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North Korea escalates border crackdown

A North Korean government ministry's latest threat of harsh punishment against people leaving North Korea without permission renews concerns about freedom of movement in a country with a deplorable human rights record, Amnesty International said.

On 19 June the [state news agency published a statement](#) by the Ministry of People's Security of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea), vowing to "take substantial measures to physically remove despicable human scum" who leave the country without permission – an act the government views as treason. The statement added "Sordid human scum will never be able to look up to the sky nor be able to find an inch of land to be buried after their death".

"Nobody should be detained, prosecuted or punished in any way simply for exercising their right to freedom of movement by leaving North Korea," said Catherine Baber, Director of the Asia-Pacific Programme at Amnesty International.

"Statements such as that made by the Ministry of People's Security demonstrate that the North Korean government has every intention of continuing its policy of harsh punishment for anyone caught attempting to leave the country without permission. This puts border-crossers at risk of arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment and possibly death."

North Koreans are prohibited from travelling abroad without state permission and recent crackdowns have made it increasingly difficult to cross the border into China and escape via a third country such as Laos or Thailand.

China considers all undocumented North Koreans to be economic migrants and returns them if caught. Laos typically detains undocumented North Koreans found on its territory, and until recently allowed those it detained to travel on to South Korea.

The latest official statement from North Korea on its position on border-crossers comes several [weeks after nine North Korean teenagers were forcibly returned after being arrested in Laos](#).

The teenagers, aged between 14 and 19, were detained after illegally crossing the border from China into Laos and were reportedly returned to the North Korean capital Pyongyang on 28 May, accompanied by North Korean officials.

"Amnesty International believes the government of Laos violated international law and standards by forcibly returning these nine teenagers to North Korea where they are at risk of punishment rather than providing them with international protection," said Catherine Baber.

"We urge the North Korean authorities to ensure no harm comes to them and not to use them for propaganda purposes to deter others from leaving the country. North Korea must comply with its human rights obligations and abolish the requirement for permission to travel internally and abroad."

In January 2012, North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un reportedly increased border controls and threatened people caught crossing the border with severe punishments.

According to South Korean government figures, the number of North Koreans reaching South Korea last year was 1,509 compared to 2,706 in 2011.