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Democratic People's Republic of Korea

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DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA (TIER 3)

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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.

Prosecution

The government did not report anti-trafficking 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. Media reports in prior years indicated the government inappropriately used trafficking charges to prosecute and sentence individuals, including

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officials, to life imprisonment or execution for assisting fellow citizens to defect from the DPRK.

Protection

The government did not report any victim 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 prevention efforts.

Political repression and economic deprivation in the DPRK often prompted North Koreans to flee the country in ways that heightened their risk of trafficking in transit and 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, and diplomatic personnel directly participated in maintaining state-sponsored forced labor of North Korean workers overseas. The DPRK is not a party to the 2000 UN TIP Protocol.

Trafficking Profile

This section describes the nature and scope of trafficking based on recent reporting. 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. The government subjects prisoners to unhygienic living conditions; beatings; torture; sexual exploitation, including rape; lack of medical care; and insufficient food, including reduced food rations for not meeting work quotas. 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. 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 that 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. Some workplaces, including farms, factories, schools, the military, and government offices, do not pay wages or provide food to their workers. 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. 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 and face punishment if they fail to meet production or work targets. 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, and increases workers' vulnerability to coercion and exploitation by authorities. The government withholds up to 90 percent of wages from overseas workers, generating hundreds of millions of dollars in annual revenue for the government. Traffickers coerce some female North Koreans in China working in seafood processing plants, restaurants, or coffee shops into commercial sex acts with customers.

The vast majority of North Koreans employed outside the country are in Russia and China. There are an estimated 20,000-50,000 North Koreans working in China, primarily in restaurants, manufacturing, construction, factories, and information technology sectors. Observers estimated 15,000-30,000 North Koreans worked in Russia in manufacturing, construction, IT, restaurants, and medical sectors, often through tourist and student visa schemes. In 2025 DPRK workers were also reportedly in other countries, including Cambodia, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea, Kyrgyz Republic, Laos, Mongolia, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe. Although some countries may have returned most or all of these workers, 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. 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 to 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 possible 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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