

NORTH KOREA'S HIDDEN GULAG:

INTERPRETING REPORTS OF
CHANGES IN THE PRISON CAMPS



David Hawk



*Cover satellite photographs courtesy of *DigitalGlobe*.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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In 1981, while based in Thailand to monitor the situation of Cambodian refugees and famine relief, Hawk kicked-off the groundbreaking investigation, documentation and analysis of the Khmer Rouge genocide—a project that he would continue through the decade—traveling regularly to Cambodia and obtaining and publishing original Khmer Rouge prison documents, prisoner execution and mass grave photographs, and supplying first-person eye-witness testimony from Cambodians inside the country and in refugee camps, along with a framework to understand the system of repression within the terms of international human rights law.

In August 1995 Hawk traveled to Rwanda to document genocidal massacres for the US Committee for Refugees, and in 1996 he returned to Kigali on mission for Amnesty International. In the mid-to-late 1990s, he directed the Cambodia Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, helping to train and sustain fledgling Cambodian human rights civil society organizations, monitor current violations, and stand up for accountability. Returning to the USA in 1999, Hawk consulted for the Washington DC-based Landmine Survivors Network, advocating

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Since 2002, Hawk has focused on the grievous situation of human rights in North Korea. His publications on North Korea include: *Hidden Gulag Second Edition: The Lives and Voices of Those Who Are Sent to the Mountains*, The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012; *Hidden Gulag: Exposing North Korea's Prison Camps—Prisoner Testimonies and Satellite Photographs*, The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2003; *Thank You Father Kim Il Sung: Eyewitness Accounts of Violations of Freedom of Thought Conscience and Belief in North Korea*, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2005; "Human Rights and the Crisis in North Korea," *North Korea: 2005 and Beyond*, APARC/Stanford University, Brookings Institution Press, 2006; *Concentrations of Inhumanity: An Analysis of the Phenomena of Repression Associated with North Korea's Kwan-li-so Political Penal Labor Camps*, Freedom House, 2007; "Factoring Human Rights into the Resolution of Cold War Conflict on the Korean Peninsula" in *Human Rights in North Korea: Toward a Comprehensive Understanding*, eds. Park and Han, The Sejong Institute, Seoul, 2007; and *Pursuing Peace While Advancing Rights: The Untried Approach to North Korea*, The U.S.-Korea Institute at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, 2010.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2012, the *Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK)* published a second edition of *The Hidden Gulag: The Lives and Voices of "Those Who are Sent to the Mountains."* The 229-page report was based on the testimony of sixty former prisoners and prison guards, reinforced by satellite images. The prisoners had been held in prison camps and other notorious detention facilities.

Later that same year, following media reports that Camp No. 22 (Hoeryong, North Hamgyong Province) had been closed, *HRNK*, in collaboration with *DigitalGlobe*,¹ published two reports on Camp No. 22 in October and December. These reports recommended that further research be conducted to understand if the North Korean gulag was undergoing a transformation.²

This brief report updates the information provided in the second edition of *The Hidden Gulag* in four areas:

- (1) The nature of the sources of information on North Korea's *kwan-li-so* political prison camps;
- (2) The "closing" of Camp No. 22 (Hoeryong, North Hamgyong Province) and the fate of missing prisoners;
- (3) The "dismantlement" of Camp No. 18 (Bukchang, South Pyongan Province) and whether this could act as a model; and
- (4) The present estimate of the *kwan-li-so* prison camp population

¹ DigitalGlobe is a leading global provider of high-resolution satellite photographic images.

² See *North Korea's Camp No. 22* (DigitalGlobe Analysis Center and Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK), 2012); and *Camp No. 22 – Update* (DigitalGlobe and HRNK, 2012).

– how many of the tens of thousands of North Korean citizens who were deported and incarcerated have survived the half-dozen political penal labor colonies that are known to operate into the present millennium.³

This update is based on interviews conducted with former prisoners and guards in Seoul in April of 2013, interviews with other researchers, news reporters and experts on North Korea, assessments of contemporary non-governmental organization (NGO) reports, and assessments of contemporary satellite photo images.

I. INFORMATION TIME LAGS AND THE CHANGING NATURE OF INFORMATION ABOUT THE PRISON CAMPS

The basic information on North Korean prison camps has come primarily from former prisoners who were released, or, in two instances, escaped from the camps and were able to flee North Korea to China and make it from China to South Korea, where they became accessible to scholars, journalists and investigators. Secondly, basic information comes from former guards at the camps, and other North Korean security police officials who also fled to China and defected to South Korea. Their testimonies have been re-enforced by satellite photographic images of the prison camps, in which the former prisoners and guards have been able to identify scores of landmarks within the camps.

³ This update does not include information on the other penal and forced labor institutions in North Korea (known variously as *kyo-hwa-so* or *jip-kyul-so*, provincial or sub-provincial prison, and forced-labor facilities or the *ro-dong-dan-ryeon-dae* mobile labor brigades) that also incarcerate persons under brutal conditions for political offenses.

The former prisoners and guards have provided long hours of minutely detailed information on how the various camps operate, along with their own personal experiences and eyewitness accounts.⁴ Some former prisoners were held for three years, some for a decade, and a few for multiple decades. Their accounts have provided detailed information on the operation of the camps over a period of nearly forty years—from 1970 to 2007.

However, the last known prisoner release occurred in 2007. Since then, contemporary information comes in a very different way from very different sources. Before describing those sources and the nature of their information, it is important to note that there had usually been a two to five year delay between the time when human rights violations occur and when the international community actually learns about them.

Many of the severe human rights violations in North Korea have taken place behind electrified barbed wire fences in a country whose leaders have gone to great lengths to isolate its citizenry from any

⁴ Two dozen testimonies from former *kwan-li-so* labor camp prisoners are summarized in *The Hidden Gulag*, 2nd ed., (Washington D.C.: HRNK, 2012). There are in addition three excellent English language biographies about former prisoners (Blaine Harden, *Escape from Camp 14*, which tells the story of Shin Dong-hyuk (New York: Viking Press, 2012); Pierre Rigoulot, *Aquariums of Pyongyang*, which tells the story of Kang Chul-hwan's experience at Camp No. 15 (New York: Basic Books, 2001); and Kim Yong with Kim Suk-young, *Long Road Home*, which tells the story of Kim Yong's experience at Camps No. 14 and 18 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). There are additional prisoner and guard autobiographies in Korean. Five hundred pages of disaggregated information from former prisoners mostly categorized by phenomena of repression may be found in *Political Prison Camps in North Korea Today* (The Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB), 2012). Information is also found in the "White Papers" published by the Korean Institute for National Unification, a Seoul-based think tank, the (South) Korean Bar Association, and reports by several South Korean NGOs.

and all contact with the outside world. After release⁵ or escape from the prison camp,⁶ most former prisoners spend months or years inside North Korea, plotting their dangerous escape to China. And then, they spend additional months or years in China earning enough money and making the connections for the (usually months-long) trip from China to South Korea, sometimes through Mongolia or, more often, through southern China and Southeast Asia.⁷

In many other countries in today's world, human rights violations take place against a citizenry armed with photo and video capable mobile phones with internet connection, or even in the presence of *CNN* or *BBC* TV cameras, in which case repressive acts are known to the outside world in real time, virtually instantaneously. In most other countries in today's world, journalists, scholars, and human rights investigators are able to enter the country to do on-site reporting and investigations. Nothing of the sort is possible in North Korea. Until one or two years ago, documenting the human rights situation depended on waiting until a North Korean with personal or eye-witness knowledge fled North Korea, and usually until that person safely arrived in South Korea.⁸

5 Only two of the prison camps operating at the turn of the millennium—Camps No. 15 and 18—had “revolutionizing zones” or “cleared” areas from which, or in which, prisoners were returned to North Korean society. The other *kwan-li-so* prison camps incarcerated citizens deemed irremediably counter-revolutionary and consigned to forced labor until death.

6 To my knowledge only two prisoners have escaped from the *kwan-li-so* prison camps, Shin Dong-hyuk and Kim Yong, whose stories are in the biographies noted in footnote 4.

7 See Melanie Kirkpatrick, *Escape from North Korea: The Untold Story of Asia's Underground Railroad* (New York: Encounter, 2012) for descriptions of the flights of the North Korean refugees.

8 North Koreans traveling through China or Southeast Asian countries without valid

The resulting time lag in obtaining detailed information on the human rights situation described above has complicated the ability to track changes in North Korea's complex system of arbitrary detention and forced labor. Furthermore, this massive system of multiple and severe violations has been anything but stable. Over the course of almost sixty years since Kim Il-sung firmly and brutally monopolized political power in the late 1950s, various prison camps were set up, operated for a decade or so, and then closed. The prisoner populations would transfer to a different area, opening up a new prison camp or enlarging an existing prison camp.

There have also been continuous changes within the labor camps.⁹ Some changes are visible in the satellite photographs of the camps. However, such changes often still require eyewitness testimony to inform and/or confirm what the changes mean.

Overall, there has been a consolidation of forced labor encampments. Between the late 1950s and early 1970s, ten prison camps entirely filled with persons deported without trial for presumed, real, or imagined political offenses were set up. Over time, these labor camps were consolidated into a half-dozen often very large political penal labor colonies called *kwan-li-so* (literally translated as "managed places").

and proper travel documents risk forced repatriation (as recently happened to a group of nine young North Koreans forcibly repatriated from Laos) to North Korea, where they often face draconian punishment for having exercised their right to leave their country of origin.

⁹ For example, at Camp No.15 (Yodok) in 1999 a new single prisoner section, called Sorimchon, was set up in a "revolutionizing" section of the prison camp to hold prisoners—including persons repatriated from China, former North Korean diplomats and higher level officials suspected of reactionary ideas, and persons suspected of religious offenses such as participating in a Bible-study—many of whom were released after three years. Later, the name of this section of the camp was changed to Kumchon-ri.

Five of these prison camps were described in the 2012 edition of *The Hidden Gulag*.

Since the completion of the research interviews for that publication, one of these large encampments, Camp No. 22 (Hoeryong, North Hamgyong Province) has been closed. The prisoners were reportedly transferred to other prison camps. The large area of the camp, with its coalmines and farmlands, was turned over to local civilian authorities. Another, Camp No. 18 (Bukchang, South Pyongan Province) was dismantled—essentially restoring the liberties to all but a fraction of the inmates. These releases mostly occurred prior to the publication of the 2nd edition of *The Hidden Gulag*, but because of the information time lag described above, this was not well known or well understood at the time of publication.¹⁰

New, but Limited, Sources of Information

Within the last several years, information about the present situation in North Korea comes from a new source: tiny bits or parcels of information from “sources” in North Korea using illegal cell phones to reach telephone callers in South Korea via the cell phone transmission towers located in China. Since 2000, almost 27,000 North Koreans have fled North Korea to China and travelled on from China to South Korea. These newly arrived refugees, or defectors, as they are called in South Korea, have found ingenious ways to stay in contact with their family members and friends still in North Korea. Ethnic Korean citizens of China, who are involved in providing Chinese made consumer goods

¹⁰ The “clearance” or the restoration of liberties to some prisoners at Camp No. 18 was described, largely via the testimony of Mrs. Kim Hye-Sook (see pp. 70-73 and 170-171, *The Hidden Gulag*, 2nd ed.), but the scope of these releases was not known to the present author until after the completion of research for the second edition of *The Hidden Gulag*.

to the markets in North Korea (that the North Korean authorities have not been able to suppress), carry small Chinese-manufactured cell phones with pre-paid calling cards into North Korea. At the request of former North Koreans now residing in South Korea, the Korean Chinese petty-traders and brokers seek out specified persons, who are then given the phones and calling cards. These persons then travel close enough to the Chinese border to come within range of the cell phone transmission towers in China along the border with North Korea.

Some cities and counties of North Korea, such as Sinuiju in North Pyongan Province or Onsong and Hoeryong in North Hamgyong Province are within range of the cell phone transmission towers in China. While illegal and dangerous for those North Koreans who cannot afford to pay the police bribes, illegal telephone communications between North and South Koreans are commonplace. This has led to the creation of news services in which reporters in South Korea, and also in Osaka, Japan and Washington DC, develop "sources" within North Korea, who provide information on various topics and issues inside North Korea.¹¹ Needless to say, these "sources" have to remain entirely confidential, as the entire enterprise is illegal and highly dangerous.

What is more salient to our present concern is that the information from these North Korean sources comes in very small sound bites, or bits and pieces of information, on happenings or things that can be easily observed and quickly communicated. This is very different from the investigative reporting that can be done with defectors who are safely residing inside South Korea; human rights researchers can sit and question such former prisoners or prison guards for hours-worth of the details that enable consistent and coherent in-depth accounts.

¹¹ The Seoul-based *DailyNK*, Osaka-based *Rim-jim-gang*, and Washington, DC-based *Radio Free Asia (RFA)*.

It is such bits and pieces of information from such sources inside North Korea that we have to rely on in order to understand recent developments involving one of the formerly largest—in geographic size and population—prison camps in North Korea.

II. THE MISSING PRISONERS FROM CAMP NO. 22

Mr. Ahn Myong-chul, a former guard at Camp No. 22 from 1990 to 1994, has been able to provide great detail on that camp's operations.¹² Officially termed "Chosun People's Security Unit 2209" or "Paeksan-ku Ministry of State Security," Camp No. 22 is a sprawling encampment covering an area some 50 kilometers (31 miles) in length by 40 kilometers (25 miles) in width. Camp No. 22 is commonly identified by its association to the nearby sizeable city of Hoeryong, North Hamgyong Province, a city well known in North Korea as the heralded hometown of Kim Il-sung's wife and Kim Jong-il's mother.¹³ Originally opened in the mid-1960s, the camp expanded in the 1980s and 1990s. Three areas within Camp No. 22 are identified with Chungbong (the site of a major coal mine), Sawul, and Haengyong.¹⁴ Other areas within Camp No. 22 are identified as Sowon-po and I-dong.¹⁵

12 His guard duties included making deliveries by truck to various parts of the sprawling encampment, so he saw a great deal of the camp and talked to many other camp officials. Being a prison camp guard was his assignment during his years as a draftee in North Korea's army, and he was also assigned to guard duties at Camps No. 11, 13, and 26.

13 Camp No. 22 is described on pp. 77-78 of *The Hidden Gulag*, 2nd ed. Satellite photographs appear on p. 222.

14 *Political Prison Camps in North Korea Today* (NKDB, 2011), 106-07.

15 *North Korea's Camp No. 22*, DigitalGlobe and HRNK, op. cit., 3.

Prisoners at Camp No. 22 mined coal that was shipped to the Chongjin thermal power plant to provide electricity for the Kimchaek steel mills. The camp also had extensive collective farm areas for growing corn, potatoes, beans and numerous vegetables. Its prison population included former prisoners from nearby Camp No. 11 (Kyongsong) and Camp No. 13 (Jongsong). These camps were thought to hold some 20,000 and 30,000 prisoners, respectively. When these camps were closed in or around 1990, many prisoners were transferred to Camp No. 22, which could then have held as many as 50,000 prisoners.¹⁶ Some twenty years later, a South Korean government report to the South Korean National Assembly noted that Camp No. 22 held some 30,000 prisoners.

Satellite imagery of Camp No. 22 has been analyzed, initially in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*,¹⁷ and the first edition of *The Hidden Gulag*,¹⁸ and much more intensively by professional satellite image analysts at *DigitalGlobe*, in collaboration with *HRNK*.¹⁹ In mid-2012, North Korean refugee/defector sources in Seoul, and the news bureaus described above that utilize North Korean “sources” still in North Korea, reported that Camp No. 22 had been “closed.” But satellite imagery from *DigitalGlobe* and *HRNK* indicated that the areas included within the Camp

16 Some prisoners from Camp No. 11, which was closed to convert the picturesque area into a villa for Kim Il-sung, were also reportedly transferred to Camp No. 15 (Yodok, South Hamgyong Province). The reason Camp No. 13 was closed is not known, though it may have been thought to be too close to the border with China. (Another such detention facility, Camp No. 12, was also located in North Hamgyong Province, at Changpyong, although this camp was also closed in 1989).

17 *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 12 Dec. 2002.

18 *The Hidden Gulag*, 1st ed., (Washington D.C.: 2003), 113-17.

19 *North Korea’s Camp No. 22*, DigitalGlobe and HRNK, op. cit., and *Camp No. 22 – Update*, op. cit.

No. 22 area continued to teem with activity. Their reports left open the possibility that the prisoners might have been removed and subsequently replaced with farmer and laborers from other locations within Northern Hamgyong Province.

The news outlets for sources within North Korea provided additional detail indicating that the prison camp itself had been closed, the prisoners and guards transferred elsewhere, and the administration of that area returned to the regular or normal provincial authorities (even including local phone numbers for administrative offices within the former prison camp). These sources indicated that local farmers from the area, who were allowed to come and farm these plots, were now working the farmland previously worked by prisoners. Coal miners from the Kungsim coal mine (only some two kilometers outside of the former perimeter fence of Camp No. 22) were transferred to the Chungbong mine on the site of the former prison camp.²⁰

Satellite image analysis indicated that: 1) that several buildings in the Haengyong area of Camp No. 22, identified by former North Koreans now resident in Seoul as interrogation and detention facilities located within the former political penal labor colony, had been razed,²¹ and 2) of the forty-six probable guard towers identifiable around the seventy-five kilometer perimeter of Camp No. 22, a "significant number of guard post and towers had been either razed or abandoned."²² Satel-

20 Indeed, according to these sources, this possibility brought relief to civilian Hoeryong officials, who had been worried about Kungsim coal mine's near depletion and what do with or about the Kungsim miners and their families. "From Prison Camp to Coal Hub" RFA, 6 Nov. 2012, www.rfa.org/English/korea/camp.

21 *North Korea's Camp No. 22*, DigitalGlobe and HRNK, op. cit., 3.

22 *North Korea's Camp No. 22 – Update*, DigitalGlobe and HRNK, op. cit., 3. (Although, it should be noted, several guard towers still appeared operational.)

lite analysis also showed only small-scale mining activity at Kungsim mine, where formerly, there were sizable mines,²³ and the coalmines at Chungbong appeared to be operating at relatively consistent levels.²⁴

The following summarizes what was reported by *DailyNK* and *Radio Free Asia (RFA)*, and reported to the author of this report orally during interviews in Seoul in March 2013:

- Prior to the closing, the families of prison officials at the camps were observed selling food produce from the camp at local markets;
- Trucks, reportedly holding prisoners, were observed going at night from the camps to the train station in Hoeryong;
- Trains, reportedly holding prisoners, were observed departing Hoeryong at night heading south;
- Some sources reported that the nighttime movements occurred in March, April, and June of 2012; other accounts have the nighttime movement of trains heading south continuing through September and even December of 2012;
- Some sources posited that the reason for the closing of the prison camp was the disappearance (and presumed defection) of the prison camp commandant and another prison official.²⁵

As noted above, there is a significant volume of phone calls between North Koreans from North Hamgyong Province now resident in South Korea and their friends and relatives back in North Korea. Because

²³ Ibid., 3.

²⁴ Ibid., 3.

²⁵ The original source of this information was a North Korean soldier whose unit was reportedly mobilized to search along the border for the missing prison camp officials.

Camp No. 22 was so close to Hoeryong City, the residents of Hoeryong commonly knew about the prison camp. Local residents of Hoeryong report that regular citizens—farmers from Saebyeol and Eundeok counties, and miners from Onsong—were now moving into the farmland and mines previously worked by prisoners. And the area of the camp was now under the jurisdiction of regular North Hamgyeong provincial authorities and Hoeryong City authorities. And even that the work unit headquarters in the former camp can now be telephoned on local civilian phone lines (which certainly was not the case when the prison camp was under the control of the *Bo-wi-bu* State Security Department (SSD) political police).²⁶ Based on the considerable volume of communications between Koreans in South Korea and the far northeast corner of North Korea, the consensus in the North Korean defector community in South Korea is that Camp No. 22 is no longer operating.

The Fate and Whereabouts of the Former Prisoners

It appears that the area of the former camp is now accessible to the local civilian population and economy. However, the primary concern is the fate and whereabouts of the former prisoners—those who were severely deprived of their liberties and subjected to a lifetime of forced labor under extraordinarily inhumane conditions.

One of the news stories on the closing of Camp No. 22, an October 6, 2012 dispatch from *RFA*, reported that “following a food shortage,” the prisoner population had “dwindled rapidly from 30,000 to 3,000.”²⁷ According to the *RFA* reporter, who is also a defector, North Korea’s

²⁶ The State Security Department (SSD) has also been translated as State Security Agency.

²⁷ “From Prison Camp to Coal Hub” *RFA*, op. cit.

2009 currency devaluation (whereby camp authorities were reportedly unable to purchase food in markets to supplement the crops grown in the camps) combined with bad harvests resulted in the death of large numbers of prisoners after 2010. If even remotely accurate, this is an atrocity requiring much closer investigation.²⁸

A reporter from *DailyNK*, who wrote several of the stories on Camp No. 22's closing and is also a former North Korean citizen who fled to China and South Korea, told me he "presumed" the transferred prisoner population to include some 7,000 to 8,000 persons. But even this is a dramatic diminution from the 30,000 estimated prisoners only several years ago.

Where Did They Go?

No sources or accounts indicate that the former prisoners from Camp No. 22 were in any way released or "cleared" as happened to thousands of former prisoners from Camp No. 18 (as described below). Several of these news stories indicated that the former prisoners from Camp No. 22 were transferred to Camp No. 16 at Hwasong County, North Hamgyeong Province (Hwasong has apparently been recently renamed as "Myeonggam", and is sometimes referred to by that name in North Korea). According to the *RFA* reporter, Camp No. 22 managers were transferred to Camp No. 16 along with the prisoners, but the families of the camp managers were transferred subsequently.²⁹

²⁸ The *RFA* reporter, who wrote this news story based on sources within North Korea, further related, in correspondence with the present author, that the 2009 currency devaluation adversely affected the ability of the camp authorities to purchase food, and that the Hoeryong area in North Hamgyong Province had very bad food harvests in 2009 and 2010. Thus, large numbers of prisoners succumbed to malnutrition after 2010.

²⁹ And are, according to *RFA* reporter Moon Sung-hui, among the multiple sources of the report that the prisoners were transferred to Camp No. 16.

Much less is known about Camp No. 16 compared with the information available from former prisoners and guards about the other SSD-operated prison camps. But satellite photographic imagery, analyzed over time by *North Korea Economy Watch*, and provided to the author of this report, indicates some, but “not all that much,” new housing construction within the perimeter of the sprawling camp.³⁰ In order to determine whether these new constructions could house prisoners transferred from Camp No. 22, further imagery analysis, and if possible, eyewitness testimony would be needed.

Additionally, one of the reporters for *DailyNK*, with many sources within North Hamgyong Province, said that some prisoners from Camp No. 22 were also sent to Camp No. 25, just outside of Chongjin City.³¹ Earlier satellite photography of Camp No. 22 indicated barracks sufficient to hold tens of thousands of prisoners. The precipitous decline in the number of persons detained at Camp No. 22 requires an explanation. The closure of Camp No. 22 in late 2012 leaves several thousand former prisoners unaccounted for.

30 The satellite photographs of Camp No. 16 analyzed by *North Korea Economy Watch* show construction between 2004 and 2008 to 2010 at coordinates 41 degrees 18'29.39" North by 129 degrees 21'19.80" East; new housing units between 2012 and 2013 at 41 degrees 19'05.69" North by 129 degrees 20'13.27" East; and current construction at 41 degrees 18'95.74" North by 129 degrees 20'48.00" East. See <http://www.nkeconwatch.com/2013/07/19/kwanliso-no-16-imagery-update/>.

31 Interviewed in Seoul, March 2013. Thought to hold some 5,000 prisoners, Camp No. 25 is an atypical prison camp. Unlike the other sprawling *kwan-li-so* political penal labor colonies, which are spread out over multiple mountains and valleys and contain mines, collective farms and forested hillsides, Camp No. 25 looks more like a typical penitentiary with several prisoner barracks and some factory buildings in a small campus surrounded by a high wall with guard towers. Thus, some former North Koreans refer to Camp No. 25 as a *kyo-hwa-so*, the Korean language term for prison or penitentiary in both North and South Korea. The barbed wire boundaries enclosing Camp No. 25 have been expanded to include more arable land. However, recent satellite images do not show the construction of additional housing units. See *North Korea's Camp No. 25*, (DigitalGlobe Analytics and HRNK, 2013).

In most situations, the country authorities could be asked to account for the fate and whereabouts of the thousands of persons who had been previously detained, while drawing on the resources and expertise of the *International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)*. However, as North Korea denies the existence of forced labor prison camps, it is doubtful that North Korean officials would provide an accurate accounting of either the precipitous decline in the population or the relocation of the persons previously deported to Camp No. 22.³² Notwithstanding, North Korea's authorities are, and should be held, accountable.

III. MADANG HAEJE (BROAD CLEARANCE): THE DISMANTLEMENT OF CAMP NO. 18—A PRECEDENT FOR ENDING NORTH KOREA'S POLITICAL PRISON CAMP SYSTEM

Camp No. 18, formally designated as "Korean Peoples Guard Unit 2918" is often identified as Bukchang Camp, after the name of the large nearby city in South Pyongan Province. It was located south of the Taedong River, opposite Camp No. 14 on the north side of the twisting river. Initially opened in 1958, Camp No. 18 was the first of the present day *kwan-li-so* political penal labor colonies. Its population swelled in the 1970s as the prisoners from other nearby camps were transferred to Camp No. 18.

As can be easily seen in satellite photographs, Camp No. 18 sprawled along the southern side of the Taedong River as it snaked along its

³² Hence, requests for an accounting would have to be framed in the euphemistic terminology employed by North Korea: that is, an enquiry about the fate and whereabouts of the "residents" (*ju-min*) and "migrants" (*e-ju-min*) at the "managed place" (*kwan-li-so*) near Hoeryong formally known as the Chosun Peoples Security Unit 2209.

twisting path en route downstream to Bukchang city.³³ Officially designated by “Divisions”, these divisions were called “villages” by the prisoners. Some of the dozen-odd villages were located in the flat areas along the riverbank. Other settlements were scattered in the mountains closer to the mines where the prisoners worked. All were enclosed within the barbed wire perimeter of the sprawling labor camp.

Camp No. 18 differed from the other *kwan-li-so* camps in that it was primarily administered by the “regular” police force, the Ministry of Public Security (*In-min-bo-an-seong*), formally known as the People’s Safety Agency “*Sa-hui An-jeon-bu*,” rather than the “*Kuk-ga-an-jeon-bo-wi-bu*” political police, termed the State Security Department (SSD). Because of this, some analysts, who define *kwan-li-so* as the prison camps run by the “Farm Bureau” or “Bureau 7” of the SSD, have not considered Camp No. 18 to be a *kwan-li-so*. However, because Camp No. 18 shared the unique North Korean penal practice that characterizes the other *kwan-li-so* encampments—the imprisonment of multi-generational extended family members for the political offense of one family member (the *yeon-jwa-je* guilt by association, collective punishment system)—most human rights analysts grouped Camp No. 18 along with the other *kwan-li-so* political penal labor colonies.

Camp No. 18 also differed from the other *kwan-li-so* in a number of details. Camp No. 18 employed civilian administrators to run the encampment, whereas the other *kwan-li-so* were entirely staffed and administered by *Bo-wi-bu* police officials. Borrowing the terminology of the Soviet gulag system, Camp No. 18 had a less “strict regime” than the other camps. For example, while only a small number of exemplary prisoners were allowed to “marry,” at Camp No. 18, the model prisoners could choose their “mates” unlike Camp No. 14 across the

³³ See *The Hidden Gulag*, 2nd ed. (Washington D.C.: HRNK, 2012), 209, 216-21.

river—where the prison guards assigned the model male prisoner to the model female prisoner. These model prisoners were then allowed to have relations several times a year, but not to live together as a family.³⁴ Also, at Camp No. 18, primary school children within the prison camp were provided with the same kind of primary school uniforms worn by primary school children throughout North Korea every three years, whereas at the other *kwan-li-so* labor camps, the children in the primitive primary schools wore only their raggedy, worn, and thread-bare prison camp clothes.³⁵

Camp No. 18 shared with Camp No. 15 (Yodok) a characteristic that differed from other camps such as Camp No. 14 (Kaecheon), Camp No. 22 (Heoryong), or Camp No. 25 (Chongjin) in that there were prisoners at Camps No. 15 and 18 who were released, whereas at the other *kwan-li-so* camps, the prisoners were detained without trial and subjected to forced labor until death.³⁶ For this reason, there are many more former prisoners from Camps No. 15 and 18 who subsequently fled to China and South Korea, and who have provided the outside world with testimony about the North Korean prison camp system.³⁷

34 See Blaine Harden, *Escape from Camp 14*, op.cit., for a description of former prisoner Shin Dong-hyuk's "family" life. Shin was born at the camp in one of these prison guard-assigned matings.

35 See Pierre Rigoulot, *Aquariums of Pyongyang*, op.cit., for a description of Kang Chul-hwan's primary school at Camp No. 15. (All of the prison camp primary schools, however, are better described as focal points or staging areas for child labor projects in the camps, since "education" was limited to very elementary reading, writing, addition and subtraction.)

36 Camp No. 16 also may have allowed some prisoners to be released. But if so, up to the present, none of those who may have subsequently fled to South Korea were willing to provide testimony to foreign journalists, scholars or human rights investigators.

37 For the other camps from which prisoners are not released, there is much more limited testimony, either from former prison guards or officials who defected to

At Camp No. 15 (Yodok) the comparatively small number of prisoners who were deemed counter-revolutionary but capable of “reform through labor” were housed in areas of the prison known as “revolutionizing zones” (*hyeok-myong-hwa-koo-yeok*), whereas the prisoners for life deemed to be implacable and unredeemable counter-revolutionaries were housed in areas designated as “total control zones” (*wan-jeon-tong-je-koo-yeok*).³⁸

The releases at Camp No. 18 were of a different nature, and therein lies their significance. At Camp No. 18, at various times over the last several decades, entire “villages” within the sprawling labor camp described above were de-commissioned as prison labor camps. Most of the prisoners residing in those villages were “cleared” of their wrong doings, and their liberties—to the extent that non-elite North Koreans have liberties—were restored, including their freedom to travel or move elsewhere within North Korea. The process was called *madang haeje*, “broad clearance.”³⁹ Prisoners in those villages who were not “cleared” were transferred to other villages within Camp No. 18 that continued to function as forced-labor prison camp villages.

There was a *madang haeje* “broad clearance” in the mid-1980s. Another “broad clearance” took place in the mid-1990s, as other villages within Camp No. 18 were decommissioned as forced-labor

South Korea or the two known escapees.

³⁸ Many released prisoners from the “revolutionizing zones” subsequently fled to South Korea and told their stories publicly. Such releases may have stopped, as there are no known releases since 2007.

³⁹ *Madang* can be translated as a “wide place” or “broad place.” *Haeje* can be translated as “cleared” or “lifted.” Together the words indicate that a village area had been decommissioned as a prison facility, even though it existed within the overall perimeter of the camp.

camp.⁴⁰ A former Camp No. 18 official who defected to South Korea explained these releases:

“The reason for the release of prisoners in 1989 was that many of the prisoners were the third and fourth generation of offenders such as landlords, capitalists, collaborators with the Japanese colonial government, and other people with bad family background.... In fact, the prisoners were the grandchildren of offenders and they found the grandchildren were, in fact, innocent, and decided to release them.”⁴¹

However, while the “cleared” former prisoners were technically and legally allowed to leave, many stayed, even with their citizen rights restored—etching out a penurious existence living in their same houses and working in the same places. Essentially, these former prisoners had been detained for so long—multiple decades in many cases—that they had lost all contact and connection with their families, friends, and colleagues in their home villages or towns.⁴² Having both prisoners and freed former prisoners within close proximity of each other was, according to the testimonies, a complicated arrangement.

⁴⁰ “Recent Trend of Change in North Korean Political Prison Camps” *Korea Institute of National Unification (KINU)*, 30 Jan. 2013, 30-31. (As of June 2013, available in Korean only.)

⁴¹ “Political Prison Camps in North Korea Today,” *NKDB*, op. cit., 102.

⁴² See *The Hidden Gulag*, 2nd ed., 71-73 for Mrs. Kim Hae-sook and her family’s experience at Camp No. 18. She was cleared, then released, and left the camp but then encountered difficulty finding a local authority that would register her as a resident and assign her to a legal residence.

The Final Dismantlement of Camp No. 18

As noted above, Camp No. 18 utilized civilian officials in the administration of the labor camp. Because some of these civilians, as well as former prisoners, defected to South Korea, there is a large enough base of potentially accessible testimony to re-construct a great deal of the internal history of Camp No.18. However, there is the more salient fact that, as many of these defectors now testify, and as reported by the *Data Base Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB)*,⁴³ sometime around 2006, the last villages within Camp No. 18 were decommissioned as forced-labor camps with the exception of a small number of prisoners described below.⁴⁴ With the noteworthy exception described below, most of the remaining former prisoners were “cleared.” The mines, formerly operated with prison labor, now operate as civilian enterprises. Analysis of satellite photos seems to confirm that “the fence lines of the camp are still visible, but the main checkpoints seem to be dismantled or degraded.”⁴⁵

43 Political Prison Camps in North Korea Today,” *NKDB*, July 2011. And confirmed in the 2013 *KINU* report, “Recent Trend of Change in North Korean Political Prison Camps,” op. cit.

44 For the reasons explained above (pp. 1-3) there was a delay of several years between the actual dismantlement of Camp No. 18, and the arrival of enough North Korean escapees in South Korea with eye-witness and personal accounts to fully understand the process of dismantlement.

45 Communication to the present author, April 20, 2013, from Josh Stanton, a DC-based attorney and Korea expert who first traced the perimeters of the prison camps for his blog, *OneFreeKorea*.

A Model for the Dismantlement of the Kwan-li-so Prison Labor Camps?

When thinking about or imagining the closing of North Korea's infamous prison camps, the image that comes to mind is turning off the electricity in the electrified wires that surround the encampments and opening the prison gates, thereby allowing the released prisoners to return to their families, friends, neighborhoods, and jobs they held prior to their deportation to the labor camps. That is certainly the ideal way to do it. And if North Korea's new leader Kim Jong-un so ordered, it could happen that way. However, North Korea continues to ignore the most relevant international human rights law provision that prohibits "imprisonment or *other severe deprivation of physical liberty in violation of the fundamental rules of international law*" (emphasis added).⁴⁶

North Korean officials formally object to the designation of the political penal labor colonies, such as Camps No. 14, 15, 16, 18 or 22, as "prison camps." North Korean spokespersons continue, as in the past, to proclaim to the United Nations (UN) that they have no political prisoners. Semantics aside, the abundant testimonies make it unquestionably clear that the "residents" (*ju-min*) or "immigrants" (*e-ju min*), the euphemistic prisoner designations used by North Korean prison camp officials for those deported to the labor camps, are "severely deprived of their liberties in violation of the fundamental rules of international law."

However, at Camp No. 18, now the area known as the former Camp No. 18, the *hae-je-min* "cleared people," no matter how penurious and in need of nutritional and medical rehabilitation, have had their "liber-

⁴⁶ Article 7.1(e) Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. (The relevant "fundamental rules of international law" are specified in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 6-26.)

ties” restored. That is, once “cleared,” the “cleared people” enjoy the same, albeit considerably restricted, liberties possessed by non-elite North Korean citizens throughout North Korea. They can read the same limited number of official newspapers and magazines that other North Koreans can read. They can watch the limited number of official TV channels—if they have access to a TV set—and can listen to the same official radio channels that the radios with fixed dials allow the rest of the population to listen. They could line up in the public square for “gifts” from the Great Leader or Dear Leader, as Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il were called, on regime anniversary days. The “cleared people” can send and receive mail. They may receive permission to travel within the country, that is, move away from the encampment and/or move back to their hometown or home village—if they have not lost, after a decade or decades of imprisonment, any, or all, connection to their lives and livelihoods prior to their deportation to the camp.

The dismantlement of Camp No. 18 does not appear to be an isolated occurrence. There is limited testimony about a comparable dismantlement of the *An-jeon-bu*-administered Camp No. 19 at Tanchon, South Hamgyong Province. According to the testimony of a family member of a former official at Camp No. 19, who lived there from 1984 to the 1990s, in 1990, “prisoners there with good records were given citizenship certificates and became ordinary workers....Virtually all prisoners were released at that time.”⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Witness A21, “Political Prison Camps in North Korea Today,” *NKDB* op. cit., 104. Camp No. 19, like Camp No. 18, was apparently managed by the “*An-jeon-bu*” People’s Safety Agency “regular” police. According to Witness A21, some of the former officials at Camp No. 19 were transferred to the notorious “Oro” *kyo-hwa-so* labor camp-like penitentiary which contains prisoners charged with both political and criminal offenses.

Can this example or model—the restoration of “liberties” to the former prisoners at Camp No. 18, and about which there is ample testimony—be applied to the other political penal labor colonies? Some former North Koreans who defected to South Korea say, “No, that is not the nature of the regime.” The difference is that Camp No. 18 was administered by the *An-jeon-bu* regular police, while the *Bo-wi-bu* SSD that runs the other political penal labor colonies is a much more politically powerful organ of the North Korean party-state apparatus. It is one that will never free the prisoners or restore liberties to the disloyal, purged, or deported persons under its control.

The former North Koreans now resident in South Korea who hold this view may well be right. However, the possibility exists that a forthcoming UN investigation will focus heightened international attention on the horrendous human rights situation in North Korea, including the political prison/forced labor camps.⁴⁸ Should the UN investigation find the North Korean prison camp system an egregious violation of internationally recognized human rights and recommend its dismantling, officials, diplomats, and the concerned public should be aware that there are existing North Korean precedents for doing so.

Tonglim-li: The Remnant of Camp No. 18

There, is however, a sad exception to the process of *madang haeje* “broad clearance” prison camp dismantlement described above. Apparently, a small number of prisoners—some 2,000-5,000 persons—were deemed ineligible for clearance and were, according to a recent

⁴⁸ For further information on the UN investigation, termed a Commission of Inquiry, see Roberta Cohen, “North Korea Faces Heightened Human Rights Scrutiny,” *38 North*, 21 Mar. 2013, and David Hawk, “A UN Commission of Inquiry” *38 North*, 1 Apr. 2013. The *38 North* website is an educational program of the *US-Korea Institute (USKI)* at the *Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS)*, Washington, DC.

Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) report, transferred north of the Taedong River to Tonglim-li in 2006 or 2007.⁴⁹ A prison camp-like facility at Tonglim-li (alternatively transliterated as Tongrim-ri) near Kaechon was first identified in the newly updated *Google Earth* satellite photographs by Curtis Melvin, the director of the *North Korea Economy Watch* website.⁵⁰ This facility is adjacent to *kwan-li-so* Camp No. 14 (Kaechon). *Amnesty International* picked up on this new prison camp formation and, in March 2013, published a series of satellite photographs and analysis by *DigitalGlobe* comparing the satellite images in 2008 with newer photographic images from 2013 and identifying a number of landmarks within the new facility.⁵¹

The *KINU* report, which also contains satellite photographs of Tonglim-li, reports that this is the facility where those who were not “cleared” from Camp No. 18 were transferred to in 2006 or 2007.⁵² At its height, Camp No. 18 is thought to have held up to 40,000 prisoners, following the transfer of prisoners from Camp No. 17 (Tokson). South Korean reports indicated a camp population of some 19,000 in the late

49 “Recent Trend of Change in North Korean Political Prison Camps,” *KINU*, op. cit., 31.

50 Comparing the dates of the older and newer satellite photo images, Melvin surmised that this new facility was built sometime between December 17, 2007 and September 21, 2011. See <http://www.nkeconwatch.com/2013/01/18>, “Speculation Time: A New *Kwan-li-so*”. Melvin provides the coordinates of latitude and longitude of this facility as 39.669271 and 125.995410 degrees. Communication to present author, June 4, 2013.

51 “New Satellite Images Show Blurring of Political Prison Camp and Villages in North Korea”, AI Index No. ASA/24/004/2013.

52 “Recent Trend of Change in North Korean Political Prison Camps,” *KINU*, op. cit., 31.

1990s.⁵³ If only some 2,000-5,000 of these remain imprisoned,⁵⁴ then thousands have been freed, while additional thousands will have died in detention, a phenomenon requiring more consideration below.

IV. QUANTIFYING THE KWAN-LI-SO PRISON CAMP POPULATION

The September 30, 2012 KINU report cited above also provides new figures for the estimated numbers of persons held in the remaining kwan-li-so prison camps: 80,000 to 120,000. These figures are reportedly based on examinations of the size of the prisoner housing and barracks in the satellite photographs of the prison camps. These figures are at enough variance with the often cited figures—150,000 to 200,000—to merit a closer examination. These higher population estimates were provided some ten to fifteen years ago by North Korean SSD police officials, who defected to South Korea around the turn of the millennium. As such, these figures would have reflected information about the prison camps in the 1990s, or even earlier. Apart from the questions raised above regarding the fate and whereabouts of the missing prisoners from the now closed Camp No. 22, it is highly likely that the prisoner population has declined.

53 Cited in "Political Prison Camps in North Korea Today," *NKDB*, op. cit., 71.

54 A former prisoner from Camp No. 18, interviewed in Seoul for this present up-dated report, who was cleared, that is released in the mid-1980s, but who remains in touch with relatives still living in South Pyongan Province believes that there is still a portion of Pongchang Village that continues to function as a prison camp. According to Curtis Melvin of *North Korea Economy Watch*, the main workplace in the area, Pongchang District Coal Mine has been restored to civilian production, and has been featured several times on North Korean television. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nluYaD3f2H4>. *NKDB* cites some 200-300 prisoners currently detained at Camp No. 18, "Political Prison Camps in North Korea Today," op. cit., 71.

Extremely High Numbers of Deaths in Detention

Over the last decade, I have interviewed close to thirty former prisoners and guards from the *kwan-li-so* prison camps. One of the most startling features in these eyewitness testimonies is the number of reported deaths in detention. Some of the former prisoners were deported to the camps along with their families and have recounted how many family members survived. Other former prisoners were deported to the camps individually and have described the deaths in their residence or work units. The reported numbers of deaths in detention from executions, the combination of severe malnutrition and concomitant disease, and work accidents (mining and logging/timber cutting are dangerous occupations even for well nourished and healthy workers) are staggering.⁵⁵

We know from the prisoner testimony that there were, as of 2007, ongoing deportations to the camps. One cannot project from available individual prisoner testimony prison camp-wide rates of deaths in detention or the rates of incoming deportees to the prison camps. But, in the absence of information or evidence of large-scale purges of the North Korean party, army, and government, comparable to the large-scale purges of the late 1950s or the purges of 1967, it is possible that the number of incoming deportees to the camps is lower than the high rates of deaths in detention.

⁵⁵ See for example the testimony of Jung Gwang-il, *The Hidden Gulag* 2nd ed., 65-67. In one year, April 2002 to April 2003, in the Sorimchon singles section of Camp No.15, out of 230 prisoners in his residence unit, there were 26 known deaths (23 from malnutrition, two from public execution, and one from torture). An additional six persons were taken away, Jung believes, for execution elsewhere, although their fate is not known conclusively.

Collective Versus Individual Punishment

It is clear from existing testimony that substantial numbers of prisoners were deported to the labor camps because of the real, suspected, or imagined ideological or political deviance, disloyalty, or un-trustworthiness of their fathers or grandfathers under the *yeon-jwa-je*, “three-generation, guilt-by-association, collective punishment system,” instituted by Kim Il-sung in the late 1950s (originally to remove from society the family members of Kim’s real, suspected, or imaginary political opposition).⁵⁶ It is also clear from existing testimony that, in the 1960s and early 1970s, as the family histories of all North Korean citizens were collected and analyzed during the formation of the *Songbun*, “semi-hereditary citizen classification system,” the relatives remaining in North Korea of former landowners, business people, religious believers, and others who had fled to South Korea before or during the Korean War were identified and deported to the prison camps.⁵⁷

However, most of the recent, that is, post-2000, testimony about the *kwan-li-so* prison camps comes from former prisoners who were sent

⁵⁶ Many of these persons were called “factionalists” or “revisionists”. See Andrei Lankov, *Crisis in North Korea: The Failure of De-Stalinization* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005); and *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Another recently published historical account posits that “nearly one hundred thousand “hostile and reactionary elements” were rounded up, imprisoned and executed” in the purges of 1958-59. Sheila Myoshi Jager, *Brothers at War* (New York: Norton, 2013), 364. The same figure for the purges of the late 1950s is cited by Charles Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak: North Korea and the World 1950-1992*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 105. Prof. Armstrong identifies 1967 as the date of the last major leadership purge under Kim Il-sung (p. 166).

⁵⁷ For the elimination of Kim Il-sung’s political and social opposition prior to the Korean War, see Charles Armstrong, *The North Korean Revolution: 1945-1950*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

to the camps, not as part of a larger family group, but as individuals who were deported to the camps for their own real, presumed, or imagined ideological or political indiscretions, wrong-doing, or wrong-thinking. It is known that many of those recent former prisoners were not married, and had been confined to singles quarters inside the camps. Thus, we don't know for certain if the feudal practice of deportations to the camps for the wrongdoings of family relatives continues or not. If not, then the rate of deportations to the camps has certainly declined.

Mortality

Needless to say, those who were between the ages of twenty and forty when they were deported to the camps in the 1960s, 1970s or 1980s, would, by the second decade of the present millennium, be approaching mortality even under more normal circumstances. That is, they would be without the induced malnutrition, arduous forced labor and horrendous living conditions, and life-endangering labor assignments inside the prison camps. The intent was to exterminate the family lineage of those deemed to be the enemies of "the people" in North Korea. And to a considerable extent, the regime succeeded.

While there is little reason to doubt the political prison population—150,000 to 200,000—posited by former prisoners, prison guards, and North Korean SSD officials fifteen to twenty years ago, it is likely that the reduced figures—80,000 to 130,000—for the number of persons imprisoned in the *kwan-li-so* political prison camps, posited in the recent *KINU* report, is a more accurate rendering of the *kwan-li-so* prison population as of 2010. However, as noted previously, and importantly, there are additional multiple thousands of North Koreans incarcerated in other penal institutions (variously termed *kyo-hwa-so*, *jip-kyul-so*, and *nodong-dan-ryeon-dae*) for what, by international

standards would be deemed political rather than criminal offenses.⁵⁸ Even with a reduced estimate of the number of prisoners in the *kwan-li-so* political prison camps, North Korea incarcerates a very high percentage of its population for reasons that are not permitted under international law, including, most notably, the international human rights conventions to which North Korea has acceded. The number of prisoners unlawfully held on political grounds remains extremely high, as does the number of political prisoners who are missing and the scores of thousands of prisoners who died in detention.

⁵⁸ See *The Hidden Gulag*, 2nd ed., 82-147, for descriptions of these thousands of additional political imprisonments. (It should be noted that the conditions of these other detention facilities are no better, and in some respects even worse, than the conditions in the *kwan-li-so* political penal labor colonies.)

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