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North Korea: US journalists' conviction highlights unfair system

The North Korean government should immediately release two US journalists, Laura Ling and Euna Lee, who were sentenced to 12 years imprisonment with hard labour, Amnesty International said today. The two were convicted of an unspecified "grave crime" against the nation by the Central Court in Pyongyang, seemingly ruling out the possibility of any further judicial appeals.

Laura Ling and Euna Lee, both of whom work for California-based Current TV media venture in San Francisco, were arrested by North Korean officials on 17 March near the Tumen River, which separates North Korea and China. It is not yet clear whether the two women had crossed the border into North Korea or if they were in China when arrested. The two were investigating human rights abuses of North Korean women.

The journalists had been held separately and in solitary confinement in a "state guest house" near Pyongyang. They had limited consular support and very limited contact with their families after their arrest.

"These two foreign journalists were subjected to the failures and shortcomings of the North Korean judicial system: no access to lawyers, no due process, no transparency," said Roseann Rife, Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific Deputy Director. "The North Korean judicial and penal systems are more instruments of suppression than of justice."

"The North Korean government seems to be using these two journalists as pawns in its dangerous game of escalating tensions with the international community. This sentence was harsher than many observers expected, and completely out of line with any of the accusations that Pyongyang has levelled against them," said Rife.

Amnesty International pointed out that prisoners in North Korea were forced to undertake physically demanding work which included mountain logging and stone quarrying, often for 10 hours or more per day, with no rest days. Guards beat prisoners suspected of lying, not working fast enough or for forgetting the words to patriotic songs. Forms of punishment included forced exercise, sitting without moving for prolonged periods of time and humiliating public criticism.

Prisoners fell ill or died in custody, due to the combination of forced hard labour, inadequate food, beatings, lack of medical care and unhygienic living conditions.

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