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DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA (NORTH KOREA): CONDITIONS OF DETENTION

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Amnesty International is concerned at recent reports that North Koreans held in some places of detention are given little or no food and that many die as a result of starvation and disease. Food shortages have led many people to leave their locality and seek food elsewhere in the country. Since 1997 the North Korean authorities are reported to have established makeshift detention centres to hold homeless people and those who have left their locality or tried to leave the country in order to seek food. Children are also reported to have been detained in such institutions. Most of these reports of abuses have been gathered from aid workers and foreign journalists who interviewed North Koreans in China. Although the information cannot be independently verified, the reports are consistent and suggest a pattern of human rights violations.

These detention places are reported to be located in requisitioned buildings in urban centres, close to railway stations and in areas close to the Chinese border. Although they are not officially prisons, people appear to have been detained there against their will, often in appalling conditions. According to the testimony of former inmates, some 20 to 50 people are often crammed into a small room and are given a very small amount of food each day. Many people are reported to have died of hunger and disease in such places. Security is relatively lax and many people have escaped while others secured their release when their families paid a bribe. Some are reported to have been sent repeatedly to such places. One source described how a 21-year-old said he had been sent to a detention place in Chongjin in the east of the country where the detainees were only fed once a day with cakes made out of corn stalks. They were forced to work all day and were held in such cramped conditions that they had to sleep sitting up. He said that after one week at least three of his cell-mates had died.¹

¹South China Morning Post, February 1999.

Amnesty International does not have access to information about conditions of imprisonment in other detention places but is concerned that the famine in North Korea is likely to have led to a severe deterioration of conditions, including a lack of food, in all detention places in North Korea.

Background information

North Korea is one of the world's most closed and isolated nations, with an economy in ruins and few political allies. In recent years the country has suffered from severe food shortages leading to famine in which tens of thousands, possibly millions, are reported to have died. The food shortages are believed to be the result of the government's economic policies, the loss of preferential trade with the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s and a series of natural disasters. Because of government restrictions on access to the country and on the flow of information, the full scale of the disaster is hidden from view. Since 1995 North Korea has been the recipient of massive humanitarian aid from the international community.

Little is known about prisons in North Korea. Some defectors to South Korea have claimed the existence of thousands of political prisoners, held in hidden prison camps or sent into internal exile. Such claims cannot be verified but Amnesty International is concerned that all prisoners are likely to be among the main victims of food shortages.

Amnesty International has expressed concern at reports that the North Korean authorities have distributed food unevenly, in a way which favours those who are economically active and loyal to the state. Many vulnerable groups, including homeless children and the elderly, are believed to have been effectively abandoned by the state.

North Korea's form of government is communist, run in accordance with its own *Juche* (self-reliance) ideology. Its system does not permit political opposition, independent media or non-governmental organizations. The country hosts few outside visitors and those who do visit are carefully monitored. In spite of advances in mass communication, little concrete information is available about government and society in North Korea.

In recent years, Amnesty International has called for greater openness, transparency and accountability on human rights from the North Korean authorities. It has called on North Korea to allow independent access to international human rights monitors. The lack of access and government restrictions on the flow of information have severely hampered independent research on human rights violations in North Korea.

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