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North Korea: Kim Jong-il's death could be opportunity for human rights

The death of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il and assumption of power by his son, Kim Jong-un, present an important opportunity for improving the country's catastrophic human rights record, Amnesty International said today.

"Kim Jong-il, like his father before him, left millions of North Koreans mired in poverty, without access to adequate food and healthcare, and with hundreds of thousands of people detained in brutal prison camps," said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific director.

"With this transition, we hope that the new government will step away from the horrific, failed policies of the past."

However, recent reports received by Amnesty International suggest that the North Korean government has purged possibly hundreds of officials deemed to be a threat to Kim Jong-un's succession, by having them executed or sent to political prison camps.

"Our information over the last year indicates that Kim Jong-un and his supporters will try to consolidate his new rule by intensifying repression and crushing any possibility of dissent," said Sam Zarifi.

In the months immediately following Kim Jong-il's own succession to the North Korean leadership, after the 1994 death of his father Kim Il-Sung, tens of thousands of perceived or potential political opponents and their family members were sent to political prison camps. Political opponents were also executed either in secret or publicly following grossly unfair trials, or no trial at all.

Amnesty International has documented North Korea's abysmal human rights record for years.

Freedom of expression and association are almost non-existent. Hundreds of thousands of people deemed to oppose the state are held in detention camps such as the notorious Yodok facility, which detain family members up to three generations. Inmates are forced into hard labour for up to 12 hours a day.

Meanwhile, more than a third of the population is suffering food shortages and the healthcare system is in critical decline. Amnesty International has received reports of people surviving on eating bark and grass, the use of unsterilised needles, and major surgeries undertaken without anaesthesia.

"Authorities speak of North Korea as becoming a 'strong and prosperous nation'. To ensure this, the new leadership should adopt a human rights agenda and stop the repression that characterised the Kim Jong-il era," said Sam Zarifi.

Amnesty International is repeating its call on the North Korean government, as well as international donors, to ensure that food is adequately distributed to the neediest people in North Korea.

"The people of North Korea should not have to suffer even more deprivation now because of political uncertainty," said Sam Zarifi.

Nearly a million people have died in North Korea because of acute food shortages since the mid-1990s. Millions

more, especially children and the elderly, continue to suffer from chronic malnutrition. This is in large part due to failed or counterproductive government policies implemented under the leadership of Kim Il-Sung and then under Kim Jong-il.

The North Korean authorities and the new leader of North Korea must make immediate improvements in human rights including:

- Immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience, including family members, held in all political prison camps. All other inmates should be released unless they are charged with an internationally recognizable offence, remanded by an independent court and are given a fair trial
- Act immediately to stop forced labour, torture and other ill-treatment of prisoners including those held in all political prisons camps
- Grant immediate and unfettered access to international humanitarian agencies such as the UN World Food Programme to ensure that food reaches those most in need
- Address severe shortages in the healthcare system including through accepting international humanitarian assistance and providing full cooperation and access to ensure that care reaches those most in need
- Immediately end public and secret executions
- Thoroughly, independently and impartially investigate past and current allegations of abductions and enforced disappearances
- Ensure the rights to freedom of expression and religion provided for in the Constitution and in relevant international human rights instruments are fully guaranteed in practice
- Take immediate action to implement the recommendations of international human rights experts and recommendations made to North Korea during the Universal Periodic Review.
- Invite independent monitors such as the UN Special Rapporteurs on the right to food, the right to freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of religion and belief, and in particular the situation on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to the country.