

DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF KOREA

2021 HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is an authoritarian state led by the Kim family since 1949. Shortly after Kim Jong Il’s death in 2011, his son Kim Jong Un was named marshal of the country and supreme commander of the Korean People’s Army. His titles also include chairman of the Central Military Commission of the Workers’ Party of Korea, chairman of the State Affairs Commission, and supreme representative of the Korean People. In January Kim Jong Un also took the title of general secretary of the Workers’ Party of Korea, a position formerly held by Kim Jong Un’s grandfather, the late Kim Il Sung, who remains “eternal president.” The most recent national elections, held in 2019, were neither free nor fair.

The internal security apparatus includes the Ministries of Social Security and State Security and the Military Security Command. A systematic and intentional overlap of powers and responsibilities existed among these organizations to prevent any potential subordinate consolidation of power and assure that each unit provided a check and balance on the other. Authorities maintained effective control over the security forces. There were credible reports that members of the security forces committed numerous abuses.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: unlawful or arbitrary killings by the government; forced disappearances by the government; torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment and punishment by government authorities; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions, including in political prison camps; arbitrary arrests and detentions; political prisoners and detainees; politically motivated reprisals against individuals in another country; no judicial independence; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; punishment of family members for offenses allegedly committed by an individual; serious restrictions on free expression and media, including violence, threats of violence, or unjustified arrests and prosecutions against journalists, and censorship; serious

leave, holidays, and access to sanitariums and rest homes funded at public expense. No information was available, however, regarding the state's willingness and ability to provide these services.

Mandatory participation in mass events on holidays and practice sessions for such events sometimes compromised leave or rest from work. Workers were often required to "celebrate" at least some part of public holidays with their work units and were able to spend an entire day with their families only if the holiday lasted two days. Failure to pay wages was common and reportedly drove some workers to seek income-generating activity in the informal or underground economy.

Occupational Safety and Health: The law recognizes the state's responsibility for providing modern and hygienic working conditions. The law criminalizes the failure to heed "labor safety orders" pertaining to worker safety and workplace conditions only if the conditions result in the loss of lives or other "grave loss." Workers themselves do not have a designated right to remove themselves from hazardous working conditions. No information was available on enforcement of occupational safety and health laws.

Many worksites were hazardous, and the industrial accident rate was high. Managers were often under pressure to meet production quotas and often ignored training and safety requirements. According to reports, in March 2021 three untrained teenage workers died and several were critically injured in an industrial accident at the Sungri Motor Complex in South Pyongan Province. Also in March at least 20 individuals who were part of a "storm trooper" construction brigade died in an electrical fire at their Pyongyang jobsite.

Informal Sector: The informal sector is large, but there is little information on its size or composition. Many citizens depend on the informal economy for their survival as regular wages and rations are not sufficient. The informal sector has been growing rapidly, but during the year there were signs that the government increased efforts to tighten its regulatory control.

Endnote: Note on Sourcing

The United States does not have diplomatic relations with the Democratic People's

