listening to foreign broadcasts were executed alongside others convicted of violent crimes. The government maintained law enforcement cooperation treaties with China and Russia through which Chinese and Russian authorities extradited or otherwise returned to the DPRK North Koreans suspected of criminal acts under DPRK law. Observers reported unidentified trafficking victims were deported under such agreements, and that DPRK authorities subjected many to forced labor in prison camps upon their return.

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 to “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 are 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 July 2024, an international organization also reported the government mobilized urban residents, military personnel, married women, and school children to work on farms. Some workplaces, including farms, factories, schools, the military, and government offices, 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 send 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. These children 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, distant water fishing, 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 China working in seafood processing plants, restaurants, or coffee shops into commercial sex acts with Chinese national customers.

The vast majority of North Koreans employed outside the country continue to be in Russia and China. There are an estimated 20,000-100,000 North Koreans working in China, primarily in restaurants and factories. According to one media report that cited figures from Chinese 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 2024, DPRK workers were also reportedly in other countries, including Algeria, Angola, Benin, Cambodia, Cote d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Georgia, Guinea, Laos, Mali, Mauritius, Republic of Congo, Senegal, Uganda, United Arab Emirates, Vietnam, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. 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 China. Many female North Korean refugees and asylum-seekers living without authorization in China 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 China. 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 into China. 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 Chinese national men for forced marriages, whereby they are often forced into commercial sex, domestic service, agriculture, or other types of work. These victims often lack identification documents and bear children with Chinese national men, which further hinders their ability to escape. As many as 30,000 children born in China to DPRK women and Chinese national men have not been registered upon birth, rendering them stateless and vulnerable to exploitation. If found by Chinese 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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