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North Korea: Images reveal scale of political prison camps

Amnesty International has published satellite imagery and new testimony that shed light on the horrific conditions in North Korea's network of political prison camps, which hold an estimated 200,000 people.

The images reveal the location, size and conditions inside the camps. Amnesty International spoke to a number of people, including former inmates from the political prison camp at Yodok as well as guards in other political prison camps, to obtain information about life in the camps.

According to former detainees at the political prison camp at Yodok, prisoners are forced to work in conditions approaching slavery and are frequently subjected to torture and other cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatment. All the detainees at Yodok have witnessed public executions.

"North Korea can no longer deny the undeniable. For decades the authorities have refused to admit to the existence of mass political prison camps," said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International Asia Pacific Director.

"These are places out of sight of the rest of the world, where almost the entire range of human rights protections that international law has tried to set up for last sixty years are ignored."

"As North Korea seems to be moving towards a new leader in Kim Jong-un and a period of political instability, the big worry is that the prison camps appear to be growing in size."

Amnesty International believes the camps have been in operation since the 1950s, yet only three people are ever known to have escaped Total Control Zones and managed to leave North Korea. About 30 are known to have been released from the Revolutionary Zone at Political Prison Camp in Yodok and managed to leave North Korea. According to the testimony of a former detainee at the revolutionary zone in the political prison camp at Yodok, an estimated 40 per cent of inmates died from malnutrition between 1999 and 2001.

Satellite images show four of the six camps occupying huge areas of land and located in vast wilderness sites in South Pyongan, South Hamkyung and North Hamkyung provinces, and producing products ranging from soy bean paste and sweets to coal and cement.

A comparison of the latest images with satellite imagery from 2001 indicates a significant increase in the scale of the camps.

In just one camp, Kwanliso 15 at Yodok, thousands of people are believed to be held as "guilty-by-association" or sent to the camps simply because one of their relatives has been detained.

The majority of prisoners, including some of those 'guilty-by-association', are held in areas known as 'Total Control Zones' from which they will never be released.

A significant proportion of those sent to the camps don't even know what crimes they're accused of.

Amnesty International spoke to former detainees of the political prison camp known as Kwanliso 15 at Yodok.

A former inmate, Kim, told Amnesty International: “Everyone in Kwanliso witnessed executions. When I was an inmate in Kwanliso15 at Yodok, all those who tried to escape were caught. They were interrogated for two to three months and then executed.”

Jeong Kyoungil was first arrested in 1999 and detained in Yodok from 2000-2003. Amnesty International interviewed Jeong in Seoul in April 2011.

“A room around 50m² in size, is where the 30 or 40 political prisoners sleep in. We sleep on some sort of bed made out of a wooden board with a blanket to cover. A day starts at 4am with an early shift, also called the ‘pre-meal shift’, until 7am. Then breakfast from 7am to 8am but the meal is only 200g of poorly prepared corn gruel for each meal. Then there is a morning shift from 8am to 12pm and a lunch until 1pm. Then work again from 1pm to 8pm and dinner from 8pm to 9pm. From 9pm to 11pm, it’s time for ideology education. If we don’t memorize the ten codes of ethics we would not be allowed to sleep. This is the daily schedule.”

“200g of poorly prepared corn gruel in a bowl would only be given if we finish our daily tasks. If not, we would not be given any food. The daily task is sweeping off overgrown weeds on fields. Everyone would be assigned to 1157 m² of field and only the people who finish off their task would be given food. If you only finish half of your assigned task, you would only be given half of your food.”

“Seeing people die happened frequently – every day. Frankly, unlike in a normal society, we would like it rather than feel sad because if you bring a dead body and bury it, you would be given another bowl of food. I used to take charge of burying dead people’s bodies. When an officer told me to, I gathered some people and buried the bodies. After receiving extra food for the job, we felt glad rather than feeling sad.”

The North Korean authorities are also known to use a cube ‘torture cell’, where it is impossible to either stand or lie down. “Disruptive inmates” are thrown in for at least one week, but Amnesty International is aware of one case of a child thrown into the cell for eight months.

In most of the camps, no clothing are provided and prisoners face harsh winters. Inmates are also expected to work long hours undertaking strenuous and often pointless manual labour.

Food in the camps is scarce. Amnesty International has been told of several accounts of people eating rats or picking corn kernels out of animal waste purely to survive, despite the risks – anyone caught risks solitary confinement or other torture.

“Hundreds of thousands of people exist with virtually no rights, treated essentially as slaves, in some of the worst circumstances we’ve documented in the last fifty years,” said Sam Zarifi.

“Conditions in these camps are inhuman and Kim Jong-il must close them immediately.”

AUDIO-VISUAL MATERIAL AND FURTHER INFORMATION

- For a more detailed press briefing please click here: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA24/001/2011/en>
- You may download satellite still images of the camps at: https://adam.amnesty.org/asset-bank/action/search?attribute_603=Yodok
- A B-roll of video footage has been produced for media, featuring interviews with Amnesty International, a former political prisoner of Political Prison Camp 15 (aka Yodok), archive footage and reconstruction footage. You may download the video at: <https://adam.amnesty.org/asset-bank/action/viewAsset?id=132041>
- Satellite Images were independently assessed by the American Association for the Advancement of Science