

North Korea's Political Prison Facilities

Revised Edition of
2013 North Korea's Political Prison Camps

Kim Soo-Am

Lee Kyu-Chang

Lee Keum-Soon

Choi Gyubin

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I. Introduction

1. Purpose of Publication

Since 2003, the international community has expressed deep concern over the “systematic, widespread, and grave” human rights violations in North Korea through the annual adoption of North Korea human rights resolutions at the United Nations level. The 2003 UN Commission on Human Rights resolution on North Korea explicitly mentioned human rights abuses within numerous political prison camps, making this issue a key concern for the international community.¹ The existence of North Korea’s political prison facilities is considered to have played a decisive role in the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) reaching the conclusion in 2014 that the human rights situation in North Korea may amount to “crimes against humanity.”² The North Korean regime has operated separate political prison facilities to isolate residents deemed politically threatening to the regime. These facilities have taken the form of a village-type *kwanliso* (an “*ijumin kwanliso*”) and a prison-type *kyohwaso* for political prisoners. In particular, the *kwanliso* have applied the practice of guilt by association, depriving not only political prisoners but also their families of basic rights. To date, the terms “political prison camp” and “*kwanliso*” have been used interchangeably to refer to North Korea’s political prison facilities. Despite the North Korean regime’s denials, North Korean documents themselves confirm the existence of such facilities. To avoid confusion, this report uniformly uses the term *kwanliso* when referring to these facilities. Furthermore, unless it is necessary to distinguish between the two terms, the term *kwanliso* in this report also encompasses *kyohwaso* for political prisoners.

1 UN-level resolutions on North Korean human rights began with the UN Commission on Human Rights Sub-Commission (1997–1998), continued through the Commission on Human Rights (2003–2005, the predecessor of the Human Rights Council), and have since been adopted by the Human Rights Council (from 2008 to the present) and the UN General Assembly (from 2005 to the present).

2 North Korea denies the existence of political prisoners or political prison facilities, but the existence of (*ijumin*) *kwanliso*, *kyohwaso* for political prisoners (*jeongchibeom kyohwaso*), and political prisoners themselves can be confirmed through North Korean publications. Ministry of Social Security Publishing House, *Resident Registration Reference Book* (1993), p. 16, p. 153. North Korea operates (*ijumin*) *kwanliso* as one type of its political prison facilities. The term “*ijumin*” is understood to be the designation North Korea uses to refer to political prisoners.

Since 1996, the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) has been monitoring the human rights situation within North Korea's political prison facilities through its annual publication of the *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea*. In 2013, KINU also published a special report titled *North Korea's Political Prison Camps*, which included estimates of the number of political prisoners and the conditions in individual camps. The estimate of 80,000 to 120,000 political prisoners, presented by KINU at that time, has since been widely cited. More than a decade has passed since then, during which some camps have reportedly been closed or relocated. At the same time, international policy recommendations concerning North Korea's political prison facilities, particularly through UN mechanisms such as the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the Human Rights Council, have significantly increased.

In light of these developments, KINU has decided to publish a revised edition of its report to present the latest findings on North Korea's political prison facilities, which remain among the most serious human rights concerns in the country. The objectives of this revised report are as follows:

First, to analyze how the North Korean authorities have historically identified individuals or groups deemed politically threatening to the regime.

Second, to examine the extent to which international pressure to reform political prison facilities has influenced policy changes within North Korea.

Third, to explore ways in which the international community can raise the issue of political prison facilities in line with international human rights standards and encourage their resolution.

Through this report, KINU hopes to contribute to efforts to improve the human rights situation related to North Korea's political prison facilities by providing policy recommendations.

2. Methodology

This report analyzes changes in North Korea's political prison facilities since 2013 by utilizing interviews with North Korean defectors³ and commercial satellite imagery. Due to strict access restrictions surrounding these facilities, information on human rights conditions inside these facilities has primarily been obtained through the testimonies of a very small number of defectors, either former detainees or former guards. For the 2013 report, additional interviews were conducted with six defectors, including four former detainees, one former staff member, and one family member of facility personnel. Since then, information related to political prison facilities has continued to be gathered through annual defector interviews conducted for the publication of the *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea*. Notably, through interviews with four former detainees, this report was able to obtain detailed information regarding *kwanliso* No. 18 (formerly Bukchang, now Gaecheon). Additional interviews were also conducted with defectors who had worked for North Korea's legal institutions to better understand detention and release procedures within political prison facilities. Furthermore, the research team held multiple discussions with Ahn Myung-cheol, head of NK Watch and a former North Korean political prison guard.

Organizations such as the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK) and NK Watch have published satellite imagery analysis reports to track changes inside North Korea's political prison facilities. To verify the facility conditions reported in these studies, KINU conducted its own commercial satellite imagery analysis. In the case of *Kwanliso* No. 18 (Gaecheon), facility verification was carried out in parallel with defector testimonies from former detainees.

Finally, to develop policy recommendations for improving conditions in these political prison facilities, this report analyzed major concerns raised by the international community as well as policy recommendations made through the UPR process.

³ The unique identifier "NKHR," as used in the previous *White Paper on North Korean Human Rights*, was assigned.

3. Overview of Changes

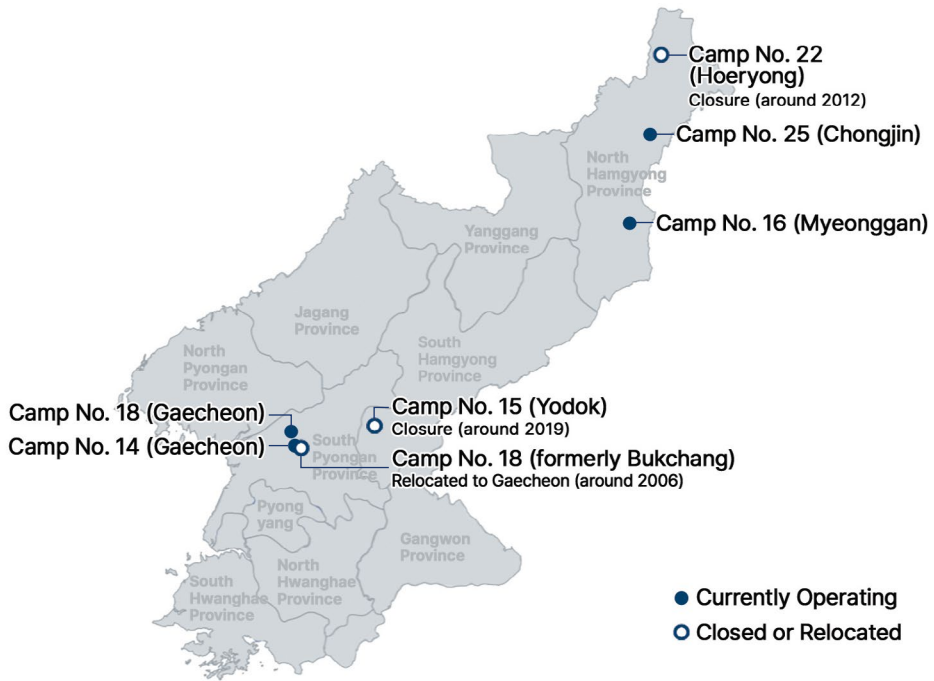
The current operational status of North Korea's political prison facilities, as identified since the publication of the 2013 report *North Korea's Political Prison Camps*, can be summarized as follows.

<Table I-1> Operational Status of the Political Prison Facilities

	Operation / Closure or Relocation	Location	Managing Authority	Name	Form	Controlled Areas
No. 14	In operation	Gaechon City, South Pyongan Province (Oedong-ri), Deokcheon City (Samgil-ri), Bukchang County (Bongchang-ri, Jamsang-ri)	Ministry of State Security	<i>kwanliso</i>	Village	Completely-controlled area
No. 15	Closure (around 2019)	Yodok County, South Hamgyong Province (Gueup-ri, Ipseokri, Yongpyeong-ri, Pyeongjeon-ri, Daesuk-ri)	Ministry of State Security	<i>kwanliso</i>	Village	Completely-controlled area / Partially-controlled area (Revolutionization area)
No. 16	In operation	Myeonggan County, North Hamgyong Province (Buhwa-ri), Orang County, North Hamgyong Province (Chilhyang-ri)	Ministry of State Security	<i>kwanliso</i>	Village	Completely-controlled area
No. 18	Relocation / in operation (around 2006)	Former No. 18 Camp: Bukchang County, South Pyongan Province / Relocated No. 18 Camp: Gaechon City, South Pyongan Province (Jayang-ri)	Ministry of Social Security	<i>kwanliso</i>	Village	Partially-controlled area (Revolutionization area)
No. 22	Closure (around 2012)	Hoeryong City, North Hamgyong Province (Haengyeong-ri, Jungbong-ri, Nakseng-ri, Gulsan-ri)	Ministry of State Security	<i>kwanliso</i>	Village	Completely-controlled area
No. 25	In operation	Chongjin City, North Hamgyong Province (Suseong-dong)	Ministry of State Security	<i>kyohwaso</i> for political prisoners	Prison	<i>kyohwaso</i> type

Source: Reorganized based on Korea Institute for National Unification, *North Korea's Political Prison Camps* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2013); Ministry of Social Security Publishing House, *Resident Registration Reference Book*, among other material.

< Figure I-1> Location of *Kwanliso* and *Kyohwaso* for Political Prisoners



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II. Who Is Detained and How Are They Controlled?

1. The Existence of Political Prisoners

North Korea continues to deny the existence of political prison facilities. During the fourth cycle of the UPR in April 2024, North Korea claimed that its *Criminal Law* and *Criminal Procedure Law* contain no provisions on political prisoners or political prison camps, and that only correctional facilities exist.⁴ However, contrary to these claims, official North Korean documents do contain references to political prisoners. For example, the *Resident Registration Reference Book* published in 1993 by the Public Security Department (currently the Ministry of Social Security) includes the term “former political *kyohwaso* inmates” in its classification system for social status and origin.⁵ The inclusion of “former political *kyohwaso* inmates” as a category of social status clearly indicates not only the existence of such facilities but also the separate supervision of former inmates, contradicting North Korea’s denials.

North Korea’s claim that no political prison facilities exist likely stems from the internal practice of referring to such sites simply as *kwanliso*. According to a North Korean defector formerly affiliated with law enforcement, official documents in North Korea do not use the term “political prison camp,” but rather refer to individuals as “*kwanliso* targets.” The term “political prison camp” was something he only encountered after arriving in South Korea.⁶ Some North Korean residents recognize *kwanliso* simply as “closed off areas” and appear unfamiliar with the concept of political prison camps as commonly understood by the international community.⁷

4 “North Korea: ‘There are no political prisoners in the Republic’... Human rights groups: ‘A complete lie’,” *Yonhap News Agency*, November 8, 2024; UN Doc. A/HRC/58/11 (19 December 2024), para. 85. “There were no political prisoners or political prison camps in the vocabulary of the *Criminal Law* or the *Criminal Procedure Law*. The laws used only terms such as criminals who committed anti-State offences and reform institutions. Those who committed anti-State crimes as provided in the Criminal Law were spies and terrorists who were sent by hostile forces. Such prisoners were kept separately from ordinary prisoners.”

5 Ministry of Social Security Publishing House, *Resident Registration Reference Book*, p. 153.

6 NKHR2021000002-2 2025-04-22.

7 NKHR2020000048-2 2025-05-09; NKHR2025000004 2025-05-08.

Official North Korean documents also mention *kwanliso*. The *Resident Registration Reference Book* contains information on the operation of *ijumin kwanliso*, separate from the section on former political *kyohwaso* inmates.⁸ This suggests that the term *kwanliso* is a widely accepted abbreviation for *ijumin kwanliso*, and the two terms are used interchangeably in practice.

In addition to *kwanliso*, North Korea operates a *kyohwaso* for political prisoners as a separate entity. Camp No. 25 (Chongjin) is categorized as a political prison camp. Located in Suseong, Chongjin City, it has often been referred to as Suseong *kyohwaso* or Chongjin *kyohwaso* in South Korea. However, based on the terminology used in North Korean official documents, it is more appropriate to refer to Camp No. 25 as a *kyohwaso* for political prisoners. The 2024 North Korean Human Rights Report by South Korea's Ministry of Unification describes political prison facilities as taking the form of villages or reform (*kyohwa*) facilities and identifies Camp No. 25 as a reform-type facility.⁹ KINU and domestic and international human rights organizations also assess that Camp No. 25 operates as a *kyohwaso* for political prisoners.

In sum, North Korea operates two types of facilities for detaining political prisoners: *kwanliso* and *kyohwaso* for political prisoners. Generally, *kwanliso* take the form of enclosed villages where not only political prisoners but also their family members, under the system of guilt by association, are detained. In contrast, *kyohwaso* for political prisoners resemble correctional facilities where only the political prisoner is confined. While further investigation is needed to clarify the specific criteria that determine whether an individual is sent to a *kwanliso* or a *kyohwaso* for political prisoners, it is evident that these two types of facilities operate under different structures and practices.

8 "Resident Survey Work Division – Inquiries into individuals in *ijumin kwanliso* under the Public Security Department must be conducted by resident registration officials of the *ijumin kwanliso* of the Ministry of Social Security. Inquiries into individuals in *ijumin kwanliso* (including reformatories) under the State Security Department must be handled by 7th Bureau of the State Security Department." Ministry of Social Security Publishing House, *Resident Registration Reference Book*, p. 16.

The names of the Ministry of State Security (formerly the State Security Department) and the Ministry of Social Security (formerly Public Security Department) have changed slightly over time. In this report, the current name is provided in parentheses only at its first occurrence, while elsewhere the name used at the time is used.

9 North Korean Human Rights Records Center, Ministry of Unification, *2024 Report on North Korean Human Rights* (Seoul: North Korean Human Rights Records Center, Ministry of Unification, 2024), p. 135.

2. Grounds for Detention

A. Anti-Party, Anti-Revolutionary, and Anti-State Crimes

The *Resident Registration Reference Book* published by the Public Security Department (now Ministry of Social Security) in 1993 describes individuals released from *kyohwaso* for political prisoners as those who had been subjected to reform for committing “anti-Party, anti-revolutionary, and anti-state crimes.”¹⁰ This provides clear insight into the types of acts that constitute grounds for incarceration in North Korea’s political prison facilities.

First, the fact that anti-Party and anti-revolutionary acts are listed as grounds for incarceration indicates that any behavior contradicting the Supreme Leader’s directives (Kim Il-sung’s instructions, Kim Jong-il’s teachings, Kim Jong-un’s orders), the Workers’ Party of Korea (WPK) policies, or the *Ten Principles for the Establishment of the Party’s Monolithic Ideological System* (hereafter *Ten Principles*) constitutes grounds for detention. The preamble of the WPK Charter emphasizes that Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism forms the foundation for the Party’s construction and activities. The *Ten Principles* require North Korean citizens to be thoroughly armed with Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il’s revolutionary ideology and the Party’s policies (Principle 4), and demand that the revolutionary cause initiated by Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il be carried on and completed by future generations (Principle 10). Furthermore, with the enactment of the *Law on Revolutionary History Work* in 2021, North Korea formally codified Kim Jong-un’s personal cult, specifying in Article 2 that Kim Jong-un, alongside Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il, is a subject of revolutionary history and achievements that must be inherited and developed.

Second, the inclusion of anti-state crimes as grounds for incarceration shows that violations defined as anti-state or anti-national crimes under North Korean criminal law are also grounds for detention in political prison facilities. North Korea’s *Criminal Law* (as of December 24, 2023) categorizes crimes such as conspiracy to overthrow the state, terrorism, treason, anti-state propaganda and agitation, and acts of national betrayal as anti-state and anti-national crimes, prescribing significantly harsher penalties compared to other offenses.

¹⁰ Ministry of Social Security Publishing House, *Resident Registration Reference Book*, p. 153.

Religious activities, including worship, distribution of Bibles, or missionary work, are also grounds for incarceration as a political prisoner. In North Korea, religious activities are considered a direct challenge to Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism and the state's monolithic ideology, which form the foundation of the regime. As such, they are strictly prohibited and heavily repressed.

B. Evolution of Anti-Regime Offenses

1) Early Phase: Detention of Factional Elements and Anti-Kim Il-sung Individuals

North Korea has operated collective detention camps since 1947. In the immediate post-liberation period, these camps mainly held landlords, pro-Japanese collaborators, and religious figures. After the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, the camps primarily detained individuals accused of collaborating with anti-communist security forces.¹¹ Political prison facilities became firmly established following the so-called "August Faction Incident" of 1956, an alleged anti-Kim Il-sung conspiracy. Initially, factional elements were detained, later expanding to include individuals accused of being anti-Kim Il-sung. This function of the political prison facilities remains intact to this day. In other words, individuals who oppose the North Korean regime or insult the Supreme Leader continue to be detained in these facilities. KINU's *2024 White Paper on North Korean Human Rights* includes testimonies from North Korean escapees stating they were always cautious with their words to avoid being labeled as "verbal reactionaries." Other testimonies describe individuals being detained by the Ministry of State Security for opposing or criticizing Kim Jong-un, distorting his words, misapplying his directives, or making anti-regime remarks while drinking.¹² Reflecting this trend, on May 17, 2022, North Korea amended its *Criminal Law* to introduce the offense of "Defamation of the Dignity of the Republic" (Article 64), which carries penalties of up to the death sentence.¹³

11 It refers to the *Geon-guk Chiandae* (National Foundation Security Corps), a provisional police organization established by Lyuh Woon-hyung immediately after liberation in 1945, aimed at restoring order amid political chaos, maintaining public security, and protecting individuals' lives and property.

12 Korea Institute for National Unification, *2024 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2024), p. 394.

13 Since this report deals exclusively with North Korean laws, the term "North Korea" has been omitted before the names of laws.

2) Pre- and Post-Kim Jong-un Era:

Detention of Individuals Involved in Defection

Since the mid-2000s, North Korea has seen a steady stream of defections and a growing number of escapees. Particularly before and after Kim Jong-un came to power, the regime significantly tightened control over defection-related activities. This has led to individuals being detained as political prisoners not only for attempting to defect but also for receiving money from South Korea, making phone calls to South Korea, or facilitating defection to the South. North Korea's *Criminal Law* categorizes defection as treason, which is classified as an anti-state and anti-national crime, punishable by severe penalties, including the death sentence (Article 63). Similarly, providing classified documents or information to South Korea or other foreign countries is also grounds for detention as a political prisoner. Espionage is likewise defined as an anti-state crime under Article 67 of the *Criminal Law*.

C. Serious Economic Offenses and General Crimes also Punished as Anti-State or Anti-National Crimes

1) Acts Contrary to Economic Policy

North Korea also detains individuals as political prisoners for actions that, under ordinary circumstances, may not typically be considered political crimes, particularly acts that go against the regime's economic policies. For example, embezzlement of Party funds or other economic misconduct is treated as grounds for detention in political prison facilities. According to KINU's *White Paper on North Korean Human Rights* (1996–2024), there have been multiple documented cases illustrating this practice. In December 1995, Kim Jong-il issued a handwritten directive stating that anyone hoarding foreign currency could not be trusted to remain loyal to the Party, and such individuals should be treated as political criminals. Other examples include a hotel employee who was detained after failing to report a small tip received from a foreign visitor for carrying luggage, and a case in 2013 where an individual was imprisoned for attempting to sell stolen railroad ties.¹⁴ The *2024 North Korean Human Rights Report* by South Korea's Ministry of Unification also records similar cases, such as an individual detained for using construction materials from Kim Il-sung's villa project for personal purposes, another detained for embezzling Party funds and

¹⁴ Korea Institute for National Unification, *2020 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification), p. 112, p. 119; NKHR2017000074, 2017-08-28.

submitting false reports on tasks assigned by Kim Jong-un, and a former People's Security Ministry official imprisoned for alleged embezzlement of crude oil.¹⁵

2) Human Trafficking and Watching South Korean Movies

Although these are typically categorized as general crimes, when deemed sufficiently serious, individuals involved are also detained in political prison facilities. In particular, cases involving organized human trafficking or connections to South Korea often result in detention in such facilities. According to KINU's *2024 White Paper on North Korean Human Rights*, one woman affiliated with the Korean Democratic Women's Union was detained in 2015 after being caught attempting to traffic 70 individuals to China. Another case from around 2016 involved a local people's committee leader from Kimjongsuk County, Ryanggang Province, who was detained for receiving money from South Korea in connection with human trafficking.¹⁶ As North Korean authorities have tightened control over the inflow of outside information and culture, activities related to (South Korean) movies and recordings are also considered grounds for detention in political prison facilities. Possession or trafficking of large quantities of narcotics similarly results in severe punishment. The *2024 White Paper* also includes testimony about an individual who, between 2015 and 2016, was detained for a combination of offenses: contacting relatives in South Korea, watching South Korean movies, drug involvement, and human trafficking. Another case cited involves a State Security agent who was detained in 2006 after being caught trafficking 40 kilograms of heroin to China.¹⁷

3) Application of Anti-State and Anti-Nation Crime Charges during Case Documentation

Economic crimes such as embezzlement of Party funds, theft of railway materials, and misappropriation of crude oil are not classified as anti-state or anti-nation crimes under North Korea's criminal law. These offenses typically fall under other categories, such as theft of state property, embezzlement of state property, fraudulent acquisition of state property, and large-scale plundering of state property, which are organized under

¹⁵ North Korean Human Rights Records Center, Ministry of Unification, *2024 Report on North Korean Human Rights*, p. 145.

¹⁶ Korea Institute for National Unification, *2024 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea*, p. 395.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 398.

Chapter 5 of the *Criminal Law* addressing crimes that undermine the socialist economy. In the case of materials like crude oil, which may be considered strategic reserves, related offenses such as neglect of strategic reserve creation and wartime production readiness, illegal trade of military supplies, and crimes obstructing military production are categorized under Chapter 4, covering crimes that undermine national defense order. Other offenses such as kidnapping, which relates to human trafficking, fall under Chapter 9 as crimes against individuals, and drug-related offenses are organized under Chapter 6, dealing with crimes that undermine socialist culture.

Nevertheless, acts that may not traditionally be considered political crimes from an international human rights perspective can still be reclassified as anti-state or anti-nation crimes based on their perceived severity and whether they are deemed to violate the supreme leader's instructions or the Party's policies. According to a North Korean defector (B) who previously worked in North Korea's legal system,¹⁸ even when an offense constitutes an economic or general crime, investigators can apply anti-state or anti-nation crime charges depending on the case.¹⁹ This practice is possible because in North Korea, the supreme leader's instructions function as an extralegal, overriding norm enforced across the Party, government, and military. The *Ten Principles* emphasize that the supreme leader's instructions and the Party's policies effectively constitute the law.²⁰ A 2011 survey of 80 North Korean defectors revealed that the perceived order of normative authority in daily life was: *Kim Jong-il's instructions* → *Party orders* → *Cabinet decisions* → *Party cadre instructions* → *Constitution (general law)*, with 52.9% of respondents indicating this hierarchy.²¹

18 In North Korea, legal institutions refer to the security agency (Ministry of State Security), the prosecution agency (Prosecutor's Office), and the public security agency (Ministry of Social Security).

19 NKHR2025000002 2025-04-25.

20 Fifth Principle: ... regard the teachings of the Great Leader and the General, as well as the Party's lines, policies, and instructions, as the law itself and as supreme orders ...

21 Choi Bong-dae, *A Case Study on the Legal Consciousness of North Korean Defectors* (Ministry of Unification Policy Research Service Report, 2011), pp. 10–12.

3. Detention Procedures

A. Lack of Publicly Available Regulations

Under the *Criminal Procedure Law* (January 20, 2021), the handling of criminal cases follows four stages: investigation → preliminary examination → prosecution → trial.²² Depending on the nature of the case, investigations and preliminary examinations are conducted by one of three state bodies: the State Security Agency (Ministry of State Security), the Prosecutor’s Office, or the Public Security Agency (Ministry of Social Security). In cases involving anti-state and anti-nation crimes, investigators and preliminary examiners from the State Security Agency are responsible for the investigation and examination. These are commonly referred to in North Korea as Ministry of State Security cases, or “*Bowiseong* cases.” For all other general crimes, the investigation and examination are carried out by officials from the Prosecutor’s Office and the Public Security Agency (Article 50).²³ Once the preliminary examination is concluded, the examiner prepares a written case record and transfers it to the prosecutor (Articles 253, 254). The prosecutor then files formal charges with the court (Article 261). Trials are conducted by the courts, with anti-state and anti-nation crimes falling under the jurisdiction of provincial (or directly governed city) courts (Article 47). However, the Central Court may, if necessary, directly take over cases that would ordinarily fall under provincial courts (Article 49).

22 In North Korea, preliminary examination concludes with a final disposition determining whether to indict, so it could be seen as functionally equivalent to the investigative phase in South Korea. However, North Korea treats investigation and preliminary examination as distinct procedures. In the North Korean system, preliminary examination entails the activities of the preliminary examiner, who, after receiving a case from the investigator, undertakes a full range of investigative actions and coercive measures. This process seeks to uncover all facts affecting the existence and degree of the suspect’s criminal responsibility and leads to a decision on whether to indict or dismiss the case. Ri Chang-se, *Criminal Procedure Law Study Reference Book* (Pyongyang: Kim Il Sung University, 1985), p. 55; Ri Jae-do, *Criminal Procedure Law* (Pyongyang: Kim Il Sung University, 1987), p. 127. re-citing: Ministry of Justice, *Commentary on the North Korean Criminal Procedure Act (Consolidated Edition)* (Seoul: Ministry of Justice, 2023), pp. 369–370.

In North Korea’s criminal procedure, preliminary examination is assessed as “performing a task so crucial that it effectively determines the outcome of the trial,” and the Ministry of Justice evaluates that North Korea’s preliminary examination effectively corresponds to the core investigative phase under South Korea’s Criminal Procedure Act. Ministry of Justice, *Commentary on the North Korean Criminal Procedure Act (Consolidated Edition)*, p. 372.

23 In addition, North Korea has special courts (military courts, railway courts, and munitions courts), and investigation and preliminary examination of cases under their jurisdiction are handled by investigators and preliminary examiners of the respective special legal bodies, as stipulated in Article 50 of the North Korean Criminal Procedure Act.

The *Criminal Law* stipulates that anti-state and anti-nation crimes may be punishable by fixed-term or life labor reform sentences.²⁴ For eight specific offenses, including conspiracy to overthrow the state, terrorism, treason, insulting the dignity of the Republic, sabotage, anti-state propaganda, hostility toward foreigners, and crimes against the nation, the maximum penalty is death (Articles 61–73).

Based on the *Criminal Law* and *Criminal Procedure Law*, the process for handling anti-state and anti-nation crimes typically follows this structure: the Ministry of State Security conducts the investigation and preliminary examination, the case is transferred to the prosecutor, the prosecutor initiates prosecution at the provincial or Central Court, and if convicted, the individual is sentenced to labor reform and imprisoned in a political prison camp or sentenced to the death penalty.

However, North Korean law does not specify formal legal procedures for detention in *kwanliso*. Based on publicly available information and defector testimonies to date, it remains unclear whether a separate legal framework exists to specifically regulate *kwanliso* operations, independent of general criminal law.

B. Jurisdiction Determination Through Inter-Agency Consultation and Party Security Committee Decisions

According to testimonies from North Korean defectors with backgrounds in law enforcement (referred to here as Defectors A and B), when jurisdiction over a case is unclear, it is determined through consultations among relevant legal institutions.²⁵ In practice, this means that whether an incident is classified as an anti-state or anti-nation crime (and thus handled by the State Security Agency) is first decided through inter-agency discussions. Even for offenses of similar nature, whether they are classified as *Bowiseong* (State Security Agency) cases depends on the Supreme Leader’s directives, the ruling party’s policies, timing, and regional circumstances.

It has also been confirmed that the Party Security Committee plays a key role in the criminal case handling process. The committee convenes between the investigation and preliminary examination stages and includes the Party’s Chief Secretary (Chair), the head of the State Security Department, the political bureau chief of the State Security Department, the relevant department heads (e.g., head of the investigation

²⁴ The labor reform penalty is defined as a punishment that places offenders in reform institutions to perform labor (Article 38 of the *Criminal Law*).

²⁵ NKHR2021000002-2 2025-04-22; NKHR2025000002 2025-04-25.

department), and the case investigators. Based on the committee's judgment, decisions are made regarding whether an individual should face social re-education measures, imprisonment in a *kyohwaso*, or internment in a *kwanliso*. The opinion of the Chief Secretary, who chairs the committee, holds the greatest weight. If the Chief Secretary cannot attend, a deputy, such as the Organizational Secretary, participates, but final decisions still require the Chief Secretary's approval or instructions.

Once jurisdiction, specifically, whether the case falls under the State Security Agency, is determined through inter-agency consultation and the Party Security Committee, the case proceeds to the preliminary examination stage. According to the *Criminal Procedure Law*, the purpose of the preliminary examination is to fully and accurately uncover all aspects of the case (Article 144), and all facts essential to resolving the case must be thoroughly investigated at this stage (Article 145). Based on these findings, a formal decision on criminal liability is made (Article 154), and upon completion of the examination, an official case report is submitted to the prosecutor (Articles 253–254).

C. Legal Ambiguity Surrounding Procedural Processes

Following the conclusion of the preliminary examination, cases are expected to proceed to indictment and trial. However, the exact legal basis and process through which individuals are detained remain unclear. First, it is uncertain whether State Security Agency cases follow formal judicial procedures similar to other criminal cases or whether the State Security Agency operates its own, independent process. Second, it is also unclear whether internal, undisclosed legal documents exist beyond the publicly available criminal laws of North Korea.

1) Conflicting Testimonies on State Security Agency Case Procedures

Testimonies from North Korean defectors with experience in legal institutions reveal contradictory views regarding how these procedures are actually carried out. According to longstanding defector accounts, North Korea operates a separate judicial process for political crimes, directly controlled by the Ministry of State Security. In other words, contrary to the procedures outlined in the *Criminal Procedure Law*, the Ministry of State Security is responsible for conducting trials for political offenses. For example, in a 2005 interview, Defector C, a former State Security Agency officer, testified that if an investigation conducted by the provincial State Security

Agency determined the allegations to be accurate, the case would be reported to the Prosecutor's Office of the Ministry of State Security. If the Prosecutor's Office confirmed the offense, the prosecutor, acting as judge, would issue a verdict in the name of the Central Court. The decision to intern individuals in *kwanliso* was also made by the Ministry of State Security, allegedly without any formal written criteria.²⁶ Similarly, in another 2005 interview, Defector D, who worked in a related department within the Ministry of State Security, stated that after the preliminary examination concluded, a prosecutor from the Ministry of State Security would deliver the final ruling, effectively bypassing any formal trial process for political prisoners.²⁷ Supporting this, materials published by South Korea's Court Administration Office in 2006 also described political trials in North Korea as being conducted directly by the Ministry of State Security, based on defectors' testimonies.²⁸

In contrast, more recent testimonies suggest a different picture. In 2025, Defector A, a former North Korean legal official, claimed that legal procedures are carried out according to internal regulations. According to these regulations, in particularly serious cases involving anti-state or anti-nation crimes, outcomes can include internment in a *kwanliso* or summary execution, while less severe cases follow formal trial procedures. Defector A emphasized that there are no separate legal provisions specifically governing the operation of *kwanliso*; rather, all criminal cases, including those involving anti-state or anti-nation crimes, are handled under a unified set of laws. Defector B, also a former legal official, provided similar testimony, stating that the Ministry of State Security, Ministry of Social Security, and Prosecutor's Office all conduct criminal case procedures based on the same legal framework. However, Defector A admitted that while internal regulations exist, they had never personally seen them, leaving the exact titles and contents of these regulations unknown. This persistent opacity contributes to the broader uncertainty surrounding how individuals are processed into political prison facilities in North Korea.

26 North Korean defector ○○○, interviewed in Seoul, April 19, 2005.

27 North Korean defector ○○○, interviewed in Seoul, October 10, 2005.

28 Court Administration Office, *Criminal Law of North Korea* (Seoul: Court Administration Office, 2006), p. 31.

2) Internal Guidelines Referred to as “Provisional”

Defector B explained that North Korea’s internal regulations governing these procedures are commonly referred to as “provisional” guidelines. This terminology appears to be based on North Korea’s *Law on Legislation* (October 19, 2021), which stipulates that any temporary legal document must include the term “provisional” in its title (Article 62). As the term implies, these guidelines are considered temporary and are presumed to be frequently revised in accordance with the supreme leader’s instructions or the Workers’ Party’s policy directives. As noted earlier, in North Korea, the leader’s instructions hold extralegal authority that overrides individual laws. Defector A similarly testified that internal guidelines often reflect the leader’s instructions, distributed in the form of “provisional” directives.

These “provisional” criminal case guidelines are reportedly subject to strict control. North Korea’s *Law on State Secrets Protection* (February 2, 2023) explicitly designates information related to the implementation of Party and state policies, State Security matters, and particularly criminal case procedures, as state secrets (Article 8). Disclosing state secrets deemed serious may result in 5 to 10 years of reform through labor (Article 258 of the *Criminal Law*), while the loss of state secrets in serious cases may lead to 2 to 5 years of labor reform (Article 259).

Meanwhile, official documents from the former Public Security Department provide further insight. These documents describe former political *kyohwaso* inmates as individuals who were imprisoned for “anti-Party, counter-revolutionary, and anti-state crimes” and subsequently underwent *kyohwa* (re-education). The same documents clarify that individuals found innocent or given suspended sentences after their re-education period are not classified as former *kyohwaso* inmates.²⁹ This suggests that in the case of *kyohwaso* for political prisoners, formal trials are held and fixed sentences are imposed.

In sum, available information, including the *Criminal Law*’s provisions on reform through labor (Article 38), testimony from Defectors A and B regarding consistent application of legal procedures to all criminal cases, and official documents from the Public Security Department, suggests that individuals sent to *kyohwaso* have typically undergone formal court trials resulting in sentences of labor reform. The legal basis appears to be a combination of North Korea’s *Criminal Law*, *Criminal*

²⁹ Ministry of Social Security Publishing House, *Resident Registration Reference Book*, p. 153.

Procedure Law, and undisclosed internal “provisional” regulations. However, given longstanding testimony that political prisoners are often sentenced directly by the Ministry of State Security, further verification is needed to determine whether political *kyohwaso* detentions always follow formal judicial procedures or whether the Ministry of State Security sometimes imposes such sentences independently.

3) Possibility of Different Detention Procedures for *Kwanliso* and *Kyohwaso* for Political Prisoners

According to defector A, who stated that legal handling procedures differ by case, it is possible that detention procedures also vary between *kwanliso* and *kyohwaso* for political prisoners. The South Korean Ministry of Unification’s *2024 North Korean Human Rights Report* similarly notes that whether trials are conducted prior to political prisoner detention depends on the nature and severity of the case. This variation in testimonies may stem from differences in the legal procedures applied to *kwanliso* and *kyohwaso* for political prisoners. While it is presumed that the legal grounds and detention criteria for both types of facilities are set forth in internal regulations labeled “provisional,” their specific content remains unknown.

D. Application of Guilt by Association

It is well-documented that North Korea applies guilt by association, extending penalties beyond the individual to family members and relatives. However, the scope of this practice appears to vary. The *1996 KINU White Paper on North Korean Human Rights* reported that not only immediate family but, in some cases, extended relatives were subject to punishment.³⁰ In contrast, research from the mid-2010s indicated that the practice was applied more narrowly, primarily to direct family members. For example, a North Korean defector who escaped in 2016 stated that around 2014, when a mother and daughter were caught attempting to defect to South Korea, even their grandmother was sent to a political prison facility.³¹ The *2024 North Korean Human Rights Report* by the Ministry of Unification notes that while family members were commonly detained alongside the primary target in political prison facilities, recent trends suggest that the scope of collective punishment varies depending on

³⁰ Korea Institute for National Unification, *1996 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 1996), p. 164.

³¹ NKHR2015000028 2015-02-10; NKHR2017000067 2017-08-28.

the severity of the case and the identity of the individual, with both immediate and extended relatives potentially detained.³²

Moreover, it appears that the application of guilt by association has varied over time. According to research by KINU, in the past, there were many cases in which individuals were detained solely because a family member had defected to South Korea. However, as the number of defections to South Korea increased, it became difficult to handle all such cases in the same way, and testimonies collected in 2015 and 2017 indicate that the number of family members being detained in political prison facilities significantly decreased.³³

Testimonies also suggest that when guilt by association is applied, children are sometimes excluded. Several North Korean defectors have stated that while families were sent to *kwanliso*, children were excluded.³⁴ For example, a 2019 interview revealed that in 2015, a family detained while attempting to defect to South Korea saw their minor children excluded from detention.³⁵

The practice of guilt by association violates international human rights standards. As a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), North Korea is obligated under Article 14(1) to ensure that individuals face legal proceedings solely for crimes they themselves are accused of. During its third UPR in 2019, North Korea denied the existence of legal provisions for guilt by association in its *Criminal Law*.³⁶ Nevertheless, further investigation is needed to verify the legal basis and procedures for collective punishment, as well as whether guilt by association is applied at both *kwanliso* and *kyohwaso* for political prisoners.

E. Confirmation of Divorce Intent for Spouses

When one spouse is detained on criminal charges, it has been reported that North Korean authorities inquire about the other spouse's intent to divorce. If the spouse expresses a desire to divorce, they may be exempt from detention. A defector who

32 North Korean Human Rights Records Center, Ministry of Unification, *2024 Report on North Korean Human Rights*, p. 145.

33 NKHR2015000028 2015-02-10; NKHR2017000067 2017-08-28.

34 NKHR2015000015 2015-01-27; NKHR2015000030 2015-02-10; NKHR2016000171 2016-11-01; NKHR2019000033 2019-06-03.

35 NKHR2019000033 2019-06-03.

36 UN Doc. A/HRC/42/10 (25 June 2019), para. 76. The Criminal Law did not contain the penalty of "guilt by association."

was detained at Camp No. 25 (Chongjin) in 1989 testified that, at the time of their detention, they were asked, “Will you go together, or do you want a divorce?”³⁷ This practice does not apply to all crimes but varies depending on the severity of the offense. A defector detained at a *kwanliso* in 2010 testified that if a detainee’s daughter was married, she would be divorced from her husband to prevent the husband from being detained. Similarly, a daughter-in-law would be divorced from the son to prevent her detention.³⁸ Testimonies suggest that the spouse’s detention also depended on the gender of the child (son or daughter) and the child’s marital status. According to Ahn Myeong-cheol, a former *kwanliso* guard now heading NK Watch, if a divorce was finalized, wives and daughters were generally excluded from detention, but sons were still detained regardless of parental divorce. In contrast, married daughters were reportedly not detained, regardless of their parents’ marital status.³⁹ This practice appears to reflect North Korea’s traditional emphasis on lineage and a patriarchal family structure. However, it remains unclear whether this practice continues today.

North Korea’s *Resident Registration Reference Book* outlines the criteria and exceptions for classifying individuals by political status and social class. It specifies that “the divorced spouse of an arrested person (or a person sent to a political prison facility), and any young children taken by the remarried spouse” should not be considered family members of the arrested individual or political prison camp inmate.⁴⁰

However, details regarding how divorce procedures are carried out remain unclear, particularly whether individuals receive legal counsel during the process. According to North Korean regulations, there is no divorce by mutual agreement; only court-ordered divorce is permitted (Article 20 of *Family Law*). Parties seeking divorce must submit a lawsuit to the court (Article 122 of *Civil Procedure Law*). Parties may appoint legal representatives (Article 51), which may include lawyers, appointed agents, or legal guardians (Article 62). *The Law on Lawyers* (2023.12.5.) also allows for the appointment of legal counsel for suspects under investigation, indicted individuals, and their family members or representatives, as well as appointments initiated by investigators, judges, or the courts (Article 26).

37 NKHR2011000008 2010-08-10.

38 NKHR2011000196 2011-09-06.

39 NKHR2025000001 2025-04-07.

40 Ministry of Social Security Publishing House, *Resident Registration Reference Book*, pp. 155–156.

4. Supervision and Control of Detainees

A. Responsible Authorities

Kwanliso in North Korea are controlled by two primary agencies: the Ministry of State Security and the Ministry of Social Security (see Table I-1). North Korean documents also confirm the existence of camps under both ministries of the former name, the State Security Department, and the Public Security Department, respectively. In particular, for camps controlled by the State Security Department, responsibility is designated to its 7th Bureau.⁴¹

Currently, *Kwanliso* No. 14 (Gaecheon) and No. 16 (Myeonggan) are known to be under the control of the Ministry of State Security, while *Kwanliso* No. 18 (Gaecheon) is operated by the Ministry of Social Security. North Korean documents also refer to Camp No. 18 explicitly as the “Public Security Department’s No. 18 *Kwanliso*.”⁴² According to Ahn Myeong-cheol, head of NK Watch and a former guard at these facilities, all camps were originally under the Public Security Department. However, in 1972–1973, when the Political Security Bureau separated from the Public Security Department and became independent, control over some camps was transferred accordingly.⁴³ Other defectors have testified that this jurisdictional change occurred around 1975.⁴⁴

Kwanliso are known for their strict isolation, with external boundaries secured by electric fences, traps, and spikes, making escape virtually impossible.⁴⁵ Ahn Myeong-cheol explained that one reason for transferring some camps to the Public Security Department was to separate detainees deemed less serious offenders from those considered to require complete isolation. This suggests that camps controlled by the Ministry of State Security hold more “serious” offenders and are likely subject to stricter control than those camps controlled by the Ministry of Social Security. A similar separation process was observed during the closure of Camp No. 17 (Tuksong) around 1983. At that time, individuals requiring complete isolation were reportedly

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16; pp. 97–98; p. 205.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.98.

⁴³ NKHR2025000001 2025-04-07.

⁴⁴ Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, *The North Korean Political Prison Camp System and Human Rights Conditions* (Seoul: NKDB, 2011), p. 48.

⁴⁵ NKHR2023000055-2 2024-03-12.

transferred to Camp No. 14 (Gaecheon), while those considered less dangerous were moved to Camp No. 18 (Bukchang).⁴⁶

Camp No. 25 (Chongjin), operated as a *kyohwaso*, is also understood to be under the control of the Public Security Department. It is believed that Camp No. 25 was transferred to the Ministry of State Security during the same period when the Political Security Bureau became independent.⁴⁷

B. Completely-Controlled Areas and Partially-Controlled Areas

A 1993 document from the Public Security Department explains that within *ijumin kwanliso*, areas are divided into completely-controlled areas and partially-controlled areas. The same document states that individuals registered as residents of the partially-controlled areas must have the term “Revolutionization” marked in their household registration records.⁴⁸ Traditionally, the two areas within *kwanliso* have been referred to as completely-controlled areas and Revolutionization areas, the latter name stemming from the fact that detainees in the partially-controlled areas were subjected to so-called “revolutionary re-education.” (In this report, the terms partially-controlled areas and revolutionization areas are used interchangeably.) Among the camps currently in operation, Camps No. 14 (Gaecheon) and No. 16 (Myeonggan) are known to consist solely of completely-controlled areas. In contrast, Camp No. 18 (Gaecheon) is known to operate a revolutionization area.⁴⁹ Camp No. 15 (Yodok) also reportedly contained a revolutionization area in the past, but this camp has since been closed.

⁴⁶ NKHR2025000004 2025-05-08.

⁴⁷ NKHR2025000001 2025-04-07.

⁴⁸ Those who are arrested by security agencies and sent to reform institutions or controlled areas ... must be recorded as “arrest” for those sent to reform institutions, “relocation” for those sent to completely-controlled areas, and “revolutionization” for those sent to partially-controlled areas. Ministry of Social Security Publishing House, *Resident Registration Reference Book*, p. 40.

⁴⁹ NKHR2025000004 2025-05-08.

5. Return to Society and Discriminatory Life After Release

A. Exoneration or Release from *Kwanliso* and *Kyohwaso* for Political Prisoners

1) Exoneration and Release from *kwanliso*

In cases where an individual detained as a political prisoner or a politically dangerous person is later found innocent, meaning the individual is “exonerated (*haemyeong*),”⁵⁰ they are allowed to return to their original place of residence. It is known that many detainees held at Camp No. 18 (formerly Bukchang) in connection with “the Deepening Group (*shimhwajo*)” incident were exonerated and returned to society around 2001.⁵¹

Apart from exoneration, the term “release (*haeje*)” refers to the process of reintegrating detainees back into society. This release process is led by the Ministry of State Security. Testimonies indicate that they undergo a pre-screening and approval process before release. According to a North Korean defector who was detained in Camp No. 18 (formerly Bukchang), the head of the household’s workplace would submit documents for release, which would then pass through the Party Committee, Security Bureau, Ministry of State Security, and finally the central authorities.⁵² If the central authorities approved, the release was granted.⁵³

Meanwhile, official documents from the Public Security Department state that regardless of whether an individual was detained in a completely-controlled area or a partially-controlled area, their time in a *kwanliso* and subsequent legal punishment must be recorded in the “Resident Registration Card” section of the household registry.⁵⁴ This suggests that release from a completely-controlled area may be possible in theory; however, no confirmed cases of such releases have been documented to date. Ongoing investigation is needed to clarify whether release from completely-controlled areas occurs and under what procedures.

⁵⁰ Ministry of Social Security Publishing House, *Resident Registration Reference Book*, p.155.

⁵¹ NKHR2025000004 2025-05-08.

⁵² It appears to fall under the jurisdiction of the Organization and Guidance Department’s State Security Bureau section.

⁵³ NKHR2025000004 2025-05-08.

⁵⁴ Ministry of Social Security Publishing House, *Resident Registration Reference Book*, p. 34.

2) Release Procedures from Partially-Controlled (Revolutionization) Area

Detainees held in the revolutionization areas of *kwanliso* are generally understood to return to society after completing their assigned revolutionizing period, following certain procedures. However, there are cases where individuals were released immediately after completing the designated period, raising questions about whether formal procedures are consistently applied. For example, according to a North Korean defector interviewed in 2025, the individual was investigated by the Ministry of State Security of ○○ County in December 2001, detained in the revolutionization area of Camp No. 15 (Yodok) in 2002, and informed by a Pyongyang State Security official in December 2002 that their revolutionizing period would be three years. After completing this three-year term, the individual reportedly signed a confidentiality agreement and was released.⁵⁵

3) Need for Research on Release from *Kyohwaso* for Political Prisoners

Camp No. 25 (Chongjin) operates as a *kyohwaso* for political prisoners, but has often been collectively referred to as part of the *kwanliso* system, resulting in insufficient investigation into the specific release procedures for *kyohwaso* detainees. However, based on Article 38 of North Korea's *Criminal Law*, which stipulates labor reeducation sentences, individuals sentenced to fixed-term labor reeducation may be released upon completion of their term, while those sentenced to life labor reeducation are effectively imprisoned for life. KINU's 2013 report *North Korea's Political Prison Camps* similarly stated that in Camp No. 25, both release after sentence completion and lifelong detention coexist depending on the sentence imposed. Upon sentencing to labor reeducation, an individual's citizenship ID (*Gongminjeung*) is confiscated under Article 13 of the *Citizenship Registration Law*, and certain civic rights are suspended during the execution of the sentence according to Article 38 of the *Criminal Law*.

Even in cases of life labor reeducation, sentence reduction or early release is possible through sentence mitigation (Article 59), while both special amnesty (*teuksa*) and general amnesty (*daesa*, as referred to in North Korea) result in sentence exemption (Article 58). Special amnesty is granted by the State Affairs Commission Chairperson, and general amnesty by the Presidium of the Supreme People's

⁵⁵ NKHR2025000003 2025-05-07.

Assembly (Articles 104 and 116 of *Constitution*; Article 58 of *Criminal Law*). Whether these legal provisions have been practically applied to *kyohwaso* detainees remains unclear and requires further investigation and research.

B. Social Discrimination against Released Political *Kyohwaso* Inmates and Their Families

In North Korea, citizens are classified by *songbun* (social status) and *gyecheung* (class) categories, which determine access to Party membership, military service, university education, and other opportunities. This classification is documented in the resident registration book (*jumin daejang*), maintained through a nationwide registration system. As shown in Table II-2, the resident registration book records personal details such as *songbun* and *gyecheung*. Citizens are divided into three main classes: basic masses, complex masses, and remaining elements of the hostile class. Former political *kyohwaso* inmates and their families are classified under complex masses (marked in blue in Table II-1). This indicates that former political *kyohwaso* inmates and their families are officially recorded as complex masses in the resident registration system and consequently face systemic social discrimination. The *Citizen Registration Law* (August 10, 2016) mandates that social security agency (in other words the Ministry of Social Security) must register all citizens in the resident registration book, recording their name, gender, date and place of birth, residence, occupation, and marital status, including divorce, among other details (Article 6). This legal requirement confirms that North Korea's resident registration system, along with the documentation and management of citizens' status, remains an active, ongoing process.

<Table II-1> Classification of Social Strata and *Songbun* in North Korea

Three classes	Basic masses	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Revolutionary 2. Family members of a revolutionary 3. Bereaved family of a revolutionary 4. Honored war veteran 5. Honored disabled war veteran 6. Visitor (or contact person) 7. Hero 8. Meritorious person (Contributor) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Discharged soldier (Veteran) 10. Family of the fallen (war dead) 11. Family of those killed (murdered) 12. Family of socialist patriotic martyrs 13. Others (Core masses including those who have long served the Party with unwavering loyalty in revolutionary posts entrusted by the Party, as well as workers, farmers, soldiers, and intellectuals with a solid class background, family environment, and socio-political life)
	Complex masses	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Draft evader from the People’s Army 2. Deserter from the People’s Army ranks 3. Demobilized soldier (returning military personnel) 4. Repatriated citizen 5. Member of a reactionary organization 6. Person who served in Japanese imperial institutions 7. Pre-liberation fighter (fighter active before Korea’s liberation) 8. Demobilized member of a construction brigade 9. Defector to North Korea for ideological reasons 10. Person affiliated with the No.10 Guerilla Operations Area 11. Person affiliated with Geumgang School 12. Former political <i>kyohwaso</i> inmates 13. Religious believer (person engaged in religious activities) 14. Family member of a defector to South Korea 15. Family member of an executed person 16. Family member of an arrested person 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 17. Family members of political <i>kyohwaso</i> inmates 18. Family member of a person taken prisoner and never returned 19. Family member of a person who fled abroad 20. Family member of a landlord 21. Family member of a rich peasant 22. Family member of a dependent capitalist 23. Family member of a pro-Japanese collaborator 24. Family member of a pro-American collaborator 25. Family member of a malicious religious believer 26. Family member of a factionalist 27. Family member of a factionalist affiliate 28. Family member of a spy 29. Family member of a agricultural foreman (village-level supervisor) 30. Family member of an entrepreneur 31. Family member of a merchant
	Remaining elements of the hostile class	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Landowner 2. Rich peasant 3. Dependent capitalist 4. Pro-Japanese collaborator 5. Pro-American collaborator 6. Malicious religious believer 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Factionalist 8. Factionalist affiliate 9. Spy 10. Rural foreman (village-level supervisor) 11. Entrepreneur 12. Merchant

<i>Songbun</i> (25 in total)	1. Revolutionary	13. Landowner
	2. Professional revolutionary	14. Office worker
	3. Worker	15. Student
	4. Soldier	16. Artisan / Handicraftsman
	5. Farmhand (pro-regime)	17. Foreman
	6. Poor farmer	18. Small and medium entrepreneur
	7. Farmer	19. Patriotic commercial entrepreneur
	8. Cooperative farm member	20. Entrepreneur
	9. Mid-sized farmer	21. Petitbourgeois
	10. Wealthy middle farmer	22. Small and medium merchant
	11. Agricultural foreman	23. Merchant
	12. Rich farmer	24. Religious person
		25. Japanese colonial official

Source: Compiled in table format from Ministry of Social Security Publishing House, *Resident Registration Reference Book*, pp. 121–162. Emphasis by the author (blue: *kyohwaso* for political prisoners, red: *kwanliso*, each corresponding accordingly).

<Table II-2> Example of a North Korean Resident Registration Record

Resident Registration Number Onchon 27950		Household Registry and Background Investigation Record		67th Unit, Onchon Town, Onchon County, South Pyongan Province	
Relationship to Head of Household	Oneself	Wife	Eldest Son	Second Son	First Daughter
Personal Identification Number	Onchon 37981	Onchon 37982	Onchon 37993	Onchon 37984	Onchon 37985
Name	Kim Jeong-ho	Ri Sun-nyeo	Kim Chang-guk	Kim Chang-nam	Kim Chang-sil
Gender	Male	Female	Male	Male	Female
Date of Birth	1938.4.17.	1940.2.19.	1968.7.8.	1971.10.17.	1976.8.7.
Place of Birth	Won-eup District, Onchon County, South Pyongan Province	Palcheong-ri, Daedong County, South Pyongan Province	Onchon-eup, Onchon County, South Pyongan Province	Onchon Town, Onchon County, South Pyongan Province	Onchon Town, Onchon County, South Pyongan Province, North Korea
<i>Songbun</i>	Origin	Laborer	Poor farmer	Laborer	Same as left
	Status	Soldier	Farmer	Laborer	Same as left
Political Party Affiliation	Worker's Party of Korea	Worker's Party of Korea			
Education	University graduate	Middle school graduate			
Ethnicity	DPRK	Same as left	Same as left	Same as left	
Nationality	DPRK	Same as left	Same as left	Same as left	
Workplace and Position	Gwiseong Salt Refinery, Worker at Workplace No. 1	Dependent	Gwiseong Salt Refinery, Worker at Workplace No. 2	Cooperative Farm Member, Onchon Town	Student at Onchon Girls' Senior Middle School
Residential Relationship					
Career Background					
Personal Affiliation					
Social Class	Basic	Basic	Basic		
Status of Exoneration					
Status of Changes					

Source: Ministry of Social Security Publishing House, *Resident Registration Reference Book*, p. 13. Bold text indicates emphasis by the author, and the table has been reorganized for clarity.

C. Discrimination Against Released *Kwanliso* Inmates and Their Families

Table II-1 highlights the classification of individuals involved in religious activities, factional activities, and espionage, all of which were identified earlier as grounds for detention. Notably, “malicious religious figures,” “factionalists,” “factional associates,” and “spies” are categorized as remnants of the hostile class. Their families, such as relatives of religious figures, malicious religious figures, factionalists, factional associates, and spies, are classified as members of the “complex masses” (highlighted in red in Table II-1). The families of those arrested are also classified as members of the complex masses. “Families of those arrested” refers to the immediate relatives of individuals arrested for anti-Party, anti-revolutionary, or economically immoral crimes who have not been heard from since, as well as the immediate relatives of those labeled political threats and relocated by security agencies who have similarly disappeared.⁵⁶ This suggests that individuals released from *kwanliso*, known as *haejemin* (released persons), and their families are recorded in resident registration records as either remnants of the hostile class or members of the complex masses. As such, they face systemic discrimination, including restricted access to Party membership, military service, and higher education opportunities. The Ministry of Unification’s *2024 North Korean Human Rights Report* similarly documents testimonies from defectors stating that people from *kwanliso* were distinctly treated from ordinary citizens.

Ordinary North Korean residents generally have limited means to identify individuals as *haejemin*. This is because resident registration records are accessible only to officials with specific positions, such as Party organization department and cadre department staff at the provincial, city, or county level.⁵⁷ The Resident Registration Act requires that citizens’ names, gender, date and place of birth, and address be recorded on identity cards, but does not mandate disclosure of their status as former *kwanliso* inmates (Article 10). KINU’s 2013 report *North Korea’s Political Prison Camps* states that identity cards for former *kwanliso* inmates do not explicitly state their camp origin but instead use designations such as “Korean People’s Army Security Guard Worker.”⁵⁸ However, some defectors who were released from Camp

⁵⁶ Ministry of Social Security Publishing House, *Resident Registration Reference Book*, p. 155.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁵⁸ NKHR2025000004 2025-05-08.

No. 18 (former Bukchang) testified that the camp name was listed as their place of birth on their identity cards. These same defectors reported that, despite their backgrounds, they were allowed to join the military and pursue higher education.⁵⁹ However, due to the lack of sufficient evidence from other camps beyond Camp No. 18, now under the Ministry of Social Security, it remains unclear whether such leniency applies universally to released inmates from other camps.

⁵⁹ NKHR2020000048-2 2025-05-09; NKHR2025000005 2025-05-08.

III. How Are They Operated?

1. <i>Kwanliso</i> and <i>Kyohwaso</i> for Political Prisoners in Operation	40
2. Closed Facilities	101
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III. How Are They Operated?

Currently, there are a total of four operational *kwanliso* and *kyohwaso* for political prisoners: Camp No. 14, 16, 18, and 25. Excluding Camp No. 25, which operates as a *kyohwaso* for political prisoners, the other three are primarily located in mountainous areas that are difficult for ordinary residents to access. These camps are composed of guard units, labor facilities, housing for inmates, and housing for administrators. This structure is understood as a system designed to utilize the labor of inmates to sustain and maintain the camps through self-sufficiency. While the specific labor facilities vary slightly by camp, they generally include orchards, mines, fish farms, and livestock farms. Based on satellite imagery analysis of the currently operational camps, estimates of the inmate population for each facility were produced. In addition, the coordinates of major facilities are also provided. Meanwhile, Camp No. 15, which has been closed, was briefly reviewed with a focus on matters related to its closure.

1. *Kwanliso* and *Kyohwaso* for Political Prisoners in Operation

A. Camp No. 14 (*Kwanliso*)

Camp No. 14 was established in 1965 and has been in operation ever since.⁶⁰ Around 2014, the camp was expanded to include part of the former Bukchang (Camp No. 18) area, where individuals implicated in the Jang Song-thaek incident were imprisoned.⁶¹ Camp No. 14 is located in Gaecheon City (Oedong-ri), Deokcheon City (Samgil-ri), and Bukchang County (Bongchang-ri and Jamsang-ri) in South Pyongan Province. The total area of the camp is approximately 222km², and the total length of perimeter barbed wire fences is about 73km. The fences surrounding Camp No. 14 are double-layered, and a total of 21 guard posts have been identified (see Photo III-2).

Camp No. 14 operates under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of State Security and is assessed to be subject to stricter controls than other areas. Due to the lack of

⁶⁰ HRNK, *North Korea's Political Prison Camp Kwan-li-so No.14*, Update 1, 2021.12.22.

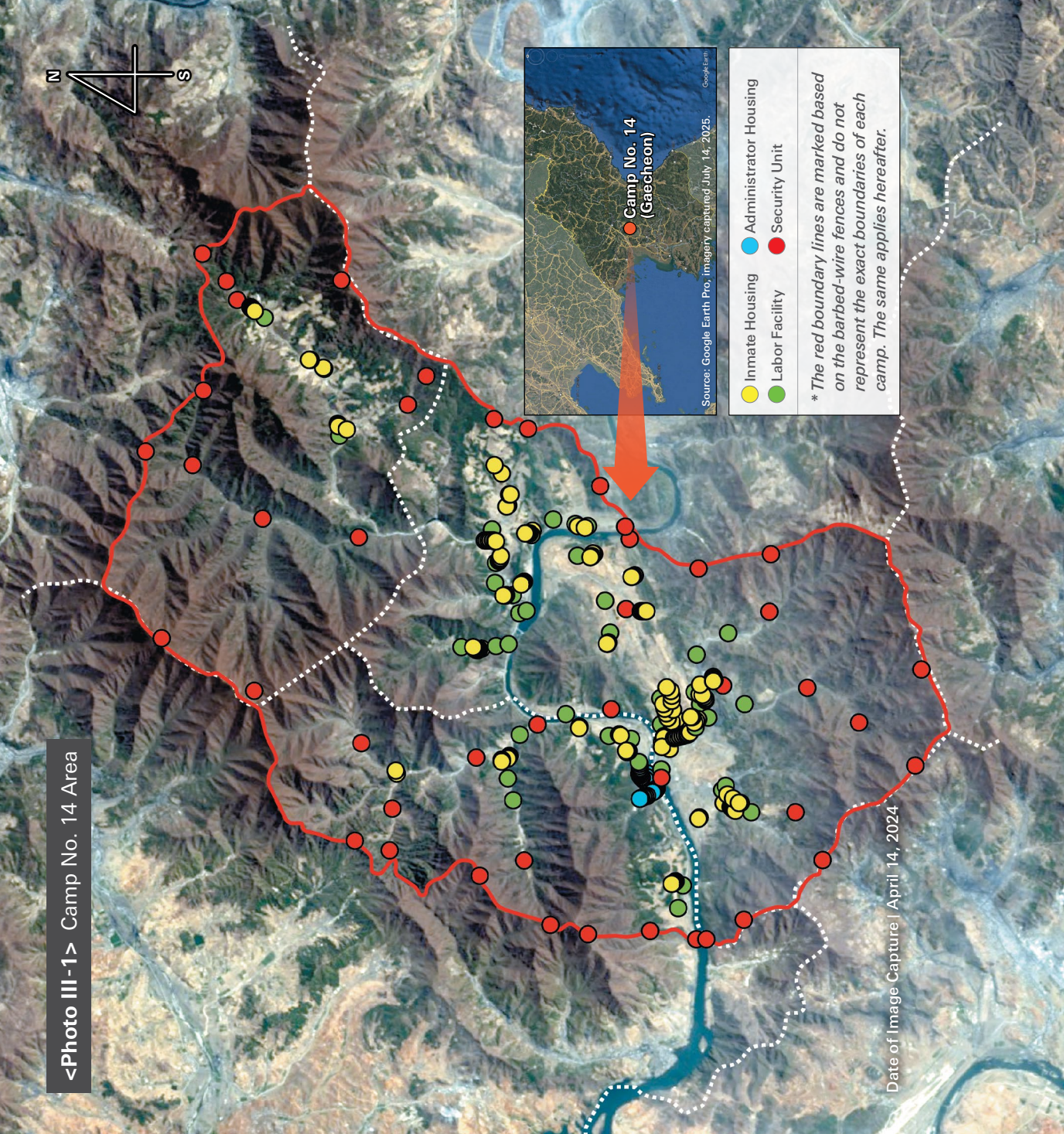
⁶¹ NKHR2020000042 2020-10-31; NKHR2020000048-2 2025-05-09; NKHR2025000004 2025-05-08.

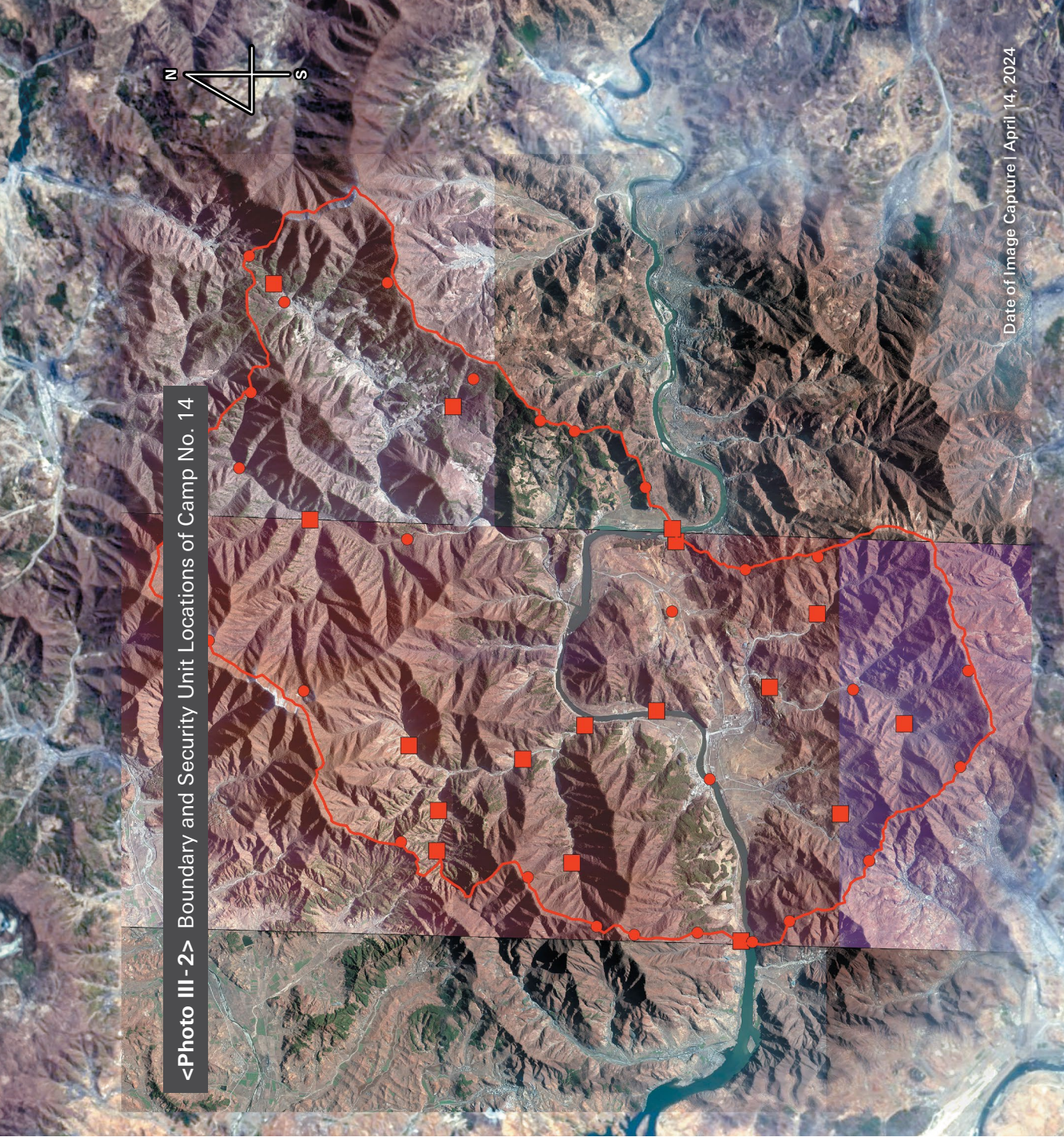
direct witness testimonies⁶² regarding the detailed conditions within Camp No. 14 (Gaecheon), analysis is primarily based on satellite imagery. The area of the former Bukchang Camp No. 18 operated as an open area from 2006 to 2013. In 2013, residents living within the former Bukchang Camp No. 18 area were relocated to other regions, and a large number of individuals implicated in the Jang Song-thaek incident were moved in.⁶³ As a result, the area of Camp No. 14 was expanded to include the former Bukchang Camp No. 18 area, which lies across the Daedong River.

⁶² In the 2013 report, the defector Shin Dong-hyuk was cited as being from Camp No. 14, but it was later determined that he was actually from Bukchang's Camp No. 18. Since then, it has not been possible to collect information on Camp No. 14 through other defectors.

⁶³ NKHR202000048-2 2025-05-09; NKHR2025000004 2025-05-08.

<Photo III-1> Camp No. 14 Area





<Photo III - 2> Boundary and Security Unit Locations of Camp No. 14

Date of Image Capture | April 14, 2024

<Photo III -3> Security Unit Headquarters of Camp No. 14



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Date of Image Capture | December 4, 2024
39:34:10N, 126:03:29E



<Photo III-4> Battalion-level Facilities of the Security Unit at Camp No. 14

<Photo III-5> Perimeter Barbed Wire Fence of Camp No. 14



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Date of Image Capture | December 4, 2024
39:30:27N, 126:05:41E



<Photo III-6> Administrative Headquarters of Camp No. 14

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Date of Image Capture | December 4, 2024
39:34:11N, 126:03:30E



<Photo III - 7> Staff Village of Camp No. 14



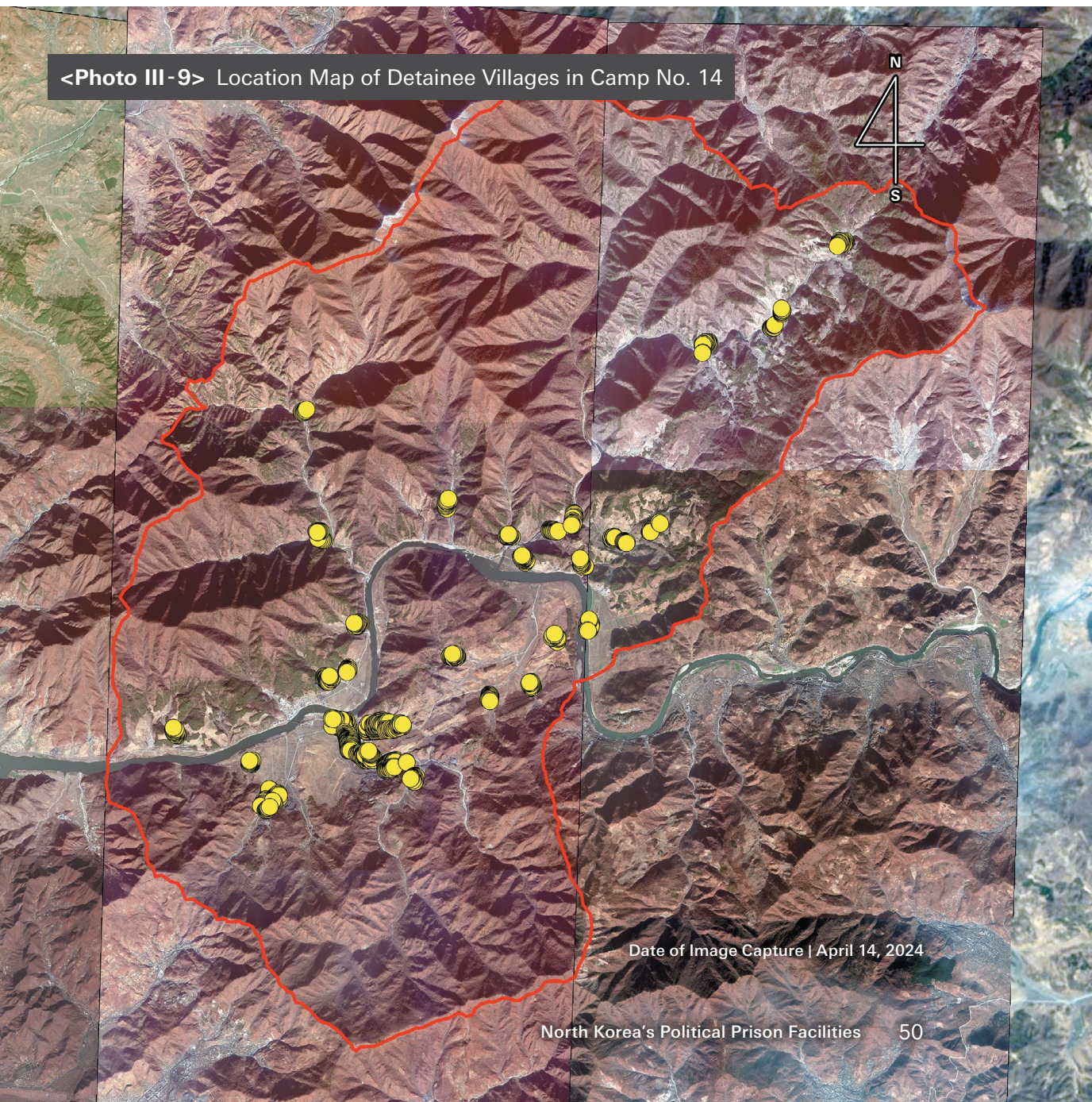
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Date of Image Capture | December 4, 2024
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<Photo III -8> Staff Housing of Camp No. 14

As of 2024, the number of detainee houses in Camp No. 14 is estimated at 1,020, the largest among all known camps, and the layout appears to follow a typical prison camp structure. Each detainee village consists of one detainee house and one warehouse building (see Photo III-10). Around the detainee houses, there is a fence approximately half the height of the house itself. In the vicinity of the detainee houses, facilities such as threshing yards, agricultural produce storage, and small-scale livestock pens can be identified.



<Photo III-9> Location Map of Detainee Villages in Camp No. 14

Date of Image Capture | April 14, 2024

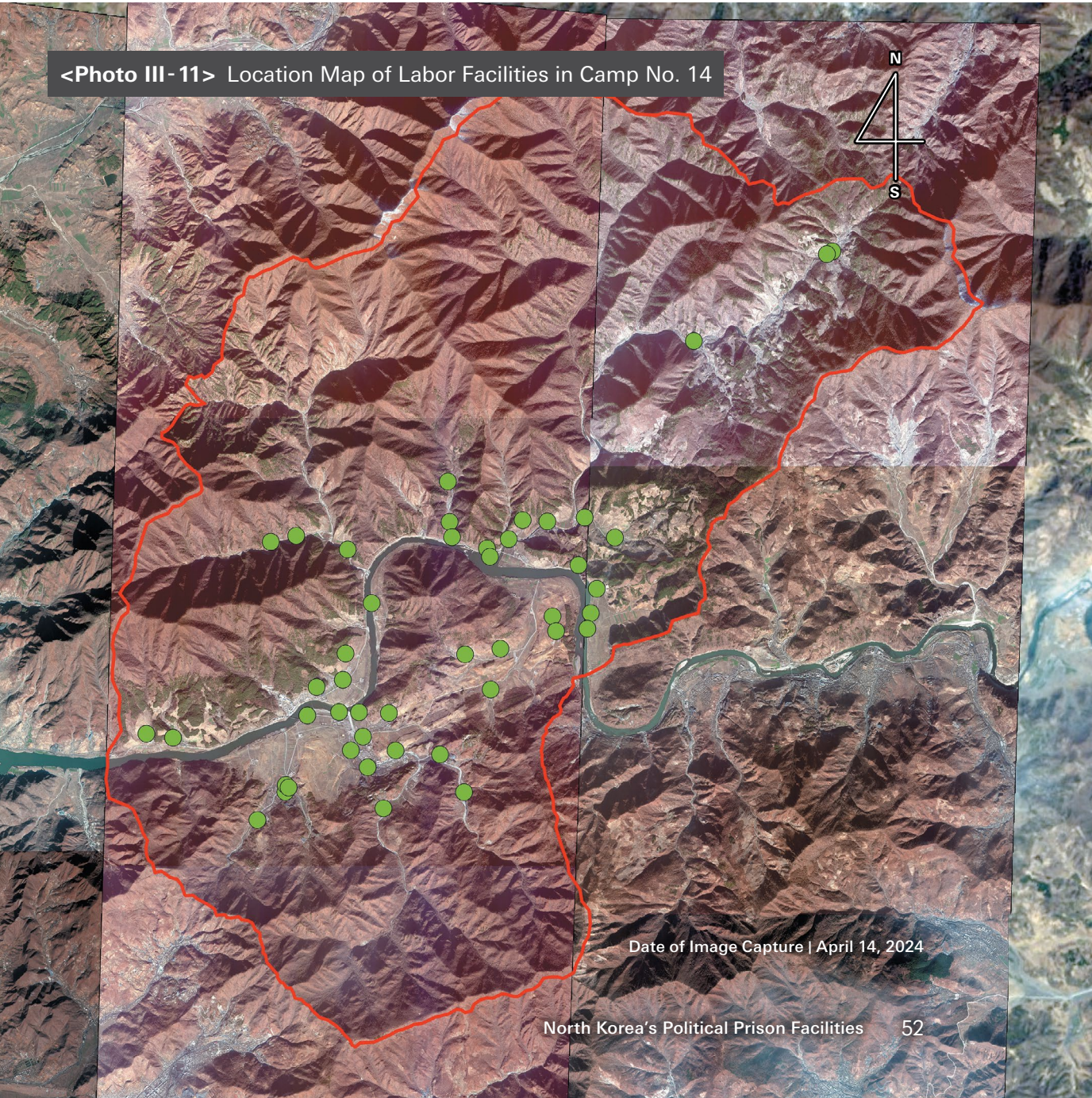


<Photo III - 10> Example of a Detainee Village in Camp No. 14

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Date of Image Capture | December 4, 2024
Zoomed Image 39:36:17N, 126:08:43E

The labor facilities used to exploit the labor of detainees in Camp No. 14 include 7 mines, 8 small-scale industrial facilities, 7 fish farms, 21 livestock pens, and 3 orchards (see Photos III-11 to III-15). The mining facilities in Camp No. 14 are coal mines that exclusively produce coal. In Photo III-13, the presence of steam or smoke suggests the facility is an industrial site, but it is difficult to identify its exact type. The orchard shown in Photo III-15 covers an area of approximately 172,000m².



<Photo III - 11> Location Map of Labor Facilities in Camp No. 14

Date of Image Capture | April 14, 2024



<Photo III - 12> Coal Mine of Camp No. 14

<Photo III - 13> Small - Scale Industrial Facility of Camp No. 14



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39:36:39N, 126:08:18E



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Date of Image Capture | December 4, 2024
39:33:35N, 126:05:14E



<Photo III - 14> Fish Farm and Livestock Pens of Camp No. 14

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Date of Image Capture | December 4, 2024
39:33:46N, 126:04:40E

<Photo III - 15> Orchard of Camp No. 14



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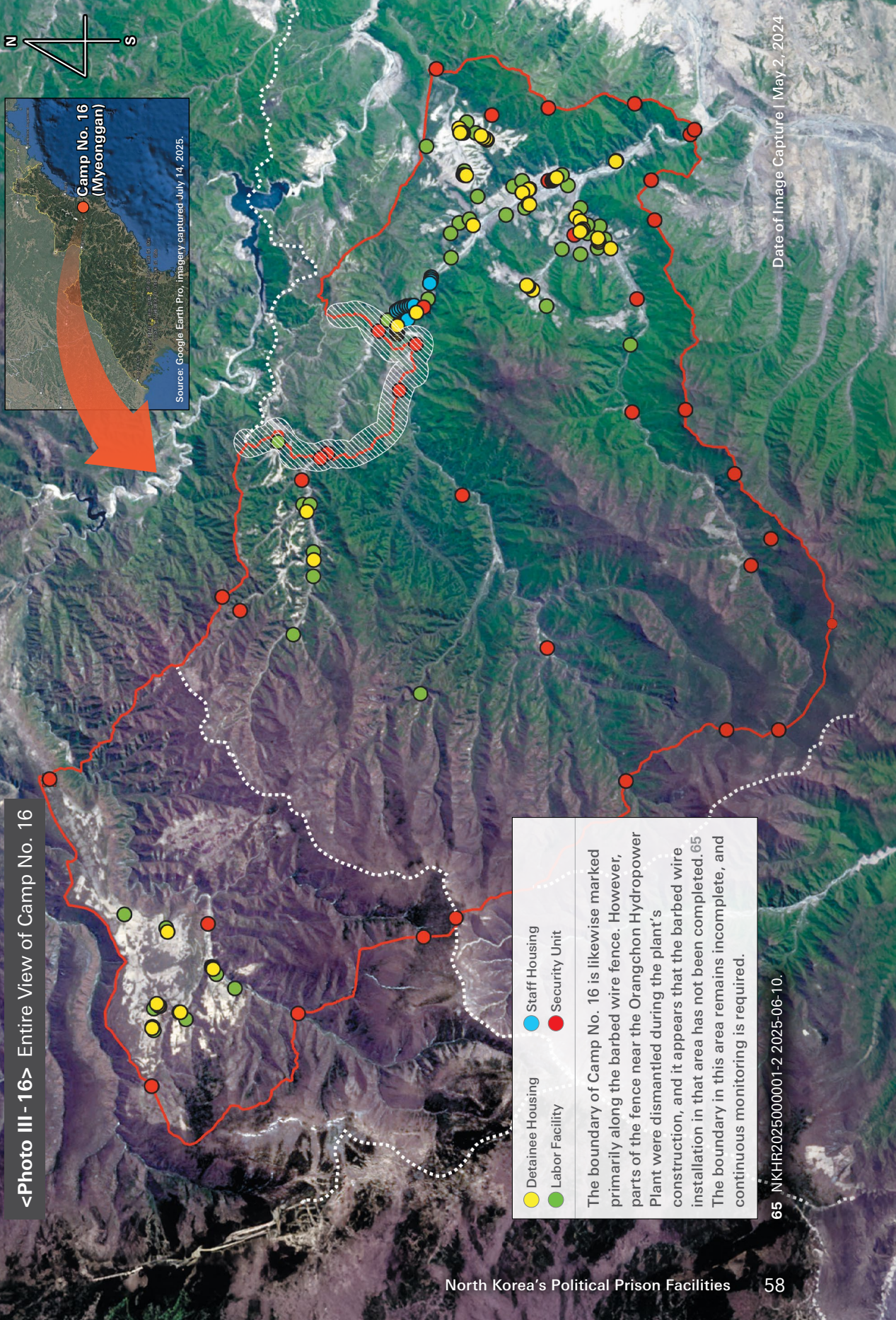
Date of Image Capture | October 30, 2024
39:36:29N, 126:07:00E

B. Camp No. 16 (*Kwanliso*)

Camp No. 16 is located in Myeonggan County (Buhwa-ri) and Orang County (Chilhyang-ri), North Hamgyong Province. The area includes steep mountainous terrain and, at 435km², is the largest among the currently operating camps. The double-layered perimeter barbed wire fence (see Photo III-20) surrounding Camp No. 16 stretches approximately 119.2km, with a total of 21 guard posts (see Photo III-17) identified. Camp No. 16 in Myeonggan is situated just 3km from the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site, leading the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK) to raise the possibility that detainees from Camp No. 16 may have been used for labor related to the Punggye-ri nuclear facility.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ HRNK, *Switchback: Evidence of a Connection between Kwan-li-so No.16 and the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Facility?* 2023.10.17.

<Photo III - 16> Entire View of Camp No. 16



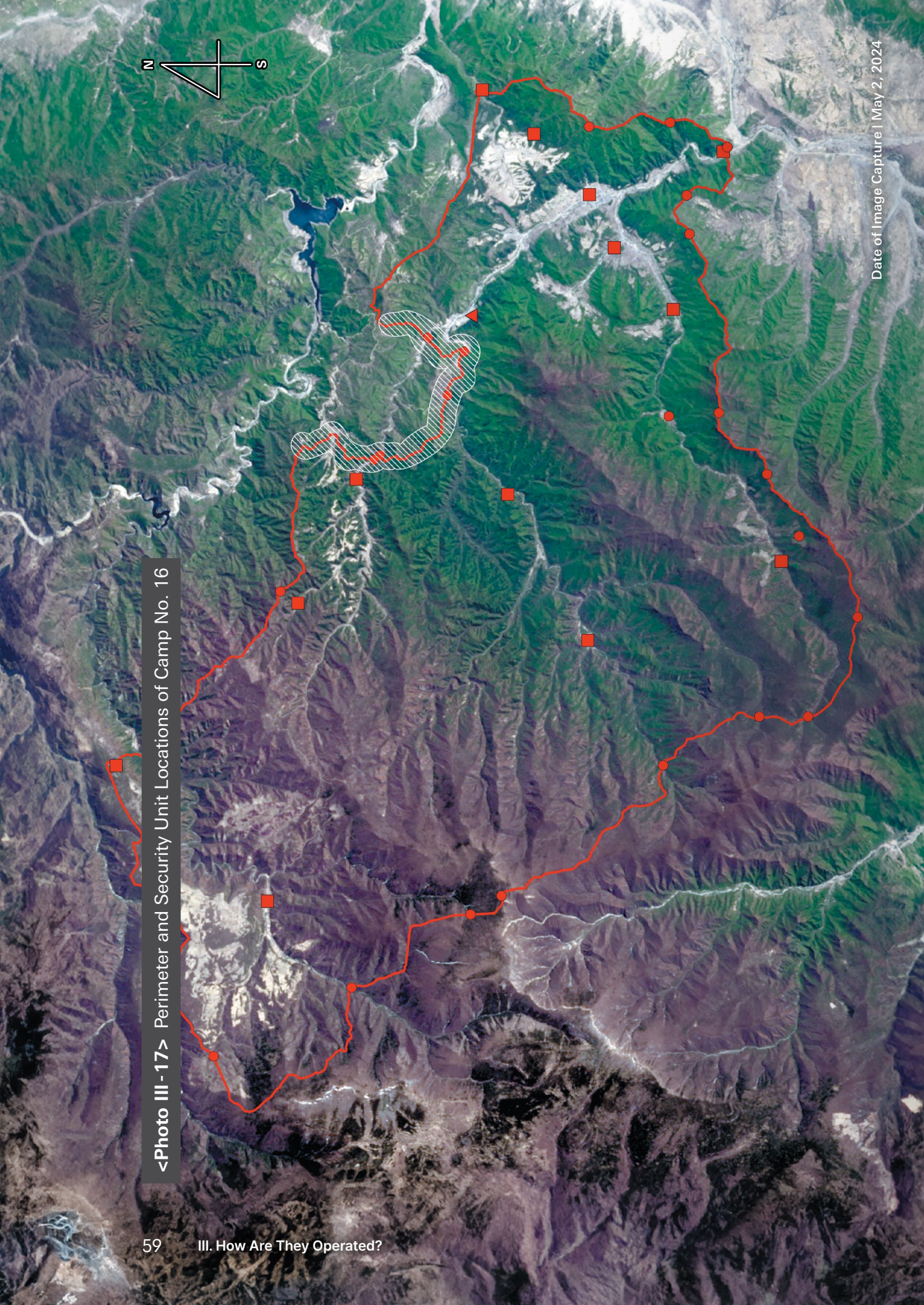
Camp No. 16
(Myeonggan)

Source: Google Earth Pro, imagery captured July 14, 2025.

	Detainee Housing		Staff Housing
	Labor Facility		Security Unit

The boundary of Camp No. 16 is likewise marked primarily along the barbed wire fence. However, parts of the fence near the Orangchon Hydropower Plant were dismantled during the plant's construction, and it appears that the barbed wire installation in that area has not been completed.⁶⁵ The boundary in this area remains incomplete, and continuous monitoring is required.

⁶⁵ NKHR2025000001-2 2025-06-10.



<Photo III - 17> Perimeter and Security Unit Locations of Camp No. 16

Date of Image Capture | May 2, 2024

<Photo III - 18> Security Unit Headquarters of Camp No. 16



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Date of Image Capture / December 7, 2024
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<Photo III - 19> Battalion - level Facilities of the Security Unit at Camp No. 16

<Photo III - 20> Perimeter Barbed Wire Fence of Camp No. 16



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Date of Image Capture | December 7, 2024
41:13:58N, 129:18:17E



<Photo III-21> Administrative Headquarters of Camp No. 16

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Date of Image Capture | December 7, 2024
41:18:51N, 129:20:33E

Along with the administrative headquarters, a staff village has been identified, where two distinct types of housing can be observed (see Photos III-22 and III-23). In the staff village, houses resembling detainee housing from other regions are mixed with typical staff residences. Additionally, educational and childcare facilities are located nearby (see Photo III-26). Camp No. 16, like Camp No. 14, falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of State Security.

According to Ahn Myung-cheol, Director of NK Watch, the houses on the left side of Photo III-22 have existed for some time, while construction of the houses on the right side began around 2012. It is believed that these new residences were built to address the housing shortage that arose when officials from Camp No. 22 (Hoeryong) were relocated and assigned to Camp No. 16 following the closure of Camp No. 22. After the closure of Camp No. 15 (Yodok), some of its staff members were also reportedly relocated and assigned to Camp No. 16.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ NKHR2025000001-1 2025-06-10.



<Photo III-22> Staff Village of Camp No. 16

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Date of Image Capture | December 7, 2024
41°18'52N, 129°20'42E



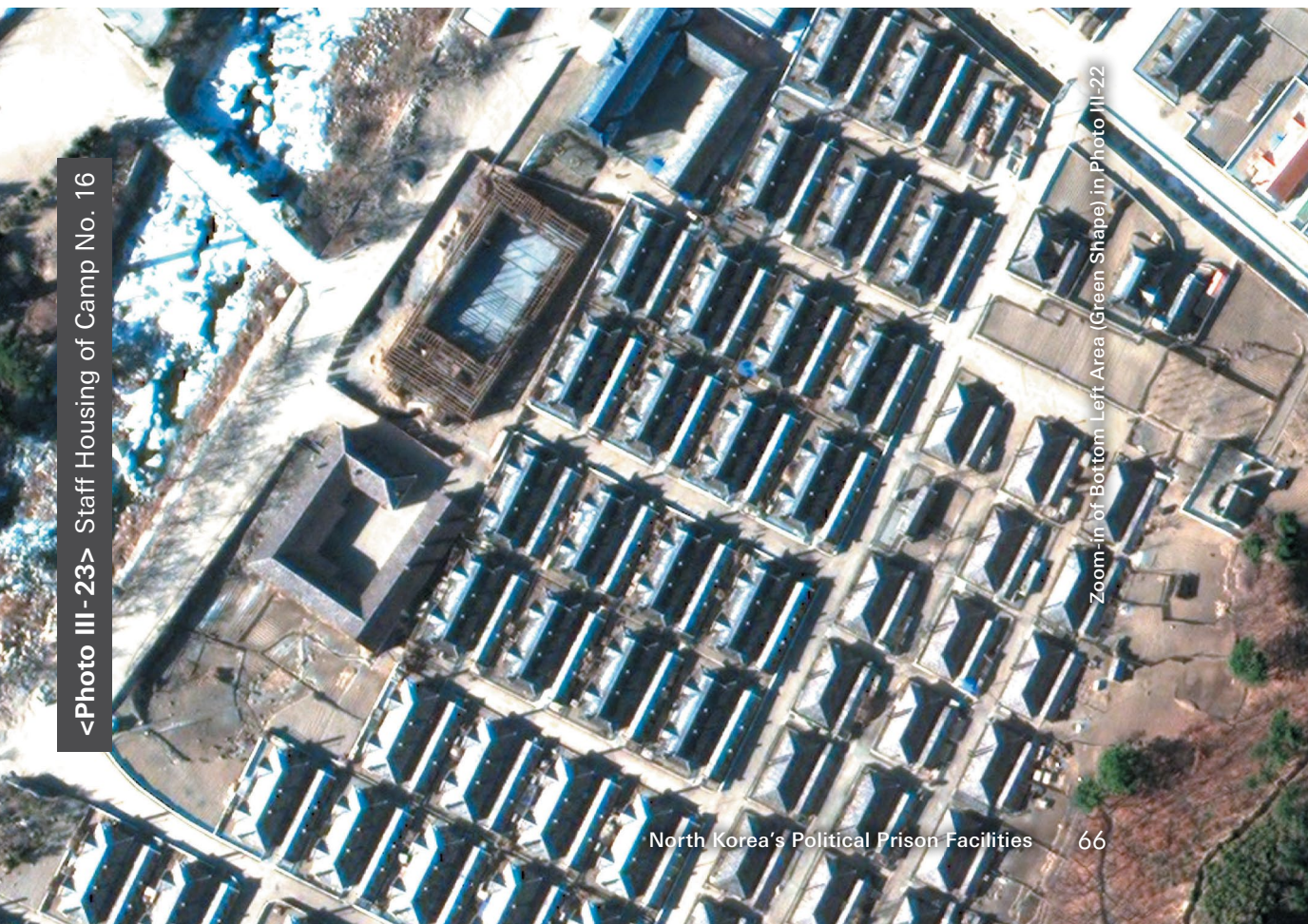
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Date of Image Capture | December 7, 2024

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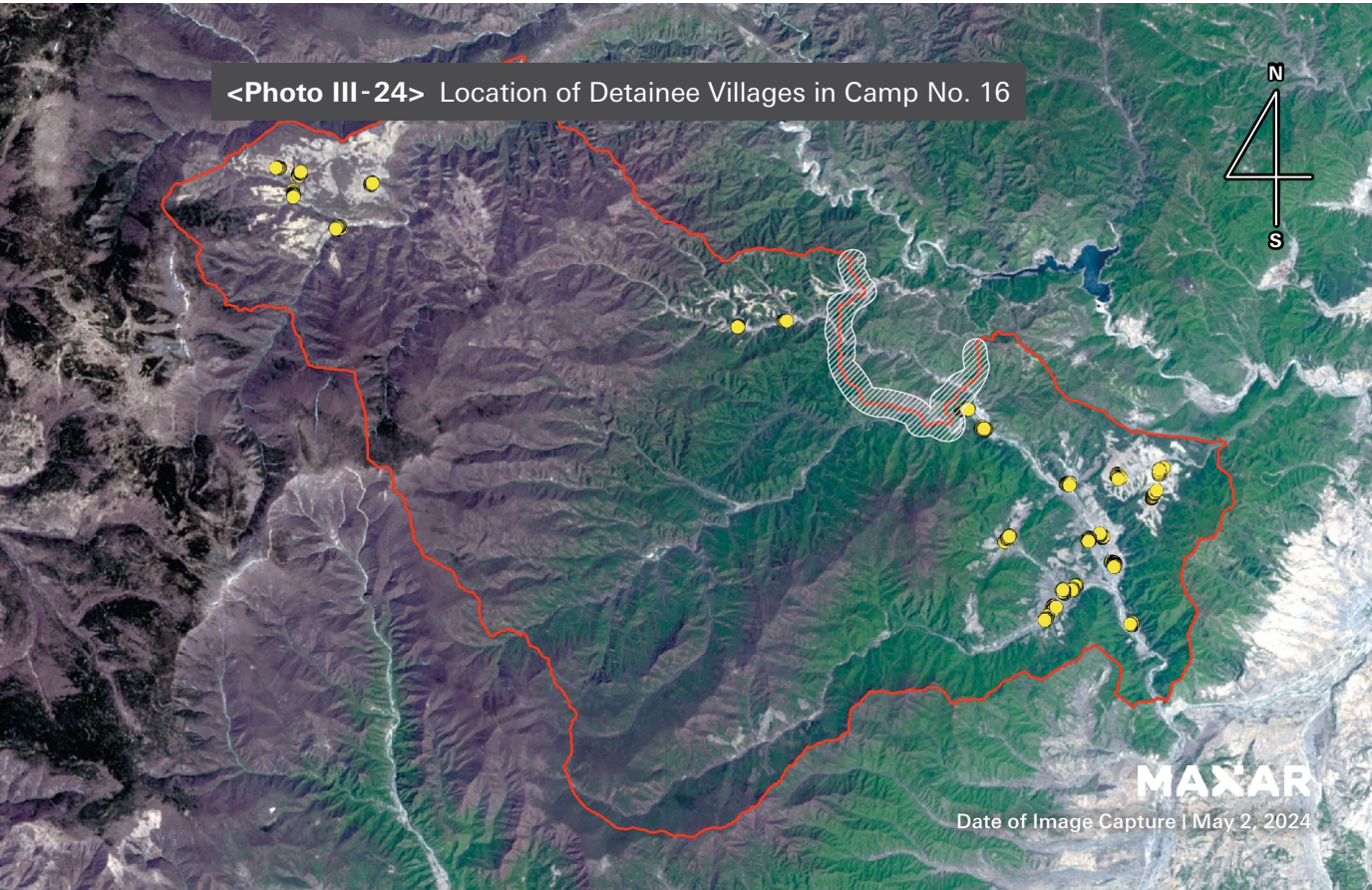
Zoom-in of Bottom Right Area (Yellow Shape) in Photo III-22

<Photo III - 23> Staff Housing of Camp No. 16



Zoom-in of Bottom Left Area (Green Shape) in Photo III-22

The detainee housing, as shown in Photo III-24, is primarily located in valley areas. A total of 428 houses have been identified, with each house covering an area of 144 square meters. Similar to Camp No. 14, each detainee residence in Camp No. 16 is accompanied by a warehouse building (see Photo III-25), and around the houses, shared work facilities such as threshing yards can be identified.



<Photo III - 25> Example of a Detainee Village in Camp No. 16



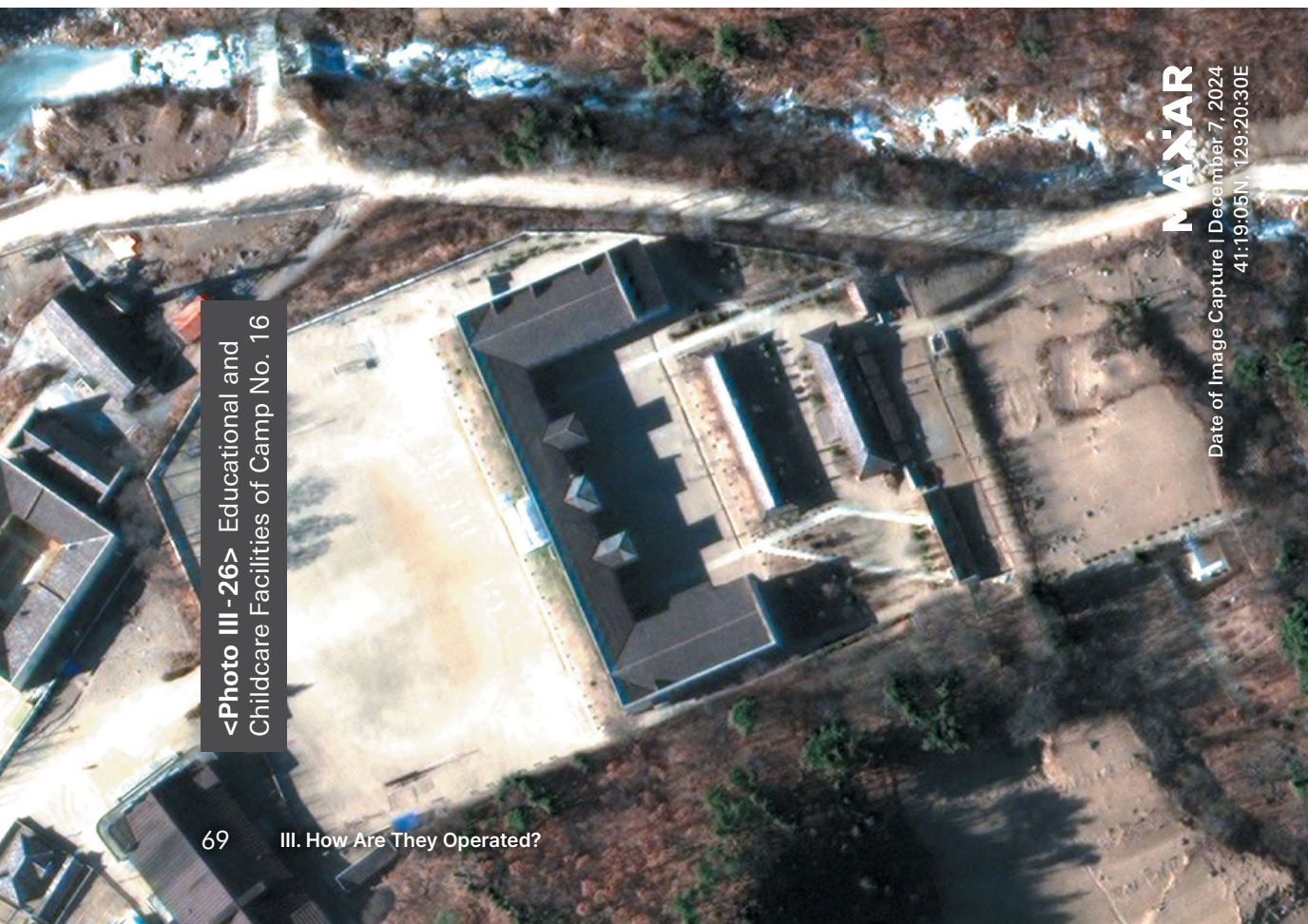
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41:17:44N, 129:22:37E



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Date of Image Capture | December 7, 2024
41:18:57N, 129:20:34E

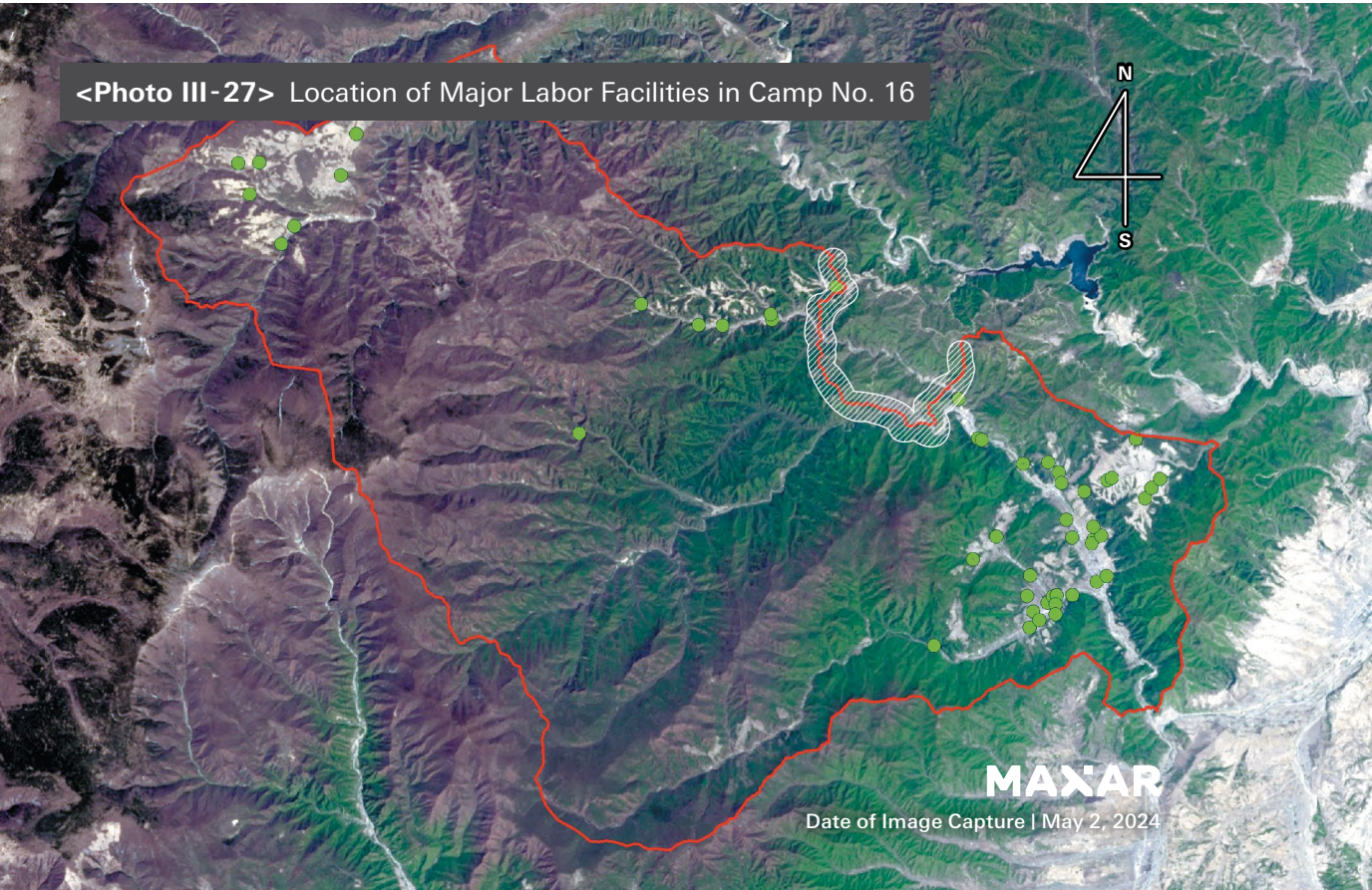


<Photo III - 26> Educational and
Childcare Facilities of Camp No. 16

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Date of Image Capture | December 7, 2024
41:19:05N, 129:20:30E

Major labor facilities within Camp No. 16 include 2 orchards, 1 mine, 7 fish farms, 37 livestock pens, and 2 industrial facilities, totaling 49 sites (see Photos III-27 to III-32).





<Photo III-28> Orchard of Camp No. 16



<Photo III - 29> Mining Facility of Camp No. 16

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Date of Image Capture | December 7, 2024
41:18:04N, 129:22:33E



<Photo III - 30> Unidentified Industrial Facility of Camp No. 16



<Photo III - 31> Livestock Facility of Camp No. 16



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Date of Image Capture | December 7, 2024
41:23:51N, 129:06:31E



<Photo III-32> Fish Farm of Camp No. 16

MAXAR

Date of Image Capture | December 7, 2024
41:18:31N, 129:24:30E

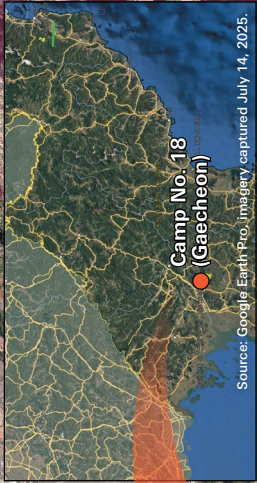
C. Camp No. 18 (*Kwanliso*)

Camp No. 18 (Gaecheon) is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Social Security. In 1958, following the Resident Registration Background Investigation Project, families deemed politically unreliable or threatening to the North Korean regime were collectively interned at this site. In the 1970s, approximately 2,000 households were relocated to the area around Tukjang Workers' District and Bongchang-ri in Bukchang County for coal mining development. In 1982, a large number of detainees from Camp No. 17 (Toksong County, South Hamgyong Province) were also transferred here. In 1997, following the so-called Deepening Group (*Simhwajo* Incident), a large number of individuals were detained at the camp. Testimonies indicate that in 2001, following clarification of the incident, approximately 1,000 households returned to their original residences.⁶⁷ In 2006, Camp No. 18, originally located in Bukchang, was relocated to Jayang-ri, Gaecheon, South Pyongan Province, where it continues to operate today. The relocation has been confirmed through numerous testimonies from defectors formerly associated with the camp. This report utilizes interview materials from defectors who escaped from Camp No. 18 in 2019, supplemented by additional interviews where necessary.⁶⁸

The current Camp No. 18 (Gaecheon) covers an area of 15km², significantly smaller than the former Bukchang site. The total length of the perimeter barbed wire fence is approximately 20.3km, and security facilities include 1 administrative headquarters, 1 battalion-level facility, and 15 platoon-level facilities, including guard posts (see Photos III-34 to III-37). Based on Photo III-33, Camp No. 14 is located in the 4 o'clock direction.

⁶⁷ NKHR2025000004 2025-05-08.

⁶⁸ NKHR2020000042 2020-10-31; NKHR2020000048-2 2025-05-09; NKHR2025000004 2025-05-08.



Camp No. 18
(Gacheon)

Source: Google Earth Pro, imagery captured July 14, 2025.

<Photo III-33> Entire View of Camp No. 18

- Detainee Housing
- Labor Facility
- Security Unit

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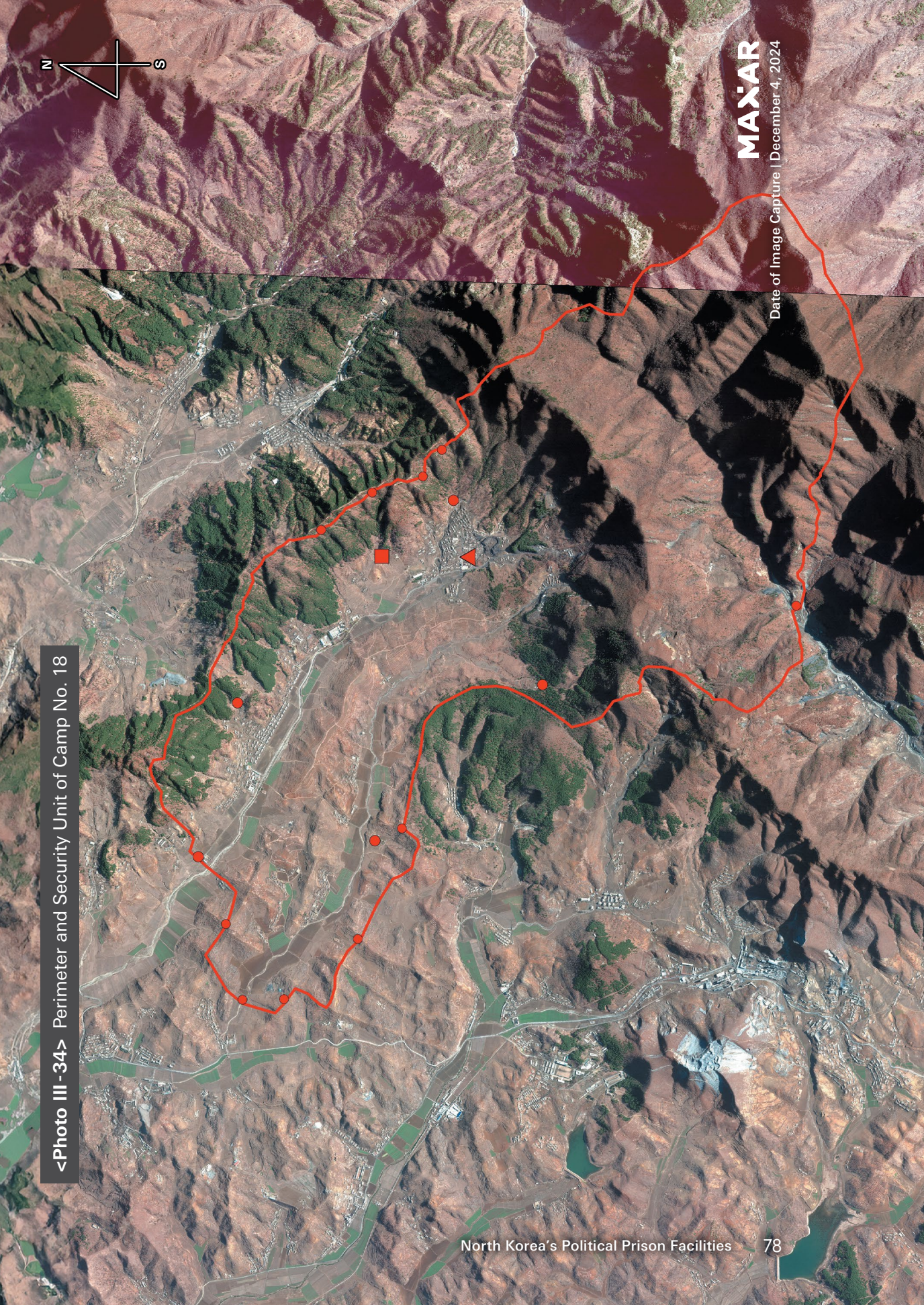
Date of Image Capture | December 4, 2024



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Date of Image Capture | December 4, 2024

<Photo III -34> Perimeter and Security Unit of Camp No. 18





<Photo III - 35> Administrative Headquarters of Camp No. 18



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Date of Image Capture | December 4, 2024
39:38:27N, 125:59:36E

<Photo III -36> Security Unit Headquarters of Camp No. 18



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Date of Image Capture | December 7, 2024
39:37:55N, 126:00:02E



<Photo III-37> Platoon-level Security Unit of Camp No. 18

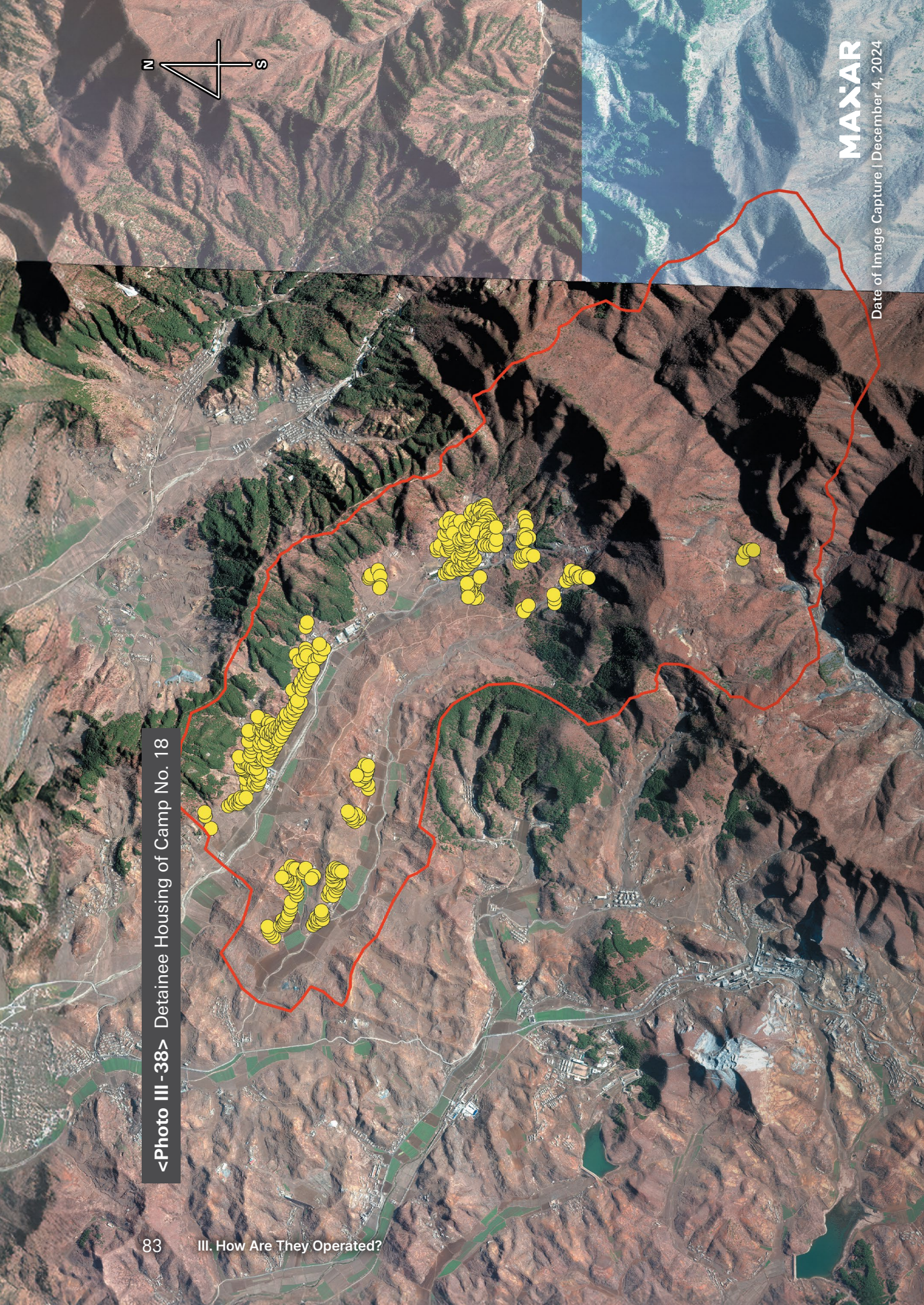
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39:37:36N, 125:59:23E

Unlike other camps such as Camp No. 14 and Camp No. 16, which are organized in a village-like structure, Camp No. 18 (Gaecheon) features an irregular distribution of detainee housing (see Photo III-39). According to defector testimonies from individuals who previously lived in the area, existing houses from the region where Camp No. 18 was relocated were repurposed for detainees. At the time of relocation in 2006, there was reportedly a shortage of housing for senior officials and staff families, leading to the construction of a new village, with families moving in around 2009.⁶⁹ Satellite imagery taken on December 18, 2006, shows that key facilities essential to camp operations, such as the administrative headquarters, Jayang School, Jayang Hospital, Revolutionary Re-education Area and Labor Training Camp, were absent at that time. Testimonies confirm that by around 2009, construction of the administrative headquarters, the Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il Revolutionary History Study Center, the Tower of Eternal Life, and the new village had begun.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ NKHR2020000048-2 2025-05-09; NKHR2025000004 2025-05-08.

⁷⁰ NKHR2025000004 2025-05-08.



<Photo III -38> Detainee Housing of Camp No. 18

<Photo III -39> Detainee Village of Camp No. 18



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Date of Image Capture | December 4, 2024
39:38:47N, 125:59:02E

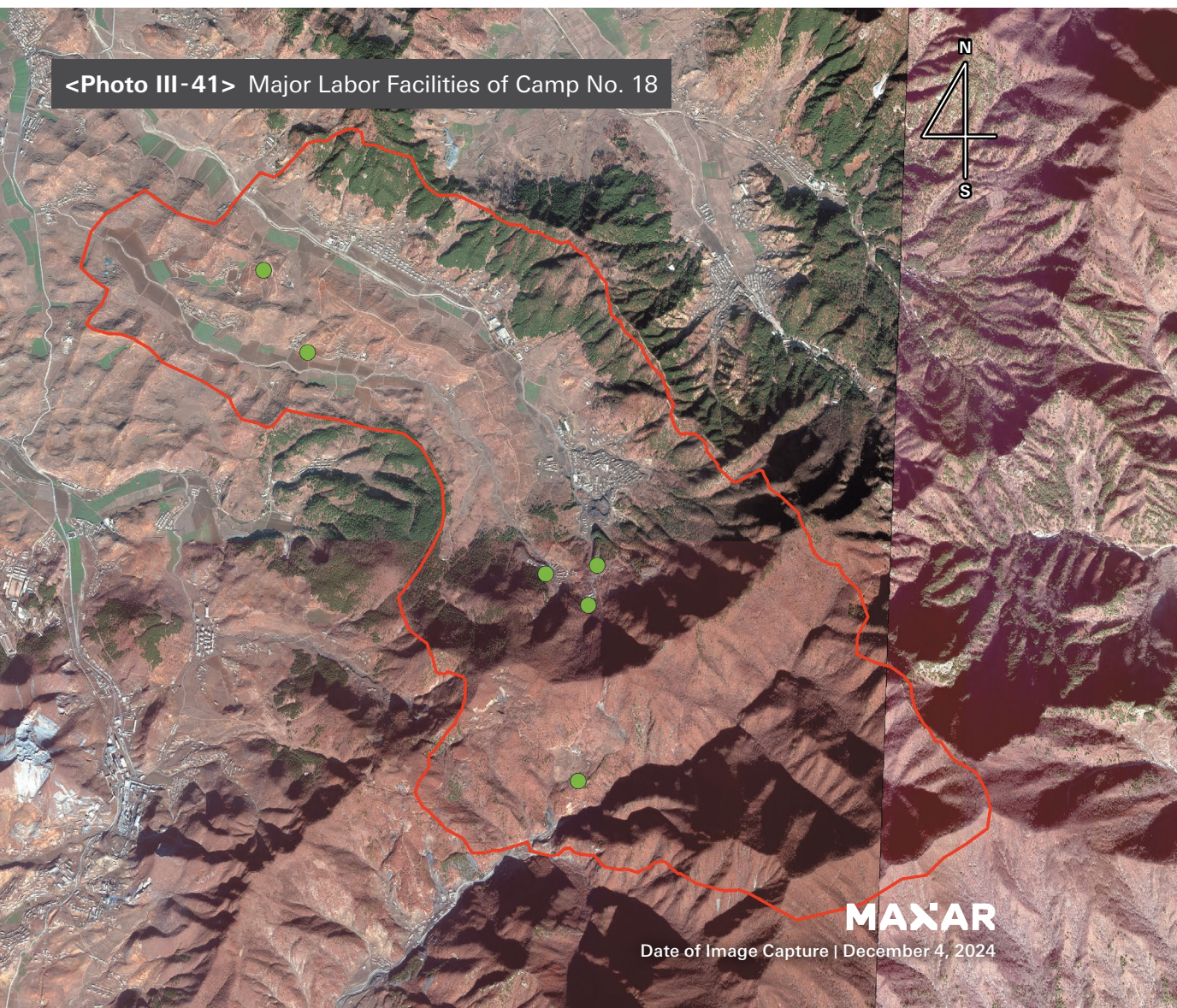


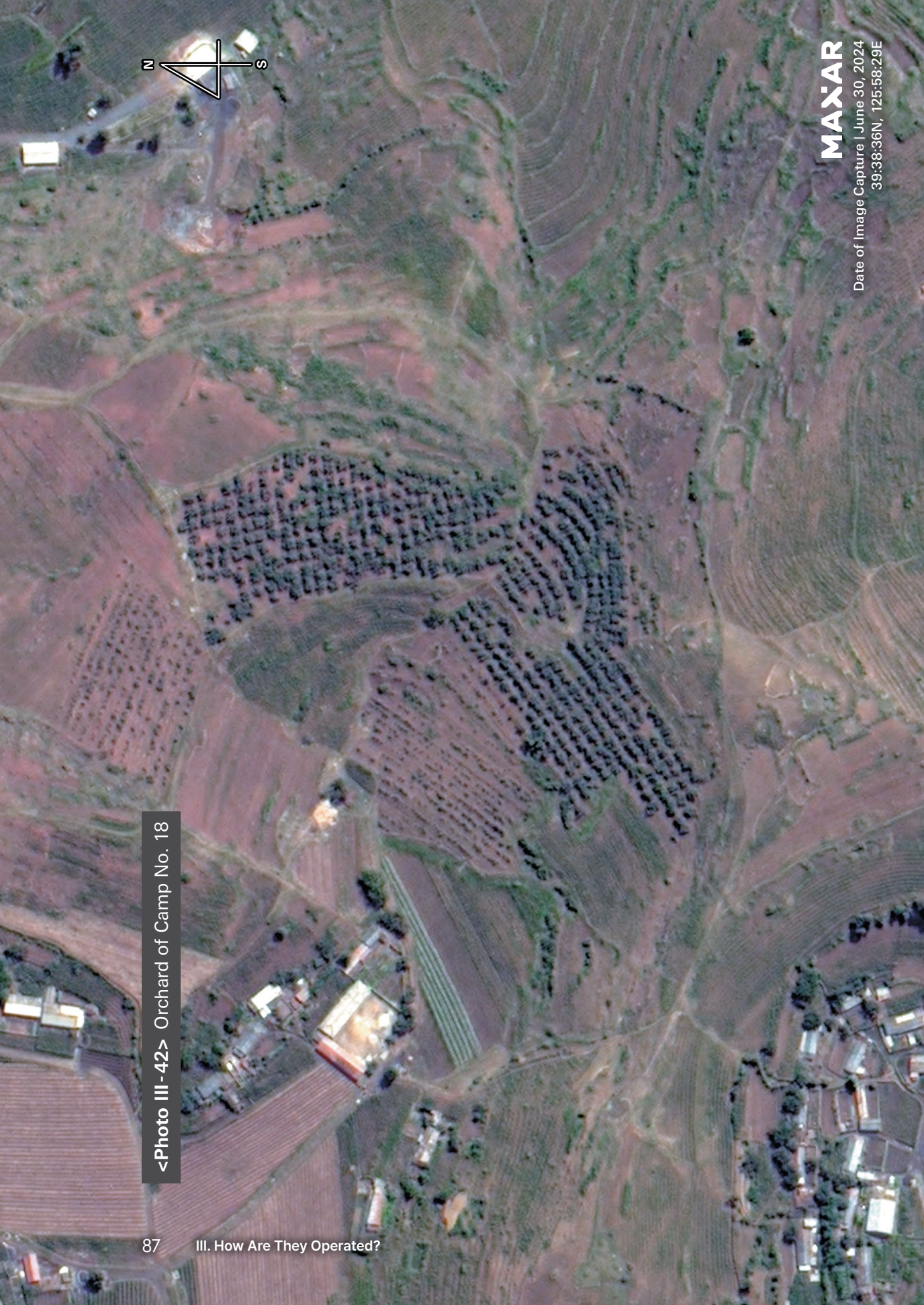
<Photo III -40> Educational Facility (Jayang School) of Camp No. 18

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Date of Image Capture | December 4, 2024
39:38:06N, 125:59:58E

The labor facilities exploiting detainee labor include two orchards, three coal mines, and one livestock facility, totaling six sites (see Photos III-41 to III-44). The mines at Camp No. 18 exclusively produce coal. In addition to these, the Administrative Headquarters (Photo III-35), Jayang School (Photo III-40), Jayang Hospital, and a Labor Training Camp (*rodongdanryundae*) (Photo III-45) are also located within Camp No. 18.





<Photo III-42> Orchard of Camp No. 18



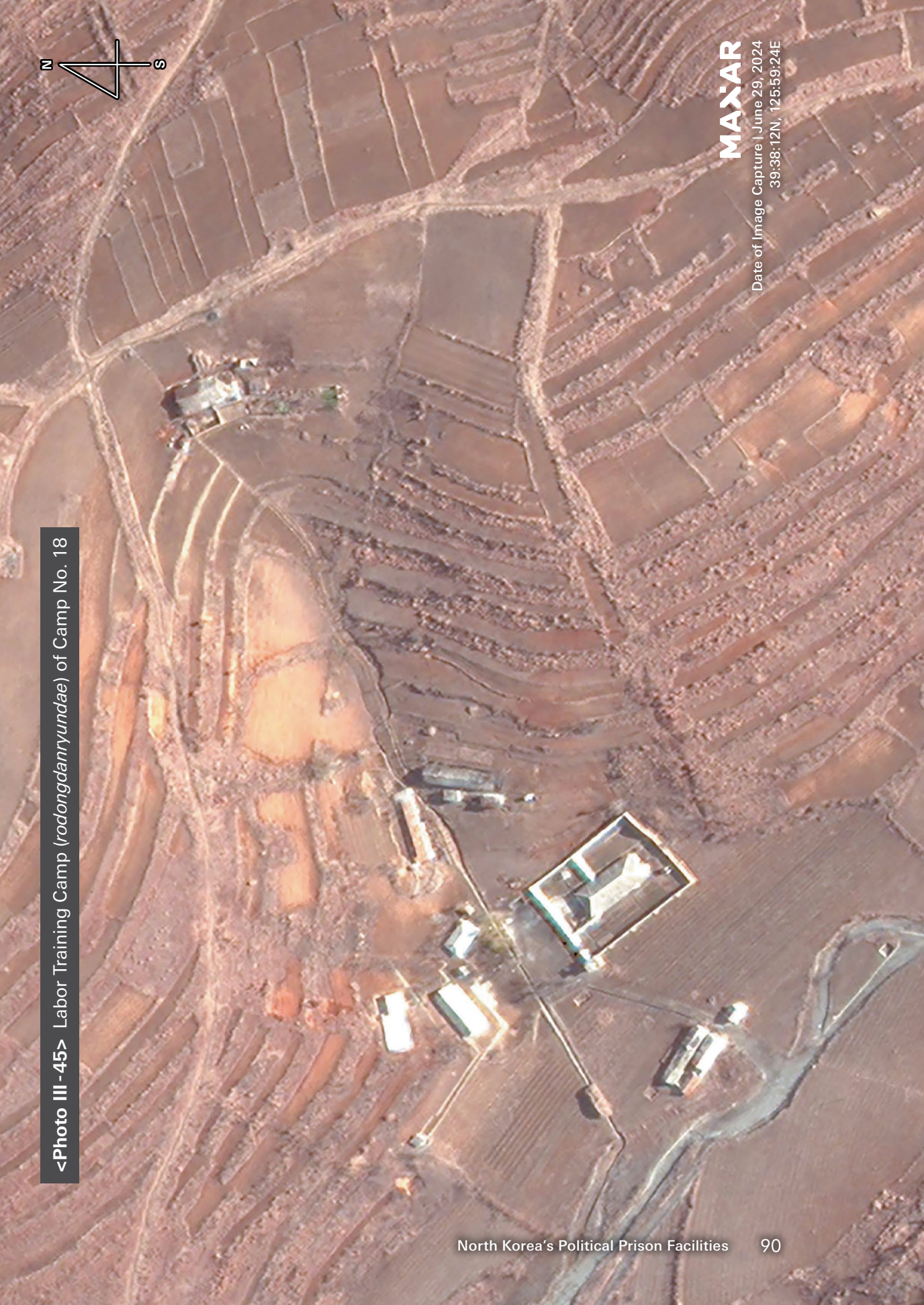
<Photo III-43> Mining Facility of Camp No. 18

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Date of Image Capture | December 4, 2024
39:37:35N, 126:00:05E



<Photo III-44> Livestock Facility of Camp No. 18



<Photo III -45> Labor Training Camp (*rodongdanryundae*) of Camp No. 18

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Date of Image Capture | June 29, 2024
39:38:12N, 125:59:24E

The revolutionization area within Camp No. 18, where approximately 50 households reside, is surrounded by barbed wire fencing. In contrast, facilities such as Jayang School and Jayang Hospital are located in the general, unrestricted area (Refer to the Appendix). It is understood that the children of *ijumin* residing in the Revolutionary area attend the Jayang School under the supervision of camp officials and receive the same education as the children of released persons (*haejemin*), ordinary residents, and camp officials. After graduating from middle school, children of *ijumin* are typically assigned to work in coal mines, whereas children of defectors are eligible for military service or university admission. In terms of population size, Camp No. 18 is comparable to an area between a typical village and county-level administrative unit. However, as the area is directly administered by the Ministry of Social Security, it is treated as a county-level unit for the purpose of university recommendations, which some consider advantageous.⁷¹ At Jayang Hospital, approximately 20 medical staff who had previously worked at the former Bukchang Camp No. 18 continue to provide medical services.⁷²

It is understood that free medical care, including medicine and treatment, is maintained in the camp. Outside the revolutionization area, residents have access to television broadcasts, and storage media can be used upon registration. Landline phone connections to outside areas are reportedly available, particularly from the administrative headquarters, and many residents appear to possess mobile phones.

Unlike other prison camps, *ijumin* of Camp No. 18 are issued citizen identification cards. The registered address is listed as “Ministry of Social Security Camp No. 18.” A distinction is made between *ijumin* and *haejemin* based on the color of the blood type marking: black for *ijumin* and red for *haejemin*.⁷³ Ordinary residents who lived in the Camp No. 18 area prior to 2006 have their addresses recorded according to the administrative district name rather than the camp designation. All residents of Camp No. 18 possess voting rights, but the right to stand for election is reserved exclusively for camp officials. Camp No. 18 operates an independent judicial system, under which criminal cases go through investigation, preliminary examination, and trial processes. Detention facilities, including a labor training Camp (*rodongdanryundae*), are known to exist within Camp No. 18. Photo III-45 shows the housing units for

71 NKHR2020000048-2 2025-05-09; NKHR2025000004 2025-05-08.

72 NKHR2020000048-2 2025-05-09; NKHR2025000004 2025-05-08.

73 NKHR2020000048-2 2025-05-09; NKHR2025000004 2025-05-08.

labor training camp detainees, where they are subjected to long hours of hard physical labor in surrounding farmland or work areas.

According to North Korea's *Resident Registration Reference Book*, understanding the background of all individuals is considered a basic principle. However, "residents of relocation camps under the State Security Department" are specifically classified as individuals exempt from background investigation. While some testimonies suggest that in most relocation camps, excluding Camp No. 18 under the Ministry of Social Security, citizen IDs are revoked or never issued,⁷⁴ there are no documented, verifiable cases to confirm this. Nonetheless, based on North Korean documents, it can be inferred that in Camp No. 14 and Camp No. 16, which fall under the State Security Department, *ijumin* likely have their citizen IDs revoked or were never issued one in the first place.⁷⁵

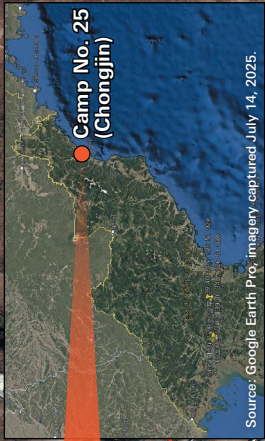
D. Camp No. 25 (*Kyohwaso* for Political Prisoners)

Camp No. 25, located in Suseong-dong, Chongjin City, North Hamgyong Province, operates as a *kyohwaso* for political prisoners rather than a large-scale village-type facility like other camps.

The site covers an area of 0.9km², and as shown in Photo III-46, 44 guard posts (watchtowers), two detainee buildings, and several labor facilities, including two orchards, one mine, one livestock pen, one fish farm, and numerous industrial facilities, have been identified. The perimeter barbed wire fence extends for approximately 5km, with guard posts positioned not only along the perimeter but also within the camp near labor facilities.

⁷⁴ NKHR2025000001 2025-04-07.

⁷⁵ It is also specified that if the head of household has been sent to a reform institution, re-education center, or *ijumin kwanliso* and is not expected to return to serve as head of household in the future, the head of household must be changed. Ministry of Social Security Publishing House, *Resident Registration Reference Book*, pp. 7–11.



<Photo III-46> Entire View of Camp No. 25

- Detainee Housing Unit
- Labor Facility
- Guard Post

The building marked at the 11 o'clock direction is identified as the Security Unit Headquarters, housing one company. The building located to the right of it is presumed to be a light industry factory. Although both buildings are situated outside the red-marked boundary, they are part of Camp No. 25.

<Photo III -47> Security Facilities of Camp No. 25



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Date of Image Capture | November 18, 2024



* The zoomed-in image shows a watchtower.



<Photo III -48> Administrative Headquarters of Camp No. 25

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Date of Image Capture | November 18, 2024
41:49:59N, 129:43:45E

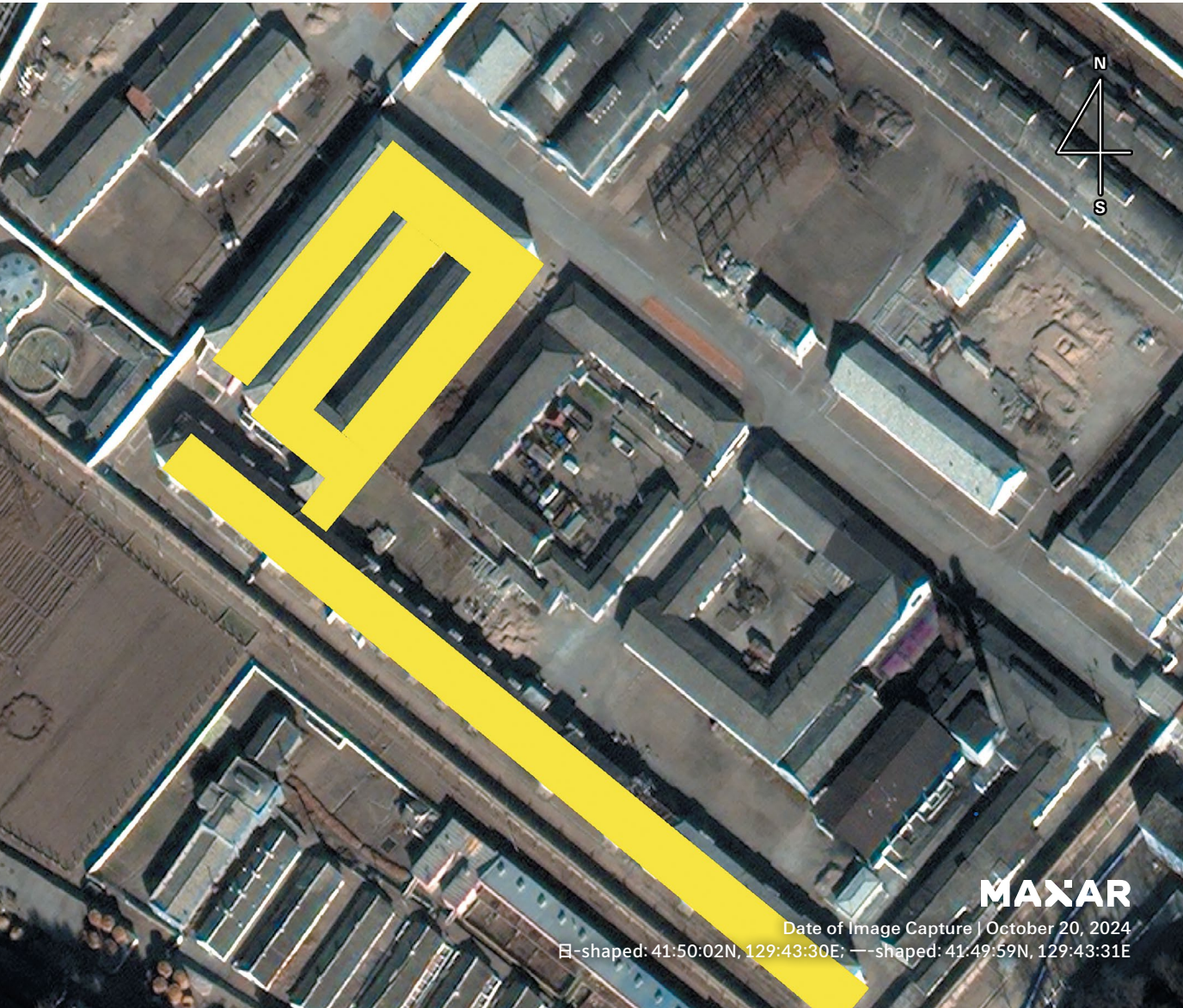
As shown in Photo III-49, the detainee complex consists of a two-story H-shaped building and a three-story linear building, covering an area of 15,000m², with the capacity to detain approximately 5,813 individuals.⁷⁶



<Photo III-49> Detainee Complex of Camp No. 25

⁷⁶ In its ruling 2013Hun-Ma142, the Constitutional Court of Korea found that the then-prevailing detention center condition of providing just over 1m² (0.3 pyeong) of space per inmate was unconstitutional, offering the opinion that at least 2.58m² (0.78 pyeong) should be secured per prisoner. The European Court of Human Rights has also presented 2.7m² as the minimum acceptable space per inmate.

No direct defector testimonies regarding conditions inside Camp No. 25 (Chongjin) have been collected. However, based on limited testimonies from family members and acquaintances of detainees, it is understood that individuals sentenced to specific prison terms may be released after completing their sentence, provided they sign a written pledge not to disclose any information about the conditions inside the camp.





<Photo III - 50> Major Industrial Facility of Camp No. 25

MAXAR

Date of Image Capture | October 20, 2024
41:50:03N, 129:43:38E



<Photo III-51> Fish Farm of Camp No. 25

MAXAR
Date of Image Capture | October 20, 2024
41:50:01N, 129:43:45E



<Photo III - 52> Livestock Facility of Camp No. 25

MAXAR

Date of Image Capture | October 20, 2024
41:49:56N, 129:43:30E

2. Closed Facilities

Camp No. 15 was under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of State Security and consisted of both a completely-controlled area and a revolutionization area. The realities of Camp No. 15 became known to the international community largely through numerous defector testimonies. The camp was located in the areas of Ipyang-ri, Impyeong-ri, Pyeongjeon-ri, and Daesuk-ri in Yodok County, South Hamgyong Province, covering a total area of approximately 363km². Through satellite image analysis and reports from related organizations, it has been confirmed that Camp No. 15 was dismantled (closed) around 2019, likely in response to international human rights pressure.⁷⁷

As shown in Photos III-53 and III-54, parts of the detainee villages have been completely destroyed and ordinary rural housing has been newly constructed in their place.⁷⁸

In the case of the staff village, satellite imagery taken on December 5, 2017 (Photo III-55) shows the presence of security facilities such as an entrance gate, guard post, and barriers at the village entrance. However, as seen in Photo III-56, while there appear to be no significant changes to the staff housing itself, the entrance gate, guard post, and barriers have been dismantled.

⁷⁷ NKHR2025000001-1 2025-06-10.

⁷⁸ It appears that rather than simply being demolished, traces suggest that the area was completely burned down, likely due to poor sanitation facilities in the former inmate village of Camp No. 15. It seems that after the destruction, around 2021, new homes were rebuilt in the form of *Saesallim* houses, which are typical rural residences.

<Photo III -53> Detainee Village of Camp No. 15 Before Dismantlement



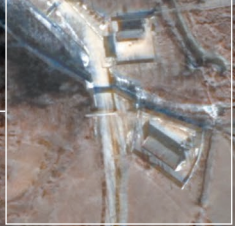
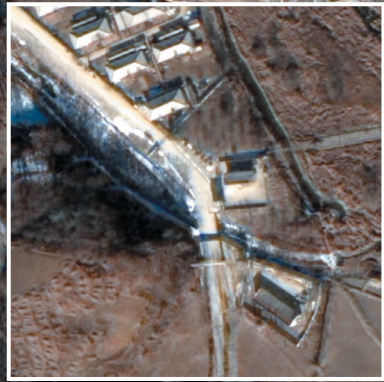
MAXAR
Date of Image Capture | December 5, 2017
39:41:24N, 126:50:37E



<Photo III - 54> Newly Constructed Ordinary Rural Housing After the Dismantlement of Camp No. 15



<Photo III -55> Staff Village of Camp No. 15 Before Dismantlement



MAXAR

Date of Image Capture | December 5, 2017
39:40:28N, 126:51:05E



<Photo III -56> Staff Village of Camp No. 15 After Dismantlement

3. Detainee Population Estimates

The estimated number of detainees held within North Korean prison facilities is calculated based on the type of facility—either village-style housing or prison-style detention buildings—and the corresponding housing capacity. In village-type camps such as Camp No. 14, Camp No. 16, and Camp No. 18, detainee housing consists of single-story collective housing units, while Camp No. 25 (Chongjin) follows a prison-style structure with designated detention buildings. For the purpose of estimating capacity in village-style camps, the calculation assumes: 20m² per household,⁷⁹ an average of either four persons per household (5m² per person) or five persons per household (4m² per person). In the case of Camp No. 25 (Chongjin), due to its prison-style structure, capacity estimates are based on the minimum space per detainee, set at 2.58m². For Camp No. 14, only the area of detainee housing clearly identifiable by fences was included in the calculation. In the case of Camp No. 18, it was difficult to clearly distinguish between typical *ijumin* villages and staff residential areas using satellite imagery. However, based on defector testimonies, the area used for capacity estimates excludes staff housing constructed after the camp was relocated in 2006 (known as the “New Village” for camp officials). Testimonies have been collected indicating that *ijumin* primarily resided in the *ijumin* villages located above the revolutionary area and the coal-mining villages, while a considerable number of rehabilitated individuals (*haejemin*) and ordinary resident households also lived there. Nevertheless, it is impossible to distinguish between *ijumin*, *haejemin*, and ordinary residents within the total housing area, so the entire area was included in the estimate for detainee housing. As a result, the actual detainee population in Camp No. 18 is likely lower than the estimated figures.

As of 2014, the total floor area of detainee housing across the five major camps, including Camp No. 15 (Yodok), was estimated at 371,036m². However, following the closure of Camp No. 15 and a reduction in detainee housing floor area across the remaining four camps, the total floor area as of 2024 stands at approximately 254,580m². Based on the overall estimated capacity of these camps, it is projected that between

⁷⁹ NKHR2020000048-2, 2025-05-09; NKHR2025000004, 2025-05-08. North Korean rural *ttangjip* (also known as *harmonica houses*, which are I-shaped row houses) are approximately 10–12 *pyeong* (33–40 m²) in size, and it is believed that inmate housing in village-style *kwanliso* is likely somewhat more rudimentary than this.

54,000 and 66,000 political prisoners are currently detained. This figure represents a significant decrease compared to the 2013 estimate of 80,000 to 120,000 detainees. The reduction reflects the closure of Camp No. 15 (Yodok), though it is unlikely that all detainees from Camp No. 15 were released. Nonetheless, it is presumed that, as seen during the relocation of Camp No. 18, a considerable number of detainees may have been released during the closure process. Additional factors contributing to the reduced estimate likely include restricted inflow of new *ijumin*, as well as deaths among the existing detainee population. It is also important to note that the 2013 report did not differentiate between village-type camps and prison-style camps, applying a uniform estimate standard. In contrast, the current report distinguishes between village-type camps such as Camp No. 14, Camp No. 16, Camp No. 18, and the prison-style Camp No. 25, applying different estimation methods accordingly. This more refined approach has resulted in a lower overall estimated detainee population.

Given this background, the reduction in the overall detainee population from 80,000–120,000 to 54,000–66,000 is unlikely to be the direct result of any genuine will on the part of the North Korean authorities to improve human rights.

<Table III-1> Estimated Total Detainee Population

Classification of Political Prison Facilities	Detainee Housing Area as of 2024	Minimum Estimated Detainee Population	Maximum Estimated Detainee Population
No. 14 (Gaecheon)	1,020 units Total Floor Area: 141,600m ²	28,320	35,400
No. 16 (Myeonggan)	428 units Total Floor Area: 61,500m ²	12,300	15,375
No. 18 (Gaecheon)	380 units Total Floor Area: 36,480m ²	7,296	9,120
No. 25 (Chongjin)	2 units Total Floor Area: 15,000m ²	5,813	5,813
Total	254,580m²	53,729	65,708

IV. Why Is the International Community Expressing Concern and Interest?

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IV. Why Is the International Community Expressing Concern and Interest?

1. Core Evidence of “Crimes Against Humanity”

As evidenced in various UN documents on North Korean human rights, including North Korean human rights resolutions, the international community, including the United Nations, has consistently assessed that systematic, widespread, and grave human rights violations have been committed and continue to be committed to this day.

Despite the UN Human Rights Council and General Assembly repeatedly adopting resolutions condemning North Korea’s human rights situation and urging its improvement, North Korean authorities have consistently rejected and denied these accusations, and have shown no willingness to reform. As a result, there has been growing recognition of the need to shift strategies to induce change in North Korea’s stance. This led the international community to focus on the issue of “impunity” within the country, specifically, the lack of accountability for ongoing rights violations. In response, the UN Human Rights Council adopted Resolution A/HRC/22/L.19 in 2013, which established a Commission of Inquiry (COI) with a view to ensuring “full accountability,” in particular for the widespread violations of human rights which may amount to crimes against humanity.

In February 2014, the COI submitted its findings (A/HRC/25/63) to the Human Rights Council. The commission concluded that widespread human rights violations in North Korea indeed constituted crimes against humanity. The report specifically highlighted that public executions and enforced disappearances into the political prison camps⁸⁰ serve as the ultimate means to terrorize the population into submission. It identified the inhumane acts committed within these camps as core evidence of crimes against humanity.

Furthermore, the COI found that these acts committed in the political prison camps were carried out on a large scale and with a significant level of organization, thereby constituting a “systematic and widespread attack.” It concluded that such crimes were

⁸⁰ In this report, the term political prison facilities refers to *kwanliso* (and *kyohwaso* for political prisoners), but Chapters IV and V, which address recommendations from the international community, the former terminology ‘political prison camp’ is retained.

part of a broad, organized campaign by the authorities against all those considered a threat to the North Korean political system or its leadership.

“The Commission finds that DPRK authorities have committed and are committing crimes against humanity in the political prison camps, including extermination, murder, enslavement, torture, imprisonment, rape and other grave sexual violence and persecution on political, religious and gender grounds.”

UN Doc. A/HRC/25/CRP.1 (7 February 2014), para. 1033, p. 322.

Based on these findings, the COI recommended that the North Korean authorities acknowledge the existence of political prison camps, immediately allow the international community to access these sites, dismantle all political prison camps, and release all political prisoners without delay. Furthermore, the COI urged that those responsible for large-scale human rights violations, constituting crimes against humanity, including those committed within the political prison camps, be referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and held criminally accountable through appropriate prosecution and sanctions.

2. The United Nations’ Continued Concern

Various UN bodies, including the General Assembly, the Human Rights Council (and its predecessor, the Commission on Human Rights), the Secretary-General, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK, and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, have continuously expressed concern about North Korea’s political prison camps.

A. Expressions of Concern in Resolutions on the Situation of Human Rights in the DPRK

The UN Sub-Commission on Human Rights (1997–1998), the Commission on Human Rights (2003–2005), the Human Rights Council (2008–present), and the General Assembly (2005–present) have consistently adopted resolutions on human rights in North Korea.

In its 1998 resolution (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1998/L.7), the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities expressed concern over reports that large numbers of political prisoners were being held in North Korea, many of whom were suffering severe mistreatment and dying from illness, hunger, and other causes.

The Commission on Human Rights, the Human Rights Council, and the General Assembly have not only voiced concern over the existence of political prison camps and forced labor, but have also repeatedly called for the dismantling of all political prison camps and the unconditional and immediate release of all political prisoners. In particular, since the publication of the COI report in 2014, these concerns have been explicitly framed within the context of crimes against humanity, such as extermination and enslavement, occurring within the political prison camp system.

<Table IV-1> Key Provisions Concerning Political Prison Camps Found in the UN Resolutions on the Situation of Human Rights in the DPRK

Sub-Commission on Human Rights (1998)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expressed concern over the detention of political prisoners, their ill-treatment, and deaths caused by illness and starvation.
Commission on Human Rights (2003–2005)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raised concerns about the existence of numerous political prison camps and the use of forced labor.
Human Rights Council (2008–present)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Condemned serious, widespread, and systematic human rights violations in North Korea, particularly the torture of political prisoners and repatriated individuals and their detention in labor camps. Highlighted the prevalence of crimes such as extermination and enslavement in political prison camps and ordinary prisons. Called for the dismantling of all political prison camps and the release of all political prisoners. Urged judicial reform to ensure fair trials and legal safeguards. Demanded an end to arbitrary and summary executions, including public executions. Called for the abolition of the practice of guilt by association.
General Assembly (2005–present)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expressed concern over the existence of numerous political prison camps where grave human rights violations occur, as well as the practice of forced labor. Called for the immediate cessation of practices involving deprivation of liberty and forced labor. Demanded the immediate closure of political prison camps and the unconditional release of all political prisoners.

B. Report on the Situation of Human Rights in the DPRK

The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK submits an annual *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in DPRK* to the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly. Likewise, the UN Secretary-General submits an annual report to the General Assembly. Both the Special Rapporteur and the

Secretary-General have consistently expressed concern over the existence of political prison camps in these reports, while also calling for the dismantling of such camps and the release of all political prisoners. In particular, in February 2013, Special Rapporteur Marzuki Darusman submitted a report (A/HRC/22/57) to the Human Rights Council, in which *Section D of Annex I* specifically addresses “political prison camps” as a distinct subsection. The main points raised by the Special Rapporteur and the Secretary-General regarding political prison camps can be summarized as follows.

First, the report expressed concern over the existence of political prison camps, forced labor, and reports of public and secret executions. Second, in March 2010, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK sent a letter to the North Korean government regarding conditions in six political prison camps. Third, the report highlighted the work of human rights NGOs using satellite imagery to reveal conditions inside the camps. Fourth, the report expressed concern over the practice of guilt by association during detention processes in political prison camps such as Yodok. Fifth, the report recommended the release of all political prisoners and to dismantle all political prison camps (*kwanliso*) (A/HRC/22/57; A/79/277, among others).

C. Reports on Promoting Accountability in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea

Following the 2014 COI report, the Human Rights Council adopted a resolution in March 2016 calling for appropriate measures to ensure accountability for human rights violations in North Korea. As a result, it appointed the Group of Independent Experts on Accountability. Two independent experts submitted their findings to the Human Rights Council in March 2017 (A/HRC/34/66/Add.1). Subsequently, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has issued a series of reports titled *Promoting Accountability in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea* in 2019, 2021, 2023, and 2025. These reports focus on efforts to implement accountability measures, particularly the establishment and work of a dedicated accountability team. In these reports, the OHCHR identifies political prison camps as a core factor in crimes against humanity and a critical element requiring accountability in the DPRK. The main points are as follows.

Political prison camps are operated entirely in secret and outside any legal framework. North Koreans forcibly repatriated from abroad who are suspected of engaging in activities considered political crimes, such as contact with Christian

organizations or South Korean citizens, or participation in South Korean prayer meetings, are often detained by the Ministry of State Security while some are sent to *kwanliso*. In light of the COI's findings that crimes against humanity are widespread in political prison camps, the OHCHR has recommended pursuing all possible means of documentation to secure reliable and up-to-date information about these detention facilities (see A/HRC/40/36; A/HRC/58/61).

D. Working Group on Arbitrary Detention:

Opinion on the Case of Shin Suk-ja, Oh Hye-won, and Oh Kyu-won

The UN Human Rights Council operates two types of special procedures: country-specific and thematic. These procedures involve independent human rights experts who report and advise on human rights from either a thematic or geographic perspective. As of November 2024, 46 thematic procedures are active, one of which is the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. At its 63rd session (April 30 – May 4, 2012), the Working Group adopted an opinion on the case of Shin Suk-ja, Oh Hye-won, and Oh Kyu-won (A/HRC/WGAD/2012/4).

In 1985, Dr. Oh Kil-nam, a South Korean economist studying in West Germany, defected to North Korea with his wife Shin Suk-ja and their two daughters, Oh Hye-won and Oh Kyu-won. In 1986, after receiving instructions from North Korea to lure two South Korean students in West Germany, Oh fled to Denmark alone and began publicly demanding the repatriation of his family. In a communication to North Korea on March 1, 2012, the Working Group stated that Oh's wife and daughters were initially detained in Yodok political prison camp, and later transferred to a facility near Pyongyang known as Daesuk-ri, but their whereabouts have remained unknown since the early 1990s. In its reply dated April 27, 2012, North Korea claimed that Shin Suk-ja had died from hepatitis and denied that the case had anything to do with arbitrary detention. However, the Working Group concluded that North Korea had arbitrarily detained Shin Suk-ja and her daughters since 1987, in violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and demanded their immediate release and appropriate reparations.

E. Report on “Forced Labour by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea”: Forced Labour and Enslavement in *kwanliso*

On July 24, 2024, the Seoul Office of the UN OHCHR published a thematic report titled “*Forced Labour by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.*” This report sheds light on human rights abuses in political prison camps (*kwanliso*) through the lens of forced labor and enslavement. The main points are as follows.

The report laments the lives of political prisoners in *kwanliso*, marked by relentless forced labor and draws attention to the 2014 COI report’s conclusion that enslavement as a crime against humanity has been and continues to be committed in North Korea’s prison camps, including *kwanliso*, and that there are credible grounds to support this claim.

F. Request for Responses on *kwanliso* Through the Human Rights Committee’s “List of Issues Prior to Reporting”

As a State Party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), North Korea is obligated to submit periodic national reports to the Human Rights Committee and to send a delegation for review. However, since submitting its second periodic report in 2000, North Korea has failed to fulfill its obligation to submit a third report. In response to this prolonged failure, the Human Rights Committee issued a List of Issues Prior to the Submission of the Third Periodic Report in 2021 (CCPR/C/PRK/QPR/3). In this list of issues, the Committee requested the North Korean government to respond, based on Articles 9 and 10 of the Covenant, which concern the right to liberty and security of person, and the treatment of persons deprived of liberty, to allegations that many individuals are subjected to long-term detention in ordinary prisons or political prison camps without trial or as a result of unfair trials.

3. Individual Countries' Concern and Interest

A. United States Department of State

The U.S. Department of State has consistently addressed the issue of political prison camps in its annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: North Korea*. The *2023 Report on Human Rights in North Korea* states that North Korea operates six political prison camps (*kwanliso*), with an estimated population generally ranging between 80,000 and 120,000 inmates, though some NGOs estimate the number to be as high as 200,000. The report highlights the issue of forced labor within the camps and notes that individuals deemed to have committed political crimes are arrested by the Ministry of State Security and imprisoned in these camps without trial.

In 2017, the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor published a *Fact Sheet* titled *Prisons of North Korea*, which provided details on the location, size, and inmate population of the six camps.⁸¹

On April 28, 2021, U.S. State Department Spokesperson Ned Price made an unprecedented move by issuing an official statement on North Korean human rights “*On the Occasion of North Korea Freedom Week*.” In the statement, he emphasized that the United States stands with the people of North Korea, whose dignity and human rights are being violated by one of the most oppressive and totalitarian regimes, including more than 100,000 political prisoners suffering unspeakable human rights abuses in political prison camps.

B. Expression of Concern by the U.S. Congress

Through Hearings on North Korean Human Rights

The *Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission* is a bipartisan body of the U.S. House of Representatives established under a unanimously adopted resolution in 2008 to address human rights issues. The Commission has held a series of hearings on North Korean human rights (in 2010, 2012, 2015, 2018, and 2021). On September 19, 2012, it held a hearing titled “*North Korea: Ongoing Human Rights Violations in an Era of Change*,” aimed at reviewing the human rights situation in North Korea following the rise of the Kim Jong-un regime, including abuses in political prison camps. At

⁸¹ The report covers six sites: Camp No. 14 (Kaechon), Camp No. 25 (Chongjin), Camp No. 16 (Hwasong), Camp No. 22 (Hoeryong, 2012), Camp No. 18 (Pukchang), and Camp No. 15 (Yodok), per U.S. Department of State style. See U.S. Department of State, *Prisons of North Korea*, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/prisons-of-northkorea> (accessed June 9, 2025).

this hearing, three witnesses testified: Suzanne Scholte, President of the Defense Forum Foundation; Park Kwang-il, Head of the Youth and Student Forum for North Korean Democratization and a defector; and Ahn Hyuk, a former prisoner of the Yodok political prison camp. Ahn testified that he was unjustly imprisoned in the Yodok camp in January 1986 and lived for three years in the “revolutionization area.” After being released from the camp, he continued to suffer unfair treatment, which ultimately led him to defect to South Korea.

C. Continued Interest of the European Parliament

Through ‘Resolutions on the Human Rights in North Korea’

The European Parliament has adopted a series of resolutions concerning the human rights situation in North Korea. These resolutions express deep concern over the grave human rights violations occurring within political prison camps and urge the dismantlement of such camps and the release of all political prisoners.

<Table IV-2> Key Points Concerning Political Prison Camps in the European Parliament’s Resolutions on the Human Rights Situation in North Korea

Resolution	Key points
European Parliament resolution of 8 July 2010 on North Korea P7-TA(2010)0290	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stated that North Korea operates at least six political prison camps (concentration camps) detaining over 150,000 political prisoners • Also detained North Korean defectors forcibly repatriated from China • Called for the release of political prisoners
European Parliament resolution of 24 May 2012 on the situation in North Korean refugees P7-TA(2012)0229	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operation of labor camps for political prisoners • Operation of at least six political prison camps and numerous reeducation through labor camps, with over 200,000 detainees, most of whom are imprisoned for political reasons
European Parliament resolution of 14 March 2013 on nuclear threats and human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea P7-TA(2013)0096	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detention of over 200,000 individuals in political prison camps and re-education camps • Called for the release of political prisoners
European Parliament resolution of 17 April 2014 on the situation in North Korea (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea) P7-TA(2014)0462	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cited the conclusion of the COI report, which states that the “unspeakable atrocities” committed against the hundreds of thousands of current and former detainees in political prison camps ‘resembles the horrors of camps that totalitarian States established during the twentieth century’ • Called for the closure of all political prison camps and the release of political prisoners

Resolution	Key points
European Parliament resolution of 21 January 2016 on North Korea P8-TA(2016)0024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Called for the release of political prisoners
European Parliament resolution of 7 April 2022 on the human rights situation in North Korea, including the persecution of religious minorities P9-TA(2022)0123	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concern over forced hard labor in detention facilities and political prison camps • According to the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in North Korea, <i>kwanliso</i> (political prison camps) are in operation and are deemed essential for the regime’s control and repression of the population • The North Korean authorities systematically and routinely rely on forced labor from many citizens—particularly political prisoners in the camps—to sustain the economy • Urged the North Korean government to cease ongoing crimes against humanity, including the political prison camp system • Emphasized the need to dismantle the camps • Called for the disclosure of detailed information about the political prison camps and the provision of access to independent international monitoring bodies
European Parliament resolution of 28 November 2024 on reinforcing EU’s unwavering support to Ukraine against Russia’s war of aggression and the increasing military cooperation between North Korea and Russia P10-TA(2024)0055	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Called for allowing access by UN human rights mechanisms to assess the human rights situation, cases of enforced disappearances, and the conditions of detainees

4. Key Grounds for Human Rights Sanctions on North Korea

Jurisdictions such as the U.S., the United Kingdom, and the EU have designated North Korea as a primary target in the implementation of autonomous human rights sanctions. In particular, individual and institutions responsible for human rights abuses within *kwanliso* have been designated for sanctions.

A. United States: North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act and Executive Orders

In 2016, the U.S. enacted the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016 as a legal basis to impose sanctions specifically on individuals responsible for the development of weapons of mass destruction and human rights abuses in North Korea. Chapter 3 of this law is titled Promotion of Human Rights (Title III), and

Section 303 is titled Report on North Korean Prison Camps. It requires the Secretary of State to submit a report containing specific information on the prison camps⁸² to the relevant congressional committees.⁸³

Furthermore, Section 304 of the Act stipulates the Report on and Imposition of Sanctions with Respect to Serious Human Rights Abuses or Censorship in North Korea.

In addition, the U.S. President has issued a series of Executive Orders (E.O. 13687, E.O. 13722, E.O. 13810) concerning human rights in North Korea. Under E.O. 13687, Jong Kyong-thaek, the Minister of State Security, was designated for sanctions in December 2018.⁸⁴

B. European Union: “Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime”

In 2012, the U.S. enacted the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act, named after Sergei Magnitsky, a Russian lawyer who died under suspicious circumstances in prison after exposing corruption among senior Russian government officials. Thereafter, international human rights organizations such as Freedom House lobbied to expand the scope of the law globally. As a result, in December 2016, the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act was passed by the U.S. Congress. This law allows for the denial of entry into the U.S., freezing of assets within U.S. jurisdiction, and prohibition of transactions with U.S. persons for foreign individuals or entities involved in human rights abuses or corruption.

The EU established its own Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, modeled after the U.S. Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act. This regime consists of 1. Council Decision (CFSP) 2020/1999 of December 2020 concerning restrictive measures against serious human rights violations and abuses, and 2. Council Regulation (EU) 2020/1998 of December 2020 concerning restrictive measures against serious human rights violations and abuses.

82 ① Estimated number of political prisoners; ② Geographical coordinates of the camps; ③ Reasons for detention; ④ Main industries and products of the camps, and end-users of those products; ⑤ Individuals and institutions responsible for conditions in the camps; ⑥ Visual materials including satellite imagery

83 The National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) under the U.S. Department of Defense released an analysis on “North Korea’s Political Prison Camp, Kwan-li-so No. 25,” assessing that North Korea continues to maintain the facility while expanding its surveillance capabilities. *Voice of America*, February 27, 2024.

84 The reason for designation is that Minister of State Security Jong Kyong-thaek was involved in directing human rights abuses—including torture, starvation, forced labor, and sexual violence—that are systematically carried out in political prison camps.

This regime, like the U.S. Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, designates not only individuals but also organizations as targets of sanctions. It imposes restrictions such as bans on entry and residence, asset freezes, and prohibitions on financial transactions for designated entities.

Based on the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, the EU began implementing sanctions in earnest starting in March 2021. On March 22, 2021, it designated 11 individuals and four entities from six countries—China, North Korea, Russia, Libya, Eritrea, and South Sudan—for sanctions due to human rights violations.

With respect to North Korea, the sanctioned parties included Jong Kyong-thaek (Minister of State Security), Ri Yong-gil (Minister of Social Security), and the Central Public Prosecutors Office. In particular, the sanctions designation for Jong Kyong-thaek highlighted that he leads the organization responsible for policies that suppress dissent, block the inflow of external information deemed threatening to the regime, and repress acts perceived as serious political threats to the political system and leadership. In December 2023, the European Parliament extended these sanctions until December 8, 2026. Subsequently, on July 22, 2024, it added Ri Chang-dae (current Minister of State Security) and the Onsong County Ministry of State Security Detention Center to the list of sanctioned entities.

C. United Kingdom: “Global Human Rights Sanctions Regulations”

In 2018, the United Kingdom enacted the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, often referred to as the UK’s version of the Magnitsky Act. Based on this law, the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regulations 2020 came into effect on July 6, 2020. Under this regulation, the UK government is authorized to impose travel bans and asset freezes on individuals and entities involved in serious human rights violations. On the day the regulations were enacted, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office designated 47 individuals and two entities from four countries, Russia, Myanmar, Saudi Arabia, and North Korea, as the first targets of sanctions. Among these, North Korea was the only country where entities, rather than individuals, were designated, specifically the 7th Bureau of the Ministry of State Security, responsible for operating political prison camps, and the Correctional Bureau of the Ministry of Social Security, responsible for managing reeducation camps.

5. Raising Awareness through Musicals and Films

In the private sector, musicals and films centered on the theme of political prison camps have been produced, helping to raise public awareness about the issue.

A. Musical: “Yodok Story”

Yodok Story is a musical produced by North Korean defector and filmmaker Jung Sung-san, created to expose the human rights abuses taking place in North Korea’s Yodok political prison camp. The production focuses on Camp No. 15, located in Yodok County, South Hamgyong Province. The musical was performed 115 times both domestically and internationally, attracting an audience of approximately 180,000 people. It drew significant international attention, with all tickets selling out in countries such as the U.S., Germany, and Japan. As a cultural content piece, *Yodok Story* played a role in raising global awareness about the realities of North Korea’s political prison camps and contributed to the broader public dissemination of human rights issues.

Plot Summary

The story follows a woman named Kang Ryun-hwa and depicts the turbulent life and death that befall her and her once peaceful family. Kang Ryun-hwa, the most renowned dancer in North Korea and an honored performer of the Wangjaesan Light Music Band, suddenly receives the shocking news that her father has been accused of being a spy for South Korea’s National Intelligence Service. As a result, she and her entire family are imprisoned in Yodok political prison camp. On the day of their arrival, the camp director, Ri Myung-soo, rapes Ryun-hwa, and she becomes pregnant with his child. Ryun-hwa attempts to commit suicide, but under North Korea’s ideological doctrine—where even suicide is seen as a challenge to the Party—she is placed in solitary confinement. Pregnant with Myung-soo’s child, Ryun-hwa is eventually persuaded by him to attempt an escape to South Korea. Ri Myung-soo is later executed by firing squad on charges of having helped her escape.

B. Animated Film: *True North*

True North is an animated film directed by Korean-Japanese fourth-generation filmmaker Eiji Han Shimizu. Released in 2020, it realistically portrays the horrific realities inside a North Korean political prison camp through the story of a repatriated Korean-Japanese family imprisoned in the North.

Plot Summary

The story centers on a nine-year-old boy named Park Yohan, whose parents are Korean-Japanese repatriates living in Pyongyang. After his father, once a loyal servant of the Party, suddenly disappears, Yohan, his mother, and younger sister are forcibly taken to one of North Korea's infamous and brutal political prison camps. Traumatized by witnessing the public execution of inmates who attempted to escape, young Yohan grows up in the camp. Harboring resentment toward his missing father, Yohan begins associating with camp guards and even participates in abusing fellow inmates, endangering his own family in the process. Years later, after the sudden and tragic death of someone he loves, Yohan falls into despair. As he struggles to survive under the camp's horrific conditions, he gradually begins to reassess the meaning of his life.

True North was invited to and received awards at international film festivals including Annecy, Tokyo, and Nashville, earning critical acclaim. Although its commercial success was limited, the film contributed to the global human rights discourse by visually depicting the realities of North Korea's political prison camps. Notably, it was also recognized for its educational value by being included in the U.S.-based educational platform infobase.com, which provides content to schools and libraries worldwide, including elementary, middle, and high schools.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ *Voice of America*, May 24, 2024.

V. What Is the Significance of UPR Recommendations?

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V. What Is the Significance of UPR Recommendations?

1. Content of UPR Recommendations

North Korea has participated in the UPR, one of the UN human rights mechanisms established in 2006, in all four review cycles: 2009, 2014, 2019, and 2024. Across these four cycles, the North Korean authorities received a total of 991 recommendations from the international community, covering all areas of human rights. Among them, 59 recommendations were related specifically to political prison camps (*kwanliso*) and detention facilities.⁸⁶ Out of the 59 recommendations made on political prison camps and detention facilities, North Korea accepted only two and rejected 57, meaning that it refused approximately 97% of the recommendations in this category. This indicates that North Korea has effectively rejected recommendations on political prison camps and detention facilities raised through the UPR mechanism. While only two such recommendations were made during the first UPR cycle, the number rose significantly to 26 in the second cycle, then declined to 14 in the third cycle, and increased slightly to 17 in the fourth cycle.

<Table V-1> UPR Recommendations Related to Political Prison Camps and Detention Facilities

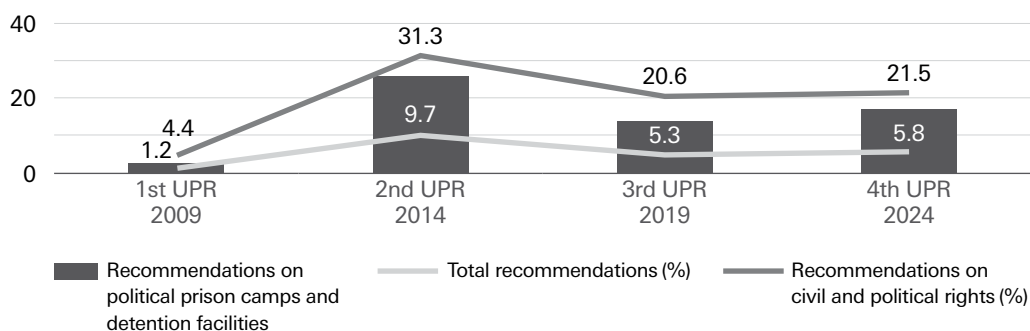
	2009 1 st UPR	2014 2 nd UPR	2019 3 rd UPR	2024 4 th UPR	Total	
Total recommendations	167	268	262	294	991	
Recommendations on political prison camps and detention facilities	Accept	0	0	0	2	2
	Reject	2	26	14	15	57
	Note	0	0	0	0	0
	Total	2	26	14	17	59

Source: Author compilation based on each cycle of the "Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review."

⁸⁶ Recommendations concerning forced labor practices against detainees, sexual violence, the right to food, adherence to international norms, collective punishment, general treatment of detainees, and cooperation with special procedures were not included.

Among the recommendations concerning North Korea that fall under civil and political rights, those related to political prison camps and detention facilities accounted for 4.4% in the first cycle, 31.3% in the second cycle, 20.6% in the third cycle, and 21.5% in the fourth cycle, with an average of 19.5%. In other words, one out of every five recommendations concerning civil and political rights was related to political prison camps and detention facilities. When measured as a proportion of all recommendations made in each cycle, those concerning political prison camps and detention facilities accounted for 1.2% in the first cycle, 9.7% in the second cycle, 5.3% in the third cycle, and 5.8% in the fourth cycle, with an average of 5.5%.

<Figure V-1> Proportion of UPR Recommendations Related to Political Prison Camps and Detention Facilities



Source: Author compilation based on each cycle of the "Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review."

From the perspective of recommending states, two states made at least one recommendation related to political prison camps and detention facilities in the first cycle, 23 states in the second cycle, 14 states in the third cycle, and 15 states in the fourth cycle. Notably, the Netherlands proposed recommendations in every UPR cycle without exception. Regionally, it is evident that European countries have been particularly active in addressing the issue of North Korea's political prison camps and detention facilities.

<Table V-2> States that Proposed UPR Recommendations Related to Political Prison Camps and Detention Facilities

	Recommending states	Number of states	Number of recommendations
2009 1st UPR	Netherlands, France	2	2
2014 2nd UPR	Lithuania, Canada, Greece, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Republic of Korea (South Korea), Austria, Sweden, Spain, France, United States, Germany, Israel, New Zealand, Netherlands, Argentina, Japan, Estonia, Ireland, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Mexico, Hungary, Belgium	23	26
2019 3rd UPR	Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Argentina, Austria, Canada, United States, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Czech Republic, Iceland	14	14
2024 4th UPR	Georgia, Portugal, Gambia, Liechtenstein, Ukraine, Türkiye, France, Czech Republic, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Sweden, Albania, United States, Malta, Israel	15	17
	Total	54	59

Source: Author compilation

2. Political Prison Camps and Detention Facilities Remain a Continued Focus of the UPR Mechanism

In the first cycle of the UPR conducted in 2009, two recommendations related to political prison camps and detention facilities were made by the Netherlands and France. These included urging North Korea to allow the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) access to all detention facilities in the country and to release political prisoners along with their family members. The North Korean authorities rejected both recommendations. The stakeholder submissions highlighted several issues: the fact that individuals in North Korea are sent to political prison camps without fair trials;⁸⁷ that the most severe human rights violations occur within these camps;⁸⁸ and that United Nations and international NGOs should be allowed to visit facilities such as Camp No. 14 (Gaecheon), No. 15 (Yodok), No. 16 (Myeonggan), No. 18 (formerly Bukchang, now Gaecheon), No. 22 (Hoeryong), and No. 25 (Chongjin).⁸⁹ In the first UPR cycle, the recommendations specifically addressing political prison

⁸⁷ UN Doc. A/HRC/WG.6/6/PRK/3 (28 August 2009), para. 20, p. 5.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, para. 21, p. 5.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, para. 24, p. 6.

camps or reeducation camps were limited in number and scope. Nevertheless, their significance lies in drawing attention to the fact that North Korea’s detention facilities are central to the country’s system of arbitrary and rights-violating punishment.

<Table V-3> UPR First Cycle Recommendations on Political Prison Camps and Detention Facilities

Recommendation	Recommending state	North Korea’s response
Provide unlimited access to ICRC to all detention facilities in the country	Netherlands	Finally rejected
Put an end to the practice of incarcerating all the members of the family of every opposition figure, release without delay political prisoners and members of their family as well as ensure freedom of opinion and expression	France	Rejected

Source: Author compilation based on “Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review (UN Doc. A/HRC/13/13)”

In the second cycle of the UPR conducted in April 2014, the number of recommendations related to political prison camps and detention facilities increased significantly to 26, compared to just 2 in the first cycle. The number of recommending states also rose markedly from 2 to 23. This indicates a growing international interest in the human rights violations occurring in political prison camps and a widening global consensus on the issue. This heightened attention may be attributed in part to the influence of the COI report submitted during the second UPR cycle. In March 2013, the UN Human Rights Council established the COI on human rights in North Korea to conduct an in-depth investigation into human rights violations. The COI submitted its report in February 2014, highlighting the extensive and severe nature of these violations.⁹⁰

One of the COI report’s key conclusions was that North Korea’s human rights abuses may constitute crimes against humanity under international criminal law. The report cited acts occurring in political prison camps such as murder, extermination, enslavement, imprisonment, torture, rape and other forms of sexual violence, persecution, and enforced disappearance.⁹¹

During the second UPR cycle, member states proposed a range of specific recommendations, including the immediate closure of political prison camps, the

⁹⁰ North Korean Human Rights Research Center, Korea Institute for National Unification, *International Discourse on North Korean Human Rights and South Korea’s Policy* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2016), p. 3.

⁹¹ For further details, refer to the “Crimes against humanity in political prison camps” section of the COI report. UN Doc. A/HRC/25/CRP.1 (7 February 2014), paras. 1033–1067, pp. 323–330.

unconditional release of political prisoners, guarantees for fair trials, the introduction of safeguards against arbitrary detention, the prohibition of torture and mistreatment of detainees, and ensuring international access to the camps and surviving victims. Compared to the first cycle, the recommendations became more diverse and detailed. However, North Korea rejected all of them. Most notably, through the UPR mechanism, the international community actively drew attention to North Korea’s operation of large-scale political prison camps, and the grave human rights violations committed within them.

<Table V-4> UPR Second Cycle Recommendations on Political Prison Camps and Detention Facilities

Recommendation	Recommending state	North Korea’s response
Take immediate steps to end the use of torture and other ill treatment of detainees in political prison camps, including forced labor and denial of food quotas	Lithuania	
Close immediately all political prison camps and unconditionally release all political prisoners detained		
Close all political prison camps immediately	Canada	
Close down the political prison camps and release all political prisoners	Greece	
Close down all camps where prisoners of conscience are held and release unconditionally all political prisoners	Czech Republic	
Close down immediately all political prison camps and labor camps and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience, including relatives that have been held on the basis of “guilt by association”	Slovenia	
Close political prison camps, eliminate discrimination based on the <i>songbun</i> system and cooperate with human rights mechanisms, including the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea	Republic of Korea	Rejected
Immediately close down all political prison camps, and release all prisoners of conscience, including relatives being held on the basis of guilt by association	Austria	
Provide international humanitarian organizations and human rights monitors with immediate access to the prison camps and their surviving victims		
Immediately close down all political prison camps and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience, including relatives being held on the basis of guilt by association	Sweden	
Proceed to the immediate closure of prisoner camps	Spain	
Immediately close concentration camps for political prisoners and release all political prisoners	France	
Immediately dismantle all political prison camps, release all political prisoners, and institute protections against arbitrary detention that guarantee due process and fair trial	United States of America	

Recommendation	Recommending state	North Korea's response
Immediately dismantle all political prison camps and abolish the practice of forced labor	Germany	
Acknowledge the existence of human rights violations, including political prison camps, dismantle them and release all prisoners	Israel	
Provide international humanitarian organizations and human rights monitors access to the camps and their surviving victims		
Acknowledge the existence of political prison camps, and take immediate steps to close them	New Zealand	
Acknowledge the existence of human rights violations, including those in facilities which it describes as "reform through labor camps", and provide international humanitarian organizations with immediate access to these facilities and their victims; dismantle all camps and release all political prisoners; and clarify with full detail the fate of any disappeared persons who cannot be readily traced	Netherlands	
Put an end to the practice of people detained in prisoner camps, closing political prisoner camps and promoting the necessary reforms in the judicial system to ensure fair trial and respect for due process guarantees	Argentina	Rejected
Abolish its political prison camps, where grave human rights violations are ongoing, and release all political prisoners	Japan	
Guarantee international humanitarian organizations and human rights monitors immediate access to political prisons and other camps, as well as to their surviving victims, in order to provide primary care	Estonia	
Provide international humanitarian organizations with immediate, free and unimpeded access to all populations in need, including those held in labor camps or political prison camps	Ireland	
Ensure access of the International Humanitarian Organization to the prison camps and to other detention centers	The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	
Make a list of persons in detention, provide access to the International Red Cross to prisons and review all cases of arbitrary arrest or confessions under torture, considering reparation for victims	Mexico	
To counter allegations of torture and ill-treatment in prison facilities, allow ICRC and other international observers to have immediate, full and genuine access to all detention facilities to ensure proper treatment of prisoners	Hungary	Finally rejected
Invite the Special Rapporteur and/or an international humanitarian organization recognized for its independence to visit "reform institutions" and other correctional and penitentiary institutions to assess/evaluate detention conditions with a view to proposing measures to improve these conditions so that they meet international norms and standards	Belgium	

Source: Author compilation based on "Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review (UN Doc. A/HRC/27/10)"

In the third cycle of the UPR conducted in May 2019, a total of 14 recommendations related to political prison camps and detention facilities were proposed by 14 member states. Both the number of recommending countries and the number of recommendations decreased compared to the second cycle. The U.S., Canada, the Netherlands, Germany, Argentina, Austria, New Zealand, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the Czech Republic made recommendations on political prison camps and detention facilities in both the second and third cycles. Among them, the Netherlands stands out for having made relevant recommendations in all three cycles. During the interactive dialogue, the U.S. expressed concern that between 80,000 and 120,000 people are detained in the camps and are subjected to inhumane conditions.⁹² In terms of the conditions of the camps, the 2000s saw changes in both their scale and location. Camp No. 18 (Bukchang) was relocated to Gaecheon, and Camp No. 15 (Yodok) is believed to have reduced its scale in the early 2000s and was reportedly closed around 2019. Nevertheless, no change has been observed in North Korea's stance toward the international community's recommendations on political prison camps. North Korea rejected all 14 recommendations made during the third UPR cycle in 2019.

Substantively, the recommendations in the third cycle, like those in previous cycles, included calls for the immediate closure of political prison camps and the release of detainees, the cessation of forced labor, torture, and inhumane treatment within the camps, the granting of access to international organizations, the abolition of arbitrary detention and the guilt by association system, the allowance of family visits, and the improvement of detention conditions.

What distinguishes the third cycle recommendations from those in earlier cycles is the explicit reference to the human rights-related targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—agreed upon by the international community as normative goals in September 2015, as well as the 2014 COI report and its recommendations, as a basis for ending human rights violations in political prison camps. It is also noteworthy that in the third cycle, several countries raised concerns about North Korea's application of guilt by association, under which not only the individual being punished but also their family members, and in some cases extended relatives, are subjected to collective punishment.

⁹² UN Doc. A/HRC/42/10 (25 June 2019), p. 3.

<Table V-5> UPR Third Cycle Recommendations on Political Prison Camps and Detention Facilities

Recommendation	Recommending state	North Korea's response
Take immediate and effective action to stop the use of torture and other ill-treatment of detainees in political prison camps and other detention facilities, in line with Sustainable Development Goal 16	Netherlands	
Give international humanitarian organizations access to provide assistance to detainees in all penitentiary facilities, including labor training camps, prisons and political prison camps, allow family visits to all detainees, and establish rules regarding the treatment of detainees in accordance with international human rights standards	Germany	
Put an end to forced labor in political prison camps and, in particular, protect children under 18 years against any form of forced labor in conformity with target 8.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals	Switzerland	
Put an end to the practice of deprivation of liberty in political prison camps, promoting their closure and guaranteeing a fair trial as well as full respect for freedom of expression and procedural guarantees	Argentina	
Immediately close down all political prison camps and release all prisoners of conscience, including relatives being held on the basis of guilt by association	Austria	
Implement its obligations under the human rights instruments to which it is party, and cease the use of arbitrary detention, political prison camps and collective punishment	Canada	
Immediately dismantle all political prison camps, release all political prisoners, institute protections against arbitrary detention that guarantee due process and fair trial, and grant international observers, including United Nations special procedures, unimpeded and unrestricted access to the country and to all detention facilities	United States of America	Rejected
Immediately close political prisoner camps and unconditionally release all political prisoners	Luxembourg	
Take immediate steps to close political prison camps	New Zealand	
Close down all political prison camps and labor camps and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience, including relatives that have been held on the basis of "guilt by association"	Slovenia	
Close all detention camps in which internees are arbitrarily deprived of liberty and subjected to inhumane conditions	Spain	
Immediately close all political prison camps and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience, including relatives being held on the basis of guilt by association	Sweden	
Build an independent judiciary, and unconditionally release all political prisoners and those detained without a due process	Czechia	
Fully implement the recommendations made by the commission of inquiry, including releasing all political prisoners and allowing for the establishment of independent media	Iceland	

Source: Author compilation based on "Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review (UN Doc. A/HRC/42/10)"

In the fourth cycle of the UPR conducted in November 2024, a total of 17 recommendations related to political prison camps and detention facilities were proposed by 15 member states. The content of the recommendations did not differ significantly from those in the third cycle. They included calls for the dismantlement of all political prison camps and the unconditional release of all political prisoners, improvements in detention conditions for minors, enhancement of detention facility environments including access to food, clean water, and medical services, an end to torture and inhumane treatment, cessation of arbitrary arrests and detentions, and the release of family members imprisoned under the guilt by association system. The U.S., the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Luxembourg, and Sweden all proposed recommendations on political prison camps and detention facilities in both the third and fourth cycles. Additionally, countries such as Georgia, Liechtenstein, Albania, Ukraine, and Malta also raised the issue in this cycle, indicating that the range of recommending states has become more diverse compared to the previous three cycles.

A notable development in the fourth cycle was that the North Korean authorities accepted two recommendations related to political prison camps and detention facilities. These were: Georgia's recommendation to "ensure that the conditions of detention facilities comply with the obligation to provide humane treatment," and Portugal's recommendation to "guarantee appropriate conditions of detention for minors in accordance with international standards." This marked the first time that North Korea had accepted any recommendation related to political prison camps or detention facilities. This suggests that, within a limited scope, North Korea may be willing to accept recommendations concerning detention facility conditions. However, it is likely that North Korea did not reject these two recommendations because they did not explicitly refer to the *kwanliso*, which it has consistently denied. Therefore, ongoing attention is needed to monitor whether North Korea's position will shift in the future.

North Korea did not immediately reject recommendations addressing overcrowding and inadequate medical services in detention facilities but finally rejected them after review. It has continued to reject all recommendations related to the prohibition of torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, abolition of the death penalty, and arbitrary arrest and detention in the context of political prison camps. The UN summary report for the fourth UPR cycle also noted that there is continuing documentation of the situation in the political prison camps, where

detainees are held indefinitely under conditions of limited access to food, water, and sanitation, and are subjected to abuse.⁹³ Despite the limitations, some indications of improvement regarding human rights violations in the camps have been noted. There have been reports that the length of detention for family members held in the camps has been reduced, and in some cases, children have been released from the camps or exempted from detention altogether.⁹⁴

<Table V-6> UPR Fourth Cycle Recommendations on Political Prison Camps and Detention Facilities

Recommendation	Recommending state	North Korea's response
Ensure that conditions in detention facilities are in compliance with its obligations for the humane treatment of persons	Georgia	Accept
Guarantee appropriate conditions of detention for minors, ensuring that detention conditions are in line with international standards	Portugal	
Improve prison conditions by addressing overcrowding and inadequate medical care and ensure that prisoners are protected from torture and inhumane treatment	Gambia	Finally rejected
Immediately cease the use of torture and other cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment in places of detention		
Release all political prisoners, disband all political prison camps and immediately cease the arbitrary arrest and imprisonment of persons on the grounds of their political or other opinion, and take steps to improve conditions in detention facilities	Liechtenstein	
Cease all forms of torture and mistreatment of detainees, and allow unimpeded access for international observers, including United Nations special procedures, to all detention facilities	Ukraine	
Dismantle all political prison camps, release all political prisoners, and implement safeguards against arbitrary detention, ensuring due process and fair trial rights		Rejected
Cease all kinds of inhuman or degrading treatment, including in detention facilities	Türkiye	
End politically motivated imprisonment and the use of torture in all places of detention and ensure fair trials	France	
Abolish political prison camps and release all political prisoners, discontinue the use of torture, prevent enforced disappearances and arbitrary and public executions, and introduce a moratorium on the use of the death penalty	Czechia	
Take immediate and effective action to abolish all political prison camps and to discontinue the use of torture in all detention facilities, in line with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Sustainable Development Goal 16	Netherlands	

⁹³ UN Doc. A/HRC/WG.6/47/PRK/2 (6 August 2024), para. 23, p. 3.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 24, p. 3.

Recommendation	Recommending state	North Korea's response
Immediately close political prison camps and release all political prisoners unconditionally	Luxembourg	
Immediately close all political prison camps and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience, including relatives being held on the basis of "guilt by association"	Sweden	
Dismantle political prison camps and release all political prisoners	Albania	Rejected
Immediately dismantle political prison camps, release unjustly detained political prisoners, and institute protections against arbitrary detention that guarantee respect for fair trials and other protections	United States of America	
Release all prisoners detained on political grounds	Malta	
Cease and abolish the forced labour camps and free persons detained, in respect of human dignity and integrity	Israel	

Source: Author compilation based on "Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review (UN Doc. A/HRC/58/11)"

There are limitations in clearly identifying the North Korean authorities' particular stance on recommendations related to political prison camps made by UN Human Rights Council member states. However, during the third UPR cycle, it is evident that North Korea rejected all 14 recommendations concerning political prison camps and detention facilities during the interactive dialogue. Among the 63 recommendations that North Korea immediately rejected on the spot, 15 (or 22.2%) pertained to political prison camps and detention facilities. This indicates that North Korea does not acknowledge this issue. In fact, the North Korean government has asserted that such recommendations "severely distort the human rights situation of the DPRK based on false information fabricated by the hostile forces and seek ulterior political purposes."⁹⁵ The fourth UPR cycle was not significantly different. Of the 17 recommendations on political prison camps and detention facilities, 14 were finally rejected during the review process. The reasoning was consistent with that of the third cycle: North Korea considered the recommendations to be based on fabricated and distorted information and to have been made with malicious intent for political purposes.

The fact that the human rights situation centered around political prison camps continues to receive sustained attention through the UPR mechanism, and that related recommendations are consistently presented to North Korea, is a positive development. However, it is difficult to conclude that there has been any meaningful

⁹⁵ UN Doc. A/HRC/42/10/Add.1 (28 August 2019), para. 3, p. 2.

improvement in the human rights situation within the camps. As pointed out in the fourth UPR cycle, the existence of political prison camps in North Korea remains a tool for reinforcing social control and instilling fear, as they are still closely tied to the *songbun* system and the state surveillance apparatus.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ UN Doc. A/HRC/WG.6/47/PRK/2 (6 August 2024), para. 46, p. 5.

An aerial photograph of Camp No. 14 in Gaecheon, showing a dense grid of buildings and a road network. The image is in grayscale and has a semi-transparent overlay. The buildings are arranged in a regular pattern, with a central road network. The overall appearance is that of a well-organized settlement or military camp.

Photography: Camp No. 14 (Gaecheon)

VI. Conclusion: What Should Be Done?

VI. Conclusion: What Should Be Done?

North Korea operates two types of facilities for detaining political prisoners: *kwanliso* and *kyohwaso* for political prisoners. These are controlled by two distinct authorities—the Ministry of State Security and the Ministry of Social Security. Within the *kwanliso*, there are two areas: the completely-controlled area and the partially-controlled area (revolutionization area). Nevertheless, there has been a tendency to generalize the control and operation of North Korea’s political prison facilities. Going forward, it is necessary to more precisely examine the actual conditions according to facility type (*kwanliso* vs. *jeongchibeom kyohwaso*), managing authority, and area classification (completely-controlled vs. partially-controlled). For example, Camp No. 25 in Chongjin should more appropriately be referred to as a *jeongchibeom kyohwaso* (*kyohwaso* for political prisoners) rather than a *kwanliso*.

Detailed and nuanced understanding of conditions within the *kwanliso*, including human rights violations, must be continuously developed. Rather than treating these facilities as a singular concept, it is crucial to capture their unique characteristics and evolutions. Based on satellite imagery analysis, defector testimony, and cross-verification, this report estimates that four currently operating facilities house a combined maximum capacity of between 54,000 and 66,000 detainees. However, with the exception of Camp No. 18, testimony and cross-verification from defectors could not be obtained for the other *kwanliso* (or *kyohwaso* for political prisoners). In order to enable more precise future estimates of detainee population sizes, it is essential to maintain continuous efforts to collect testimonies from relevant individuals, including staff members of Camps No. 14, 16, and 25, as well as former detainees with experience in Camp No. 25. Given the evolving nature of the camps’ size, function, target population, control systems, and release procedures, sustained efforts are needed for more precise documentation.

In the case of *kyohwaso* for political prisoners, it has been determined that criminal procedures are carried out based on North Korea’s criminal law, criminal procedure law, and internally labeled “provisional” documents. However, further verification is needed to determine whether detention in a *kyohwaso* for political prisoners is, as previously thought, decided by trials and rulings of the Ministry of State Security, or whether it

follows the regular criminal justice process through court-issued correctional labor sentences. The legal procedures for detention in *kwanliso* remain unclear. Given the possibility that the legal and administrative practices of *kwanliso* and *kyohwaso* for political prisoners have varied over time, further attention and in-depth research are required.

Efforts must continue to accumulate concrete data on both types of facilities, *kwanliso* and *kyohwaso*, based on satellite imagery and defector accounts, and to use this data to consistently pressure the North Korean authorities to disclose information about these political prison facilities.

As part of this effort, it is essential to utilize UN special procedures, such as the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK, as well as the UPR mechanism. For instance, given that North Korean documents contain descriptions of *kwanliso* and *kyohwaso* for political prisoners, UN member states should, ahead of the next UPR cycle, submit advance questions and recommendations during the interactive dialogue to demand information about the operation of *kwanliso* and *kyohwaso* for political prisoners. Additionally, as North Korean documents include references to political prisoners, such evidence can be used to refute the regime's claim that "there are no political prisoners," and to demand information on how many are being held under that designation and for what reasons. Through such efforts, the current gaps in knowledge regarding the operations and conditions of *kwanliso* and *kyohwaso* for political prisoners must be continuously addressed and supplemented. At the same time, the international community must persistently call for the dismantling of *kwanliso* and the immediate release of all detainees. Those who must be detained should be processed under North Korea's criminal and criminal procedure laws and held in *kyohwaso* (reform facility), but even *kyohwaso* must be reformed to ensure compliance with international standards.

In particular, the South Korean government should actively work to ensure that UN member states sustain consistent attention on human rights abuses in North Korea's *kwanliso* and *kyohwaso* for political prisoners. It should cooperate closely with the international community to develop concrete, actionable recommendations capable of prompting substantive changes in North Korea's stance.

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- A/HRC/27/10
- A/HRC/34/66/Add.1
- A/HRC/40/36
- A/HRC/42/10
- A/HRC/42/10/Add.1
- A/HRC/58/11
- A/HRC/58/61
- A/HRC/WGAD/2012/4
- A/HRC/WG.6/6/PRK/3
- A/HRC/WG.6/47/PRK/2
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North Korea's Political Prison Facilities

Revised Edition of
2013 North Korea's Political Prison Camps

Published August 27, 2025
Authors Kim Soo-Am, Lee Kyu-Chang, Lee Keum-Soon,
Choi Gyubin, Hong Yesun
Publisher Kim Cheon-sik
Issued by Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU)
Editor Director, Human Rights Research Division
Address 217 Banpo-daero, Seocho-gu, Seoul,
Republic of Korea (06578)
Tel +82-2-2023-8000
Fax +82-2-2023-8299
Website <https://www.kinu.or.kr>
Designed by Studio Plaka
Printed by Yongsung Total Printing

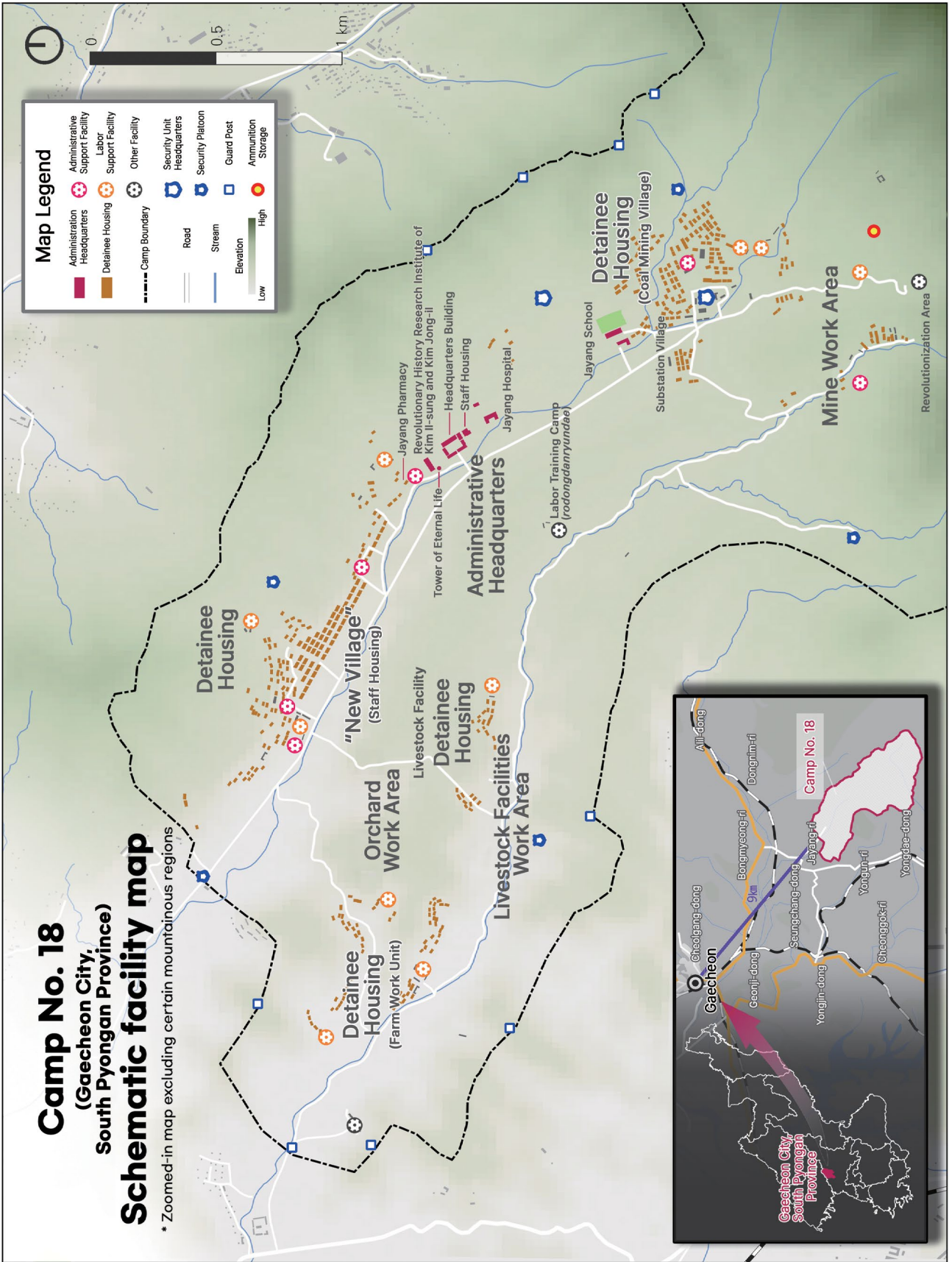
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Camp No. 18

(Gacheon City,
South Pyongan Province)

Schematic facility map

* Zoomed-in map excluding certain mountainous regions

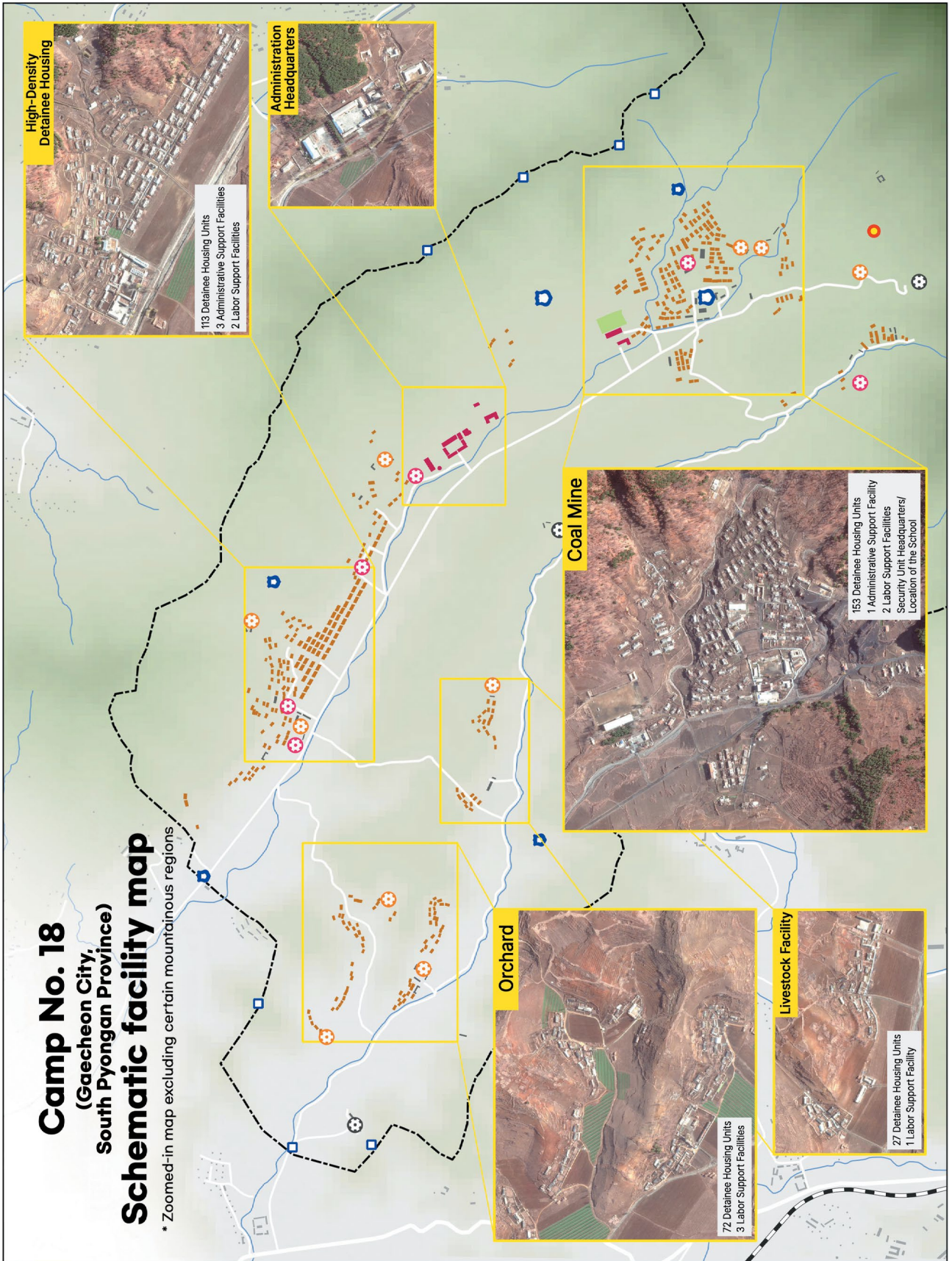


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Schematic facility map

* Zoomed-in map excluding certain mountainous regions



Recent evidence indicates that North Korea's political prison facilities have diminished in scale over the past decade, including the closure of some facilities. This report analyzes detention and release procedures, estimates the current inmate population, and reviews the international community's concerns and efforts. Based on these findings, it offers policy recommendations to policymakers and the international community.