

# CORONAVIRUS AND NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS

## Regime Response and Future Accountability Scenarios



**By Robert Collins**



**The Committee For Human  
Rights in North Korea**

북한인권위원회

# **Coronavirus and North Korean Human Rights Regime Responses and Future Instability Scenarios**

By  
Robert Collins



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Committee for Human Rights in North Korea

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# About The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea

The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK) is the leading U.S.-based nonpartisan, non-governmental organization (NGO) in the field of North Korean human rights research and advocacy, tasked to focus international attention on human rights abuses in that country. It is HRNK's mission to persistently remind policymakers, opinion leaders, and the public that more than 20 million North Koreans need our attention.

Since its establishment in October 2001, HRNK has played an important intellectual leadership role in North Korean human rights issues by publishing over 60 major reports (available at <https://www.hrnk.org/publications/hrnk-publications.php>). Recent reports have addressed North Korea's system of detention facilities, including its political prison camps, the role of security agencies and key institutions involved in human rights violations, North Korea's practice of dispatching workers overseas, and the connection between security issues and human rights when addressing North Korea. HRNK received UN ECOSOC consultative status in April 2018. It was also the first organization to propose that the human rights situation in North Korea be addressed by the UN Security Council. HRNK was directly and actively involved in all stages of the process, supporting the work of the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) on North Korean human rights. Its' reports have been cited numerous times in the report of the COI, the reports of the UN Special Rapporteur on North Korean human rights, a report by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, two reports of the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, and several U.S. Department of State Democratic People's Republic of Korea Human Rights Reports. HRNK has also regularly been invited to provide expert testimony before the U.S. Congress and to speak before UN bodies including the General Assembly.

## About the Author



Robert M. Collins completed 37 years of service as a soldier and U.S. Department of the Army civilian employee. He served 31 years in various assignments with the U.S. military in Korea, including several liaison positions with the Republic of Korea Armed Forces. Mr. Collins' final assignment was as Chief of Strategy, ROK-US Combined Forces Command, serving the four-star American commander as a political analyst for planning on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asian security issues. He received the Sam-il Medal (Republic of Korea Order of National Security Medal, Fourth Class) from President Lee Myung-bak and the U.S. Army Decoration for Exceptional Civilian Service by the Secretary of the Army. Mr. Collins earned a B.A. in Asian History from the University of Maryland in 1977, and an M.A. in International Politics, focusing on North Korean Politics, from Dankook University in 1988.

Mr. Collins is a Senior Advisor at HRNK, where he conducts interviews with North Korean escapees in South Korea to gather information on the North Korean population and the human rights situation in that country. He is the author of *Marked For Life: Songbun, North Korea's Social Classification System*; *Pyongyang Republic: North Korea's Capital of Human Rights Denial*; *From Cradle to Grave: The Path of North Korean Innocents*; *Denied From the Start: Human Rights at the Local Level in North Korea*; *North Korea's Organization and Guidance Department: The Control Tower of Human Rights Denial*; *South Africa's Apartheid and North Korea's Songbun: Parallels in Crimes Against Humanity*; *Propaganda and Agitation Department: Kim Jong-un Regime's Sword of Indoctrination*; and *Slaves to the Bomb: The Role and Fate of North Korea's Nuclear Scientists*; all published by HRNK.

# Acknowledgements

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# Acronyms

CEQH	Central Emergency Quarantine Headquarters
CRISPR	“Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats”
COVID	Coronavirus
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
DPRK	Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea)
DPS	District Physician System
GPB	General Political Bureau
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights
KIDA	Korean Institute for Defense Analyses (South Korea)
KPA	Korean People’s Army
KWP	Korean Workers’ Party
MOU	Ministry of Unification (South Korea)
MPAF	Ministry of People’s Armed Forces (now the Ministry of Defense)
MPS	Ministry of Public Security
MSC	Military Security Command
MSS	Ministry of State Security
OAD	Organization Administrative Department
OGD	Organization and Guidance Department (KWP)
PAD	Propaganda and Agitation Department
ROK	Republic of Korea
TPMI	Ten Great Principles of Monolithic Ideology
WHO	World Health Organization
WPRG	Worker-Peasant Red Guards

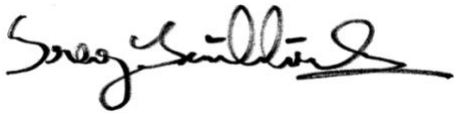
# Foreword

In “Coronavirus and North Korean Human Rights: Regime Responses and Future Instability Scenarios,” Robert Collins builds on his extensive expertise and scholarship on North Korean human rights denial, regime dynamics, and preparation for collapse scenarios to scrutinize the impact of the pandemic on the human security of ordinary North Koreans, the North Korean military, the regime’s military-industrial complex, and regime stability.

Based on substantial open-source information and expert interviews, the report is a comprehensive analysis of regime strengths and weaknesses exposed by the coronavirus pandemic, across multiple strata of society as well as party, military, security, and propaganda agencies. Future contingency planning on the Korean peninsula must consider the lessons learned and analysis put forth in the report. Collins notes that both the pandemic and the regime’s loyalty-centered rigid chain of “control of command,” as well as the draconian restrictions it implemented, exacerbated the health, food, economic, personal, political, and community insecurity of ordinary North Koreans. Environmental insecurity, in particular weather-related events, further worsened the people’s humanitarian situation.

Some elements of the regime’s policies addressed the coronavirus as a public health crisis. However, the regime followed its fundamental impulse to protect the 65,000 key party elites, including the nuclear and missile scientists and technicians. As it happened during the famine and humanitarian crisis of the 1990s, the regime prioritized the health and welfare of those who ensure its survival at the expense of the human security of ordinary North Koreans. Even within the Korean People’s Army, the regime discriminated among the echelons of deployment and capability, favoring forward-deployed troops and forces based in the capital city of Pyongyang over operational exploitation forces placed behind the forward forces and especially homeland defense forces stationed in the north of the country. Furthermore, under the pretext of coronavirus prevention, the regime weaponized the pandemic to crack down on perceived threats to its survival, even more ferociously than before: information from the outside world, travel across the border, and market activity. Under the coronavirus pandemic, the regime stepped up its ideology, information, and population control.

Its dealing with the coronavirus exposed both the regime's strengths and vulnerabilities. While the regime's intransigent control, crimes against humanity, other human rights violations and obstinate focus on key elites and weapons rather than ordinary people have maintained it in power for eight decades, its allegiance-based, unyielding chain of control and command and lack of flexibility may be North Korea's greatest vulnerability in a future crisis.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Greg Scarlatoiu', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Greg Scarlatoiu

HRNK President and CEO

June 9, 2025

# Executive Summary

**Section 1** examines the Kim regime's growing instability, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, economic decline, and human rights abuses. It highlights the regime's reliance on extreme control measures, including information suppression by the Propaganda and Agitation Department (PAD), and the potential consequences of regime collapse.

**Section 2** examines North Korea's response to the coronavirus pandemic, beginning with its border closure with China on January 21, 2020. The Kim regime imposed strict travel bans, shoot-on-sight orders, and quarantine measures. The weaponization of information on the virus proved crucial as a means of control. The regime also instituted masking and testing, despite denying any virus cases until 2022. Reports suggest the virus likely entered North Korea early on in 2020.

**Section 3** This section examines the worsening humanitarian conditions in North Korea, exacerbated by the Kim regime's prioritization of political control over public welfare. The coronavirus pandemic, combined with self-imposed border closures and international sanctions, led to severe food shortages, economic decline, and a failing healthcare system. Reports from defectors highlight increased regime surveillance, forced labor, and rising malnutrition, with entire communities facing starvation. Despite acknowledging economic struggles, Kim Jong-un continues to divert resources to nuclear and military programs, worsening living conditions. Meanwhile, the healthcare system remains critically underfunded, with hospitals lacking basic supplies and medical professionals facing government crackdowns. The regime's ongoing human rights violations and economic mismanagement signal growing instability, with potential long-term consequences for governance and societal control.

**Section 4** examines how the coronavirus pandemic reinforced existing weakness in North Korea's economy. The economic impacts of the Kim Regime's Covid policies caused a contraction of 4.5% from 2020 to 2021 and impacted all sectors of industry, agriculture, and trade. These challenges further impacted the already precarious economic position of most North Koreans.

**Section 5** examines the impact of the coronavirus on the Korean People's Army (KPA), highlighting its devastating effects on force readiness, food security, and overall military operations. The virus spread rapidly among soldiers, particularly along the China-North Korea border, where infections and deaths were widespread. Food shortages weakened soldiers' immune systems, and some recruits were seen begging their families for food through military fences.

The Kim regime used the pandemic as a pretext to tighten border security, deploying special forces with shoot-on-sight orders to prevent defections and enforce lockdown measures. Meanwhile, the military faced logistical and operational challenges, including medicine shortages, natural disasters, and reduced training due to large-scale parades and political events. Corruption and resource inequality further strained the KPA, with forward-deployed units receiving priority over others. Despite these challenges, the KPA remains a formidable force, though internal vulnerabilities could impact its long-term stability.

**Section 6** analyzes the role of North Korea's elites in managing the coronavirus crisis, highlighting their loyalty-based privilege system and the regime's pervasive surveillance apparatus. The Kim regime's elite class, particularly those in the Korean Workers' Party (조선로동당 - KWP) Politburo and Central Committee, prioritized maintaining their privileges and political survival over addressing public health concerns. Any failure to demonstrate loyalty to Kim Jong-un risked severe punishment for individuals and their entire families.

Surveillance and ideological control intensified during the pandemic, with state security agencies closely monitoring citizens, including elites, to prevent dissent. The Organization and Guidance Department (조직지도부 - OGD) played a central role in enforcing regime stability through extreme oversight and self-criticism sessions (생활총화).

The regime also relied on political purges and internal crackdowns to maintain obedience. The pandemic highlighted the fragility of this system, as the potential death of Kim Jong-un could

throw the regime into instability, with no clear successor. Corruption, bureaucratic deception, and elite self-preservation further exacerbated inefficiencies in pandemic management, creating long-term vulnerabilities within the regime's power structure.

**Section 7** examines how the coronavirus pandemic threatened the stability of the Kim regime by exposing vulnerabilities in governance, economic management, and social control. The crisis heightened risks to key political, military, and government officials, creating a scenario where regime collapse became more plausible. A future pandemic or similar crisis could trigger humanitarian disasters and destabilize the regime's tightly controlled system.

Five primary collapse scenarios are explored: pandemic-related instability, military provocations, economic failures, natural disasters, and internal political instability. Additional risks include rebellion, nuclear accidents, civil war, and a coup d'état. The regime's reliance on political terror, counterintelligence, and rigid ideological control has allowed it to survive past crises, but the pandemic, combined with food shortages, natural disasters, and economic decline, has weakened its ability to maintain total control. Potential scenarios such as the assassination of Kim Jong-un or a failure of the Organization and Guidance Department (OGD) could accelerate regime collapse. The pandemic underscored the fragility of North Korea's security apparatus, highlighting the regime's dependence on repression rather than governance to sustain its rule.

The regime's decision to prioritize nuclear and missile programs over public welfare has deepened economic struggles, worsened healthcare inequality, and heightened human rights abuses. These policy choices, coupled with international sanctions and natural disasters, have put North Korea on an unsustainable path. Key questions remain about the regime's ability to maintain stability amid growing internal weaknesses. Corruption, false reporting, and resource scarcity threaten the regime's social control mechanisms, while Kim Jong-un's isolation during crises raises concerns about internal power struggles. Future pandemics and ongoing economic hardship could further erode regime stability, forcing North Korea's leadership to either adapt or face potential collapse. The long-term consequences of these challenges will shape both the survival of the Kim regime and its continued human rights violations.

## Section One: Introduction



Figure 1, Source: Lee Sol, “北, 김정은 없이 사흘 간 '노마스크' 강습회... 모호한 방역기준 (North Korea holds 'no mask' training for three days without Kim Jong-un... Ambiguous quarantine standards),” Naver, April 1, 2022 <https://n.news.naver.com/mnews/article/421/0006002622>.

According to the U.S. State Department, “the DPRK’s human rights record has worsened since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic.”

The coronavirus emerged in China in late December 2019. It would soon spread to every continent, cripple the global economy, and take thousands of lives along the way. While the threat was uniform, nations’ responses differed greatly. North Korea is an example of the most draconian response to the pandemic. The hermit kingdom became even more isolated as it closed its borders and intensified internal control. The consequences of these policies not only pushed the Kim regime to the verge of instability, but also dramatically increased the suppression of

human rights.<sup>1</sup> The measures taken by the Kim regime to control the spread of the coronavirus were consistent with longstanding measures to control the population — the effects of which were felt at all levels of North Korea society, economy, and government. The general population of North Korea is already largely deprived of human rights, and the coronavirus presented additional challenges for every citizen, regardless of socio-political status or geographical location. Ruthless punishments for breaking covid policy went as far as public executions.<sup>2</sup>

In a country that insisted there were no cases of coronavirus infections, leadership actions and administrative measures strongly indicated the opposite. At the Day of the Sun activities designed to celebrate the birthday of Kim regime founder Kim Il-sung in Pyongyang on April 15, 2020, Kim Jong-un was nowhere to be seen.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Kim Jong-un was absent from the public scene on several occasions since the beginning of the pandemic. The Kim regime does not publicize news detrimental or threatening to its rule. Although the Kim regime's propaganda specialists crafted dubious media lines insisting there were no cases of the coronavirus in North Korea, it is quite evident that the Kim regime leadership took this challenge seriously. After the April 11, 2020, KWP Politburo meeting where they discussed measures to deal with the pandemic, the *North Korean Central News Agency* reported that the pandemic was "a great disaster threatening the whole mankind, regardless of borders and continents."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Byun Duk-kun, "Human rights conditions in N. Korea worsen during pandemic: U.S. official," *Yonhap News*, March 05, 2022. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220305000200325>

<sup>2</sup> Min-ji Lee, "N.Korea conducts public executions over COVID-19 violations: human rights white paper," *Yonhap News*, January 10, 2024. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240110007400315?section=nk/nk>.

<sup>3</sup> Travis Fedischun, "North Korea's Kim Jong Un missing at 'Day of the Sun' honors as nation insists no coronavirus cases," *Fox News*, April 16, 2020. <https://www.foxnews.com/world/north-koreas-kim-jong-un-day-of-the-sun-coronavirus-cases-reclusive-nation>.

<sup>4</sup> *Tongil News*, May 23, 2020. <https://www.tongilnews.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=205102>. Translation of graphic: "With our faith, will, and unity," and "Let us overcome the created quarantine crisis and firmly protect the well-being of our country and people" and at the bottom "Unscientific fear, lack of faith, weak will."





Figure 2, Source: Korean Central News Agency, April 11, 2020. See also Aljazeera, "North Korea calls for stronger coronavirus measures," April 11, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/north-korea-calls-stronger-coronavirus-measures-200412015519237.html>

The first blatant response to an acknowledged case of the coronavirus within the country was in regard to a young infected North Korean who re-defected to the North in July 2020. This forced Kim Jong-un to virtually admit that the coronavirus had come to North Korea. Due to the re-defector's entry into Gaesong City, North Korea declared an emergency mobilization that activated members of the Worker-Peasant Red Guards (WPRG).<sup>5</sup> After the mobilization, the WPRG units searched the terrain around Gaeseong for other defectors. Choe Ryong-hae, president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA), visited Gaeseong to inspect procedures to lock down the city, supposedly to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of whether the North Korean re-defector was infected with the virus, Choe's actions provided the Kim regime with plausible deniability that the spread of the virus was not to be blamed on the North's failed public health approaches, but on South Korean action. After the

<sup>5</sup> The Workers-Peasants Red Guards is a reserve paramilitary force assigned the mission of homeland defense. It is comprised of men 17-60 years old and women 17-30. Each member receives 160 hours of military training per year. It is not subordinate to the state or military but to the Military Department of the Korean Workers' Party. It is organized into units from platoons up to brigades. All personnel are assigned to their own region.

<sup>6</sup> Koh Byung-joon, "N. Korea's No. 2 leader visits Kaesong after lockdown amid virus fears," *Yonhap News*, July 30, 2020. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200730001451325?section=nk/nk>.

shutdown of Gaeseong, North Korean authorities began shutting down travel between provinces and cities.<sup>7</sup>

This lockdown would further cripple the North Korean economy and strain the healthcare system. Despite these challenges, North Korea maintained its strong military and nuclear capabilities. As a result, North Korea has emerged from the pandemic as a continued threat to the ROK, her allies, and the greater liberal world order. The regime's response to covid and the possibility of resulting instability will also pose a challenge to these international and regional actors in terms of how they can ease the suffering that will be inevitable during the potential scenarios resulting from regime collapse. As such, it is crucial to understand the reality of the Kim regime during these formative pandemic years.

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<sup>7</sup> Kang Mi Jin, "Source: Restrictions on movements nationwide have intensified," *Daily NK*, August 5, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/source-restrictions-movements-nationwide-have-intensified/>.

## **Section Two: Kim Regime Reaction to the Coronavirus Pandemic**



Figure 3, Source: Tongil News, May 23, 2020. <https://www.tongilnews.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=205102>. Translation of graphic: “With our faith, will, and unity,” and “Let us overcome the created quarantine crisis and firmly protect the well-being of country”

In many ways, the Kim regime faced the same challenges posed by coronavirus as most of the world, but to a greater extreme. Despite claims that there were no cases of Covid-19 in North Korea, the outbreak clearly concerned the leadership early on. An early example of this is that the regime did not hold the 72nd anniversary parade for the February 8 202 founding of the

Korean People's Army.<sup>8</sup> In April, the Politburo released a statement instructing the rest of the government to increase efforts to deal with the pandemic issue, strengthening the economy and national defense, and ordering all institutions to support the safety of the people.<sup>9</sup> In an article a month later, the *Rodong Sinmun* stated that the KWP "considers the health and lives of the people the nation's top priority" and that North Korean leaders were taking measures to prevent the spread of the virus.<sup>10</sup>

Despite this promise, the threat of Covid-19 came to bear on the population. North Korean reports acknowledge cases of fever, but not covid, in the country for the first few months of the pandemic. North Korea's National Emergency Quarantine Command announced on May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, that the number of 'patients with fever' per day on the 22<sup>nd</sup> had decreased by 18,440 compared to the previous day and remained in the 160,000 range. According to the National Emergency Quarantine Command, the number of people who had recovered had decreased by 31,550 compared to the previous day, and the number of deaths had also decreased by only 1.<sup>11</sup> A separate report claimed North Korean fatalities from the coronavirus had exceeded 500 as of June 2020, and approximately 390,000 citizens were isolated in preemptive measures to halt the spread of the virus. This became the general playbook for the North Korean response: deny covid cases but enact border closures, quarantines, and draconian punishments for those accused of disobeying the regime's policies. In this section, we will examine these measures and the path of the Kim regime's response to the crisis.

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<sup>8</sup> Sarah Kim, Min-Jeong Baek, "North quietly marks army's anniversary as virus threatens," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, February 9, 2020. <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2020/02/09/politics/North-quietly-marks-armys-anniversary-as-virus-threatens/3073589.html>

<sup>9</sup> Syung Syung, "북한 – 김정은 신변이상설, 김여정, 최룡해, 최고인민회, 철도운수, 노동당정치국회의 Rumors on (North Korea – Kim Jong-un, Kim Yo-jong, Choe Ryong-hae, Rail Transportation, and Korean Workers' Party Politburo Meeting), Naver, April 29, 2020. <https://blog.naver.com/wafsung/221935700578>.

<sup>10</sup> Yoo Jin Kim, "N. Korea's Kilju County faces possible outbreak of COVID-19," *Daily NK*, May 15, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-kilju-county-faces-possible-outbreak-covid-19/>.

<sup>11</sup> Lee Sung-hyon, "북, 발열환자 연이틀 10만명대 감소세, 완치율은 약 83% (In North Korea, the number of fever patients has decreased by 100,000 for two days in a row, and the cure rate is about 83%), *Tongil News*, May 23, 2020. <https://www.tongilnews.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=205102>.



Figure 4, Depiction of confirmed cases of the coronavirus in North Korea, as reported in April 2020.  
Source: Jieun Kim, "Ruling Party Lecturers Admit COVID-19 is Spreading in North Korea, Contradicting Official Claims," Radio Free Asia, April 17, 2020. URL: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/confirmed-coronavirus-04172020192920.html>.

## Border Closures

Kim Jong-un announced at the KWP's Politburo meeting on May 14, 2022, that "the spread of malignant infectious diseases had been the greatest turmoil since the founding of the country."<sup>12</sup> The regime's beginning point for dealing with the coronavirus pandemic was closing its 880-mile border with China on January 21, 2020. At the time, this was the first and most important action the Kim regime implemented to stop the spread of the coronavirus from China to North Korea. China followed up on this action in May 2020 by closing the cities of Jilin, Shulan, and Shenyang near its border with North Korea. Chinese officials also raised their alert level in the region to high risk, as the entire province was put on alert.<sup>13</sup> With such close proximity to North Korea, it was very likely that the virus would spread across the border into adjacent North Korean villages. Yet, North Korea was supportive of China's efforts to downplay its role in the spread of the coronavirus, so it insisted there were no virus cases in NK. The Kim regime only began loosening these coronavirus-related restrictions in late 2022.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Sung-hyun Lee, "북, 방역상황 뚜렷한 완화세..사망자 이틀째 0명(North Korea's quarantine situation is clearly easing... 0 deaths for second day)," *Tongil News*, May 25, 2022. <https://www.tongilnews.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=205127>.

<sup>13</sup> *Bloomberg*, "China shuts down city near North Korea as Covid-19 cases spike," May 10, 2020. <https://www.nst.com.my/world/world/2020/05/591547/china-shuts-down-city-near-north-korea-covid-19-cases-spike>.

<sup>14</sup> Olivia Enos, "North Koreans Executed By Kim Regime For Violating COVID," *Forbes*, January 17, 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/oliviaenos/2024/01/17/north-koreans-executed-by-kim-regime-for-violating-covid-restrictions/?sh=f766a216d8ca>.



To complement other border-related initiatives, the Ministry of Social Security publicly posted directives warning citizens to stay away from the North Korea – China border. The directives included:

- Strict security zones were established within one to two kilometers of the border.
- Citizens or vehicles were banned from traveling on roads or railways related to blockades at the border.
- Any person or animal entering the zone without authorization or approaching blockades on roads or railways should be shot on sight.
- Authorities would defend the safety of the country and its citizens “to the death” by ensuring that people strictly adhere to proper behavior in the border regions.<sup>15</sup>

At the time of the coronavirus pandemic outbreak, North Korean guard posts along the Yalu and Tumen rivers began employing Chinese surveillance cameras to detect exchanges between North Korean and Chinese citizens and prevent further spread of the disease.<sup>16</sup> The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) Government’s Ministry of State Security (MSS)<sup>17</sup> warned China in March that it would not tolerate Chinese citizens’ interference with North Korean border protection efforts, even threatening to use weapons against Chinese citizens.<sup>18</sup> This was done in an apparent effort to prevent the spread of the coronavirus directly across the border. A translation of the summary of the complaint sent by North Korea to Chinese authorities is pictured and translated below.

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<sup>15</sup> Yuna Ha, “N. Korea sets up “strict security zones” on Sino-North Korean border,” *Daily NK*, September 7, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-sets-up-strict-security-zones-sino-north-korean-border/>

<sup>16</sup> Chan-kyong Park, “How Chinese surveillance technology helps North Korea keep its citizens on a tight leash,” *South China Morning Post*, May 14, 2024. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3262581/how-chinese-surveillance-technology-helps-north-korea-keep-its-citizens-tight-leash>.

<sup>17</sup> The MSS is a secret police agency responsible for espionage, counter-espionage and maintaining political prison camps. It maintains its own court system and generally operates off of the Kim regime’s political agenda rather than national law. It is well known for its gross and innumerable human rights violations.

<sup>18</sup> Tae Joo Jeong, “N. Korea threatens use of weapons to control border with China,” *Daily NK*, March 5, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-threatens-use-weapons-border-control-china/>.

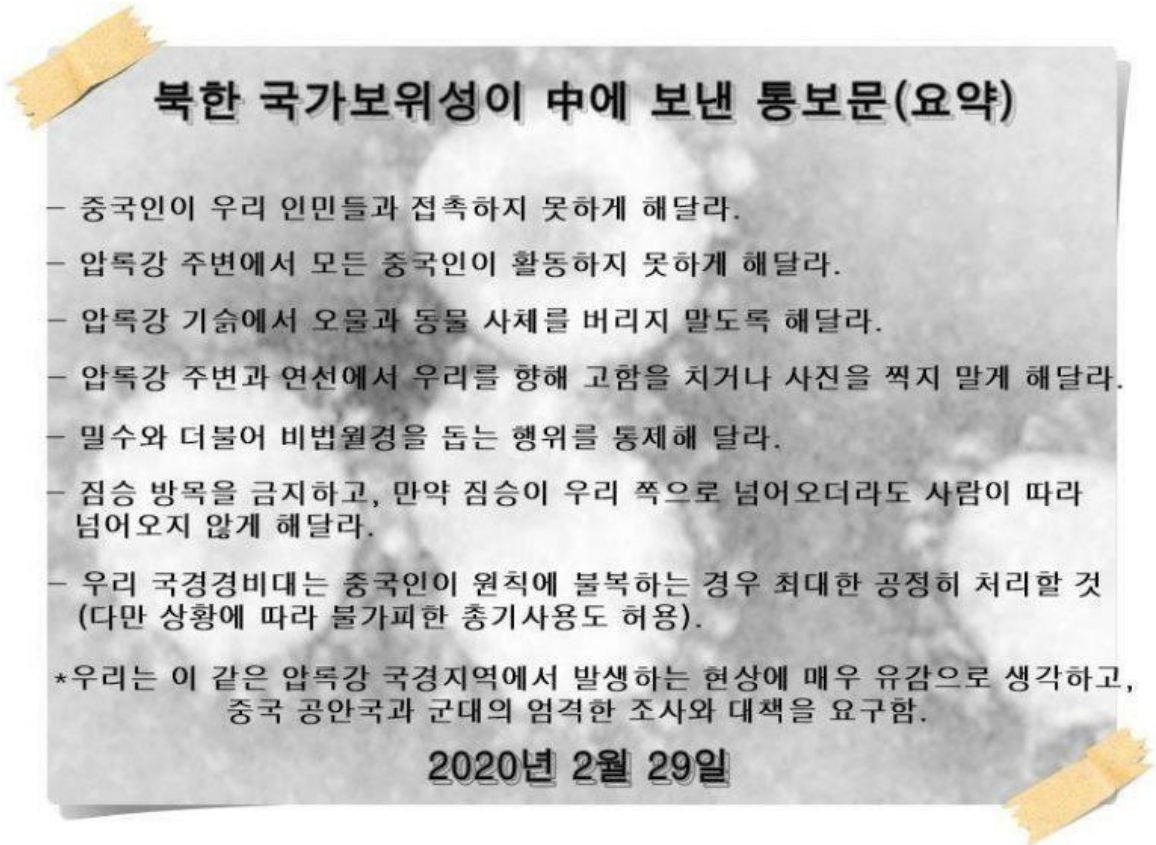


Figure 5, Source: Tae Joo Jeong, "N. Korea threatens use of weapons to control border with China," *Daily NK*, March 5, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-threatens-use-weapons-border-control-china/>

Translation:

- Prevent Chinese individuals from approaching our people
- Prevent Chinese individuals' activities around the Amnok River
- Do not dispose of waste or animal carcasses on the banks of the Amnok River
- Prevent photography or yelling in our direction along the Amnok River and the coastline
- Control activities such as smuggling and illegal border crossings
- Prevent livestock from grazing and people from crossing to our side
- If Chinese individuals ignore these directives, our border police units are authorized extreme measures (including the use of weapons)

We consider these issues relative to the Amnok River border area very regretful and insist that the Chinese Security Bureau and its military conduct thorough investigations and countermeasures.<sup>19</sup>

As reported by *Asia Press*, the Kim regime's police agency, the Ministry of Social Security, posted notices such as the one below in 2020 along the North's borders with China and Russia. The poster reads, "Do not engage in acts that undermine the Northern Border Blockade Operation."<sup>20</sup>

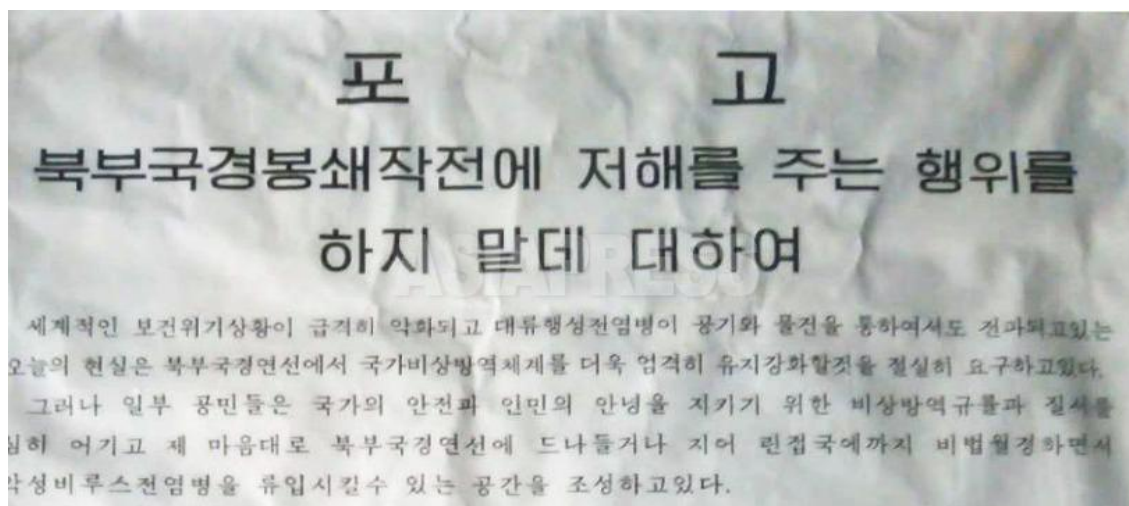


Figure 6, Source: *Asia Press*, January 19, 2024. <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2024/01/politics/invisibility-2/>.

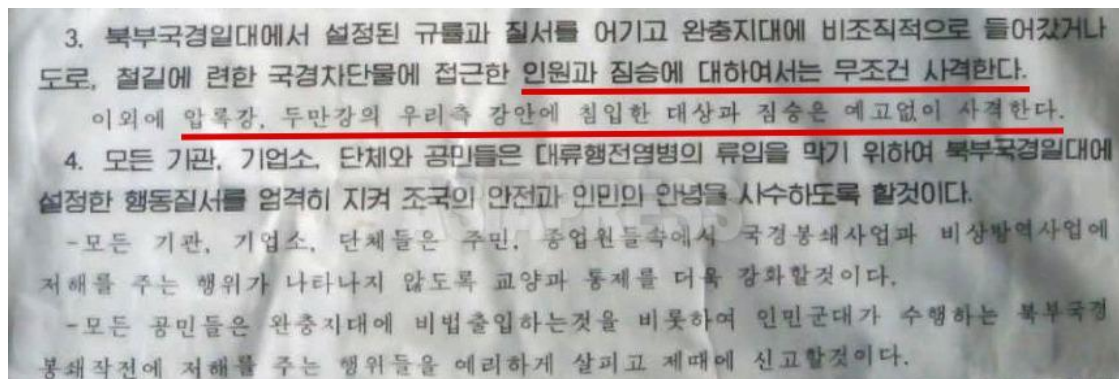


Figure 7, Source: *Asia Press*, January 19, 2024. <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2024/01/politics/invisibility-2/>.

<sup>19</sup> Tae Joo Jeong, "N. Korea threatens use of weapons to control border with China," *Daily NK*, March 5, 2020 <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-threatens-use-weapons-border-control-china/>.

<sup>20</sup> Jiro Ishimaru, "What occurred behind the veil in N.Korea 2020-2023...A disaster unfolding due to shifts in the Kim Jong-un regime's policies...Part 2: The impact of the border closure...escape is now almost impossible," *Asia Press*, January 19, 2024. <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2024/01/politics/invisibility-2/>.



The strict enforcement of border policy did produce casualties. After incidents in which civilians were shot along the border, China and North Korea took action to reduce tension along their mutual border.<sup>21</sup> According to Chinese television, China's leader, Xi Jinping, sent a letter to Kim Jong-un stating, "China is willing to strengthen anti-epidemic cooperation with North Korea and provide support within its capabilities according to North Korea's needs."<sup>22</sup> This support allowed the Kim regime to continue to tighten security and seal off its largest border for a nationwide quarantine.

An indicator of the relative success of these extreme measures for a national lockdown is the number of escapees who made it out of North Korea to South Korea. In the second quarter of 2020, only 12 North Koreans were able to successfully escape the North and arrive in the South. That is a drop from 320 in the same quarter of 2019. The annual number of escapees was already halved under Kim Jong-un's rule.<sup>23</sup> That is the lowest total since South Korea's Ministry of Unification (MOU) began keeping statistics in 1998. The first quarter of 2020 saw only 135 escapees make it to the South.<sup>24</sup> Eventually, 229 escapees made it to the South in 2020, 63 in 2021, 67 in 2022, 196 in 2023, and 236 in 2024. As of March 2025, the number of escapees who made it to South Korea during the current year was 38.<sup>25</sup>

## Quarantine and Precautionary Measures

North Korea is no stranger to quarantines. Throughout the years, the regime even restricted the movement of its highest diplomats during the threat of various pandemics. In 2014, Kim Yong-nam, then nominal head of state, was forced to land in Sinuiju on his return trip from Russia, where he received eye treatment. He remained there for three weeks due to efforts to prevent the Ebola outbreak from reaching North Korea. Even the current No.2 regime leader,

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<sup>21</sup> Jang Seul Gi, "N.Korea and China recently signed agreement aimed at easing border tensions, *Daily NK*, September 25, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-china-recently-signed-agreement-aimed-easing-border-tensions/>.

<sup>22</sup> Vivi Wu, "China says it's willing to help North Korea in fight against virus," *NBC News*, May 9, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/live-blog/2020-05-09-coronavirus-news-n1203616/ncrd1203651#liveBlogHeader>.

<sup>23</sup> *Yonhap News*, "Number of incoming N. Korean defectors hits all-time low in Q2: unification ministry," July 01, 2020. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200701005700325?section=nk/nk>.

<sup>24</sup> Kim Myong-song, "Few N.Korean Defectors Reach S.Korea During Lockdown," *Chosun Ilbo*, July 2, 2020. [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2020/07/02/2020070201790.html?related\\_all](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2020/07/02/2020070201790.html?related_all).

<sup>25</sup> Republic of Korea Ministry of Unification, Policy on North Korean Defectors. [https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng\\_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/](https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relations/statistics/defectors/)

Choe Ryong-hae, was forced to do the same when returning from an overseas trip. North Korea also took extreme measures in 2003 due to the SARS epidemic, including cancelling all flights between Beijing and Pyongyang, closing the border at Sinuiju, and halting all visits to the Mt. Geumgang resort for 62 days.

In response to Covid-19, the Kim regime increased its physical quarantine procedures nationwide. North Korea's Ministry of Social Security – the national police established travel checkpoints between counties and provinces to restrict movement of local populations and, ultimately, the spread of the coronavirus.<sup>26</sup> Even though the central North Korean government insisted there were no cases of the coronavirus infection within its borders, the mining village of Giljuep in North Hamgyeong Province quarantined more than 40 people suspected to have been infected with the virus. They were quarantined within a facility in Gilju and the roads in the area were guarded by police to prevent others from entering the area.<sup>27</sup> Closing schools was one reaction common to other countries' efforts to contain the coronavirus pandemic. North Korea followed this as well and sent boarding students studying in Pyongyang back to their regional homes. Even for a corrupt North Korean government under the control of the Kim regime, the focus on preventing border crossings from leading to the spread of the coronavirus pandemic into North Korea is well-founded. The focus on quarantining North Korea's border compelled the North Korean military and security agencies to focus on further isolating North Korea from the international community and strengthening internal control of its citizens.

Quarantines were not only limited to North Korean citizens. Personnel of foreign embassies and international organizations were initially prevented from leaving North Korea in measures that were assessed to be related to the coronavirus issue. Though some foreign personnel had been allowed to leave, hundreds remained.<sup>28</sup> Eventually, all foreign diplomatic and NGO personnel had to leave the country. As a result of covid restrictions, six out of eleven

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<sup>26</sup> Tae Joo Jeong, "Korea increases number of checkpoints nationwide ahead of Party Foundation Day," *Daily NK*, October 7, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-increases-number-checkpoints-nationwide-ahead-party-foundation-day/>.

<sup>27</sup> Kim Yoo Jin, "N. Korea's Kilju County faces possible outbreak of COVID-19," *Daily NK*, May 15, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-kilju-county-faces-possible-outbreak-covid-19/>.

<sup>28</sup> Chad O'Carroll and Oliver Hotham, "UK embassy in Pyongyang closes, resident diplomats evacuated from North Korea," *NK News*, May 27, 2020. <https://www.nknews.org/2020/05/uk-embassy-in-pyongyang-closes-resident-diplomats-evacuated-from-north-korea/>.

NGOs operating in North Korea were unable to conduct humanitarian work from 2020 to 2023.<sup>29</sup> No humanitarian United Nations agency or private NGO has operated in the North since the spring of 2021.<sup>30</sup>

Besides quarantines, North Korea employed precautionary measures such as testing and masking. The Kim regime even obtained face masks to deal with the coronavirus challenge through smuggling operations. These masks went to disease control officials and the North Korean elite, meaning senior party officials and their families.<sup>31</sup> Regardless of this unequal distribution, North Korean citizens were threatened with three months of disciplinary labor for failing to wear their face masks.<sup>32</sup> Ironically, Kim Jong-un has not been shown in the North Korean media wearing a mask. This is because a mask would have made him look weak and vulnerable to the North Korean population, an intolerable development for a supreme leader projected to be the equal of a god. The regime also employed testing, especially in the face of imperfect quarantines. The Kim regime's tight security in Pyongyang is predictably not perfect. A soldier stationed near the East Coast abandoned his post and illegally entered Pyongyang to be with family. He was immediately taken to a hospital to test for the coronavirus, a solid indicator of the regime's fear of the virus spreading in Pyongyang.<sup>33</sup>



*Figure 8, Kim Jong-un regards himself as exempt from wearing a mask while demanding all those around him to wear one, including all his top aides. Source: Hyung-Jin Kim "Kim, other N. Koreans attend large funeral amid COVID worry" Seattle Times, May 23, 2022. <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/kim-other-n-koreans-attend-large-funeral-amid-covid-worry/>*

<sup>29</sup> Ifang Bremer, "NGO's lament North Korea's reluctance to accept aid despite humanitarian problems," *NK News*, November 20, 2023.

<https://www.nknews.org/2023/11/ngos-lament-north-koreas-reluctance-to-accept-aid-despite-humanitarian-problems/?utm>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Mun Dong Hui, "N. Korea is acquiring face masks via official smuggling operations," *Daily NK*, March 13, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-acquiring-face-masks-official-smuggling-operations/>.

<sup>32</sup> Sewon Kim, "Hard Labor For North Koreans Who Don't Wear Masks Under Tough New Coronavirus Measures," *Radio Free Asia*, July 18, 2020. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/coronavirus-07162020220021.html?searchterm=utf8:ustring=%20Korea>.

<sup>33</sup> Jeong Tae Joo, "Soldier arrested after sneaking past Pyongyang's tight security," *Daily NK*, August 11, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/soldier-arrested-after-sneaking-past-pyongyangs-tight-security/>

## Covid Information in North Korea: A Paradox

The regime released limited information on Covid-19 and preventative measures. However, the country was still plagued by issues of asymmetric information access and conflicting reports. The Kim regime employed one of its two primary domestic information services<sup>34</sup> to urge popular compliance with regime directives and policies relative to combating the spread of the coronavirus. The *Rodong Sinmun* published a directive to observe “high-level alertness and tight border control to ward off the new coronavirus.” This came soon after a KWP Politburo meeting that called for “strict national countermeasures to thoroughly check the infiltration of the virus.”<sup>35</sup> Korea Central Television, the main TV broadcast in North Korea, showed news stories that provided details on treatment, virus spread venues, and interviews with health officials.<sup>36</sup> In May 2020, North Korean authorities disseminated copies of a document entitled ‘Let’s Thoroughly Prevent the Spread of the Novel Coronavirus’ to instruct citizens on how to prevent coronavirus infection. The instructions included how to properly wear a mask, properly prepare food, and how to spot symptoms associated with the viral infection.<sup>37</sup>

In April, *inminbanjang* (neighborhood chiefs) lectures informed local populations that there were coronavirus outbreaks in Pyongyang, South Hamgyeong Province, and South Hwanghae Province. However, lecturers insisted that North Korea had the world’s most sophisticated socialist healthcare system in the world, and that this would limit the spread of the virus.<sup>38</sup> All of this is contrary to national-level reporting that continued through May that there were no cases of the virus in North Korea.<sup>39</sup> Even speaking about the pandemic and sharing information was risky, as Bureau 10 of the MSS arrested individuals who discussed the coronavirus situation over the phone.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The other primary information distribution system is the neighborhood unit chief (*inminbanjang*), who distributes party propaganda and local people’s committee directives to citizens residing in the chief’s unit of responsibility (usually 10 to 40 households).

<sup>35</sup> *Yonhap News*, “N.K. paper urges high-level alertness, tight border control against pandemic,” April 17, 2020. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200417001200325?section=nk/nk>

<sup>36</sup> See YouTube video dated February 7, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUGMRhUO7NY>, account has been terminated

<sup>37</sup> Mi Jin Kang, “N. Korea distributes documents educating people about COVID-19,” *Daily NK*, May 26, 2020 <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-distributes-documents-educating-people-about-covid-19/>. Photograph of the document at the website.

<sup>38</sup> Jieun Kim, “Ruling Party Lecturers Admit COVID-19 is Spreading in North Korea, Contradicting Official Claims,” *Radio Free Asia*, April 17, 2020 <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/confirmed-coronavirus-04172020192920.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Jieun Kim, “Ruling Party Lecturers Admit COVID-19 is Spreading in North Korea, Contradicting Official Claims,” *Radio Free Asia*, April 17, 2020. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/confirmed-coronavirus-04172020192920.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Yuna Ha, “N. Koreans nabbed for sending mobile texts about the coronavirus,” *Daily NK*, February 11, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-koreans-nabbed-sending-mobile-texts-about-coronavirus/>.

The pandemic offered further propaganda opportunities for the regime. Propaganda sessions at the local level stated the U.S. was spreading the coronavirus by spraying items with the virus and sending them to North Korea.<sup>41</sup> Of course, this also ran contrary to previous Kim regime claims that there was no coronavirus in North Korea. At one point, North Korean authorities even suggested to the populace that eating kimchi would reduce their chances of coronavirus infection.<sup>42</sup> After two years of denying that there was a virus outbreak in the North, the Kim regime announced in the spring of 2022 that there were several cases of coronavirus infections in North Korea. The Kim regime blamed “alien things” from the South for bringing the coronavirus into North Korea.<sup>43</sup> The regime’s leading newspaper, the *Rodong Sinmun*, insisted in January 2023 that the regime’s top policy was its quarantine efforts against the coronavirus pandemic. This came amid preparations for a military parade on February 8, 2023, to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the KPA.<sup>44</sup>

### A Timeline of Major Government Action Against Covid-19

The Kim regime has held several decision-making meetings to parallel the above actions. Kim Jong-un chaired a dizzying round of high-level party meetings from mid-July to mid-August of 2020. Meetings included the KWP Central Military Committee, the KWP Politburo in July, the KWP Executive Policy Bureau meeting in early August, and a KWP Central Committee meeting in mid-August.<sup>45</sup> This frequency of high-level KWP meetings is quite rare. Considering the extreme circumstances, Kim Jong-un found it critical to deal with what amounted to the greatest threat North Korea had faced during his rule. The KWP instructed its leading organizations to press the people to comply with strict adherence to coronavirus countermeasures nationwide. Though local KWP committees, local state people’s committees, media, and institutions had little to combat the coronavirus pandemic scientifically, these organizations are

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<sup>41</sup> Holly Fleet, “North Korea accuses US of ‘spraying coronavirus’ on items being sent into country,” *Express*, May 5, 2020. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1277859/north-korea-news-US-spraying-coronavirus-south-korea-kim-jong-un-health-world-war-3>

<sup>42</sup> Dong Hui Mun, “Sources: N.Korea suggests kimchi to prevent COVID-19,” *Daily NK*, April 8, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/sources-north-korea-suggests-kimchi-prevent-covid-19/>.

<sup>43</sup> Chloe Sang-Hun, “North Korea Suggests ‘Alien Things’ From the South Brought Covid.” *The New York Times*, July 1, 2022, sec. World. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/01/world/asia/north-korea-covid-balloons.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Soo-yeon Kim, “N.Korea urges antiviral efforts amid apparent preparations for military parade,” *en.yna.co.kr*, January 26, 2023. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230126001351325?section=nk/nk>.

<sup>45</sup> *38 North*, “Highlights of North Korea’s Latest Party Meetings: Setting a New Agenda,” *38 North*, August 21, 2020. <https://www.38north.org/2020/08/nkpartymeetings082120/>.

quite adept at compelling the populace physically. Restricting movement is an expertise where few countries can match North Korea.

In May 2020, the Kim regime instituted a “national emergency disease control system” to maintain suppression of the coronavirus.<sup>46</sup> The Kim regime’s State Emergency Anti-Epidemic Command announced that the coronavirus pandemic could become critical in the following June or July.<sup>47</sup>

Demonstrating his frustration with his regime’s lack of progress in dealing with the coronavirus, Kim Jong-un fired several senior health officials at a July 2, 2020 meeting of the KWP Politburo. The fired officials oversaw quarantine procedures in the city of Sinuiju and the nearby county of Ryongcheon, both along the primary economic route from China to North Korea and Pyongyang. Health officials in charge of similar efforts in Pyongyang were also dismissed.<sup>48</sup> Kim Jong-un accused quarantine workers of “chronic idleness.”<sup>49</sup> Kim also demoted four-star General Jeong Gyeong-taek, Minister of State Security, to three-star for his poor performance in dealing with border crossings along the China-North Korea border during the crisis.<sup>50</sup>

On August 13, at the KWP seventh Central Committee’s fourth meeting of the Executive Policy Bureau, the KWP Politburo re-designated the Central Emergency Quarantine Command as the Central Emergency Quarantine Headquarters (CEQH) and established it as a military unit directly commanded by Kim Jong-un and governed by military law. CEQH units at the provincial level were organized as military units. At the county level, they were organized as brigades. Additionally, Kim Jong-un established the Organization Administrative Department (OAD), which politically controls North Korea’s legal, police, and security agencies.<sup>51</sup> The KWP OAD is seemingly a replacement for the former KWP Administration Department that carried out the same responsibilities and was led by Kim Jong-un’s uncle, Jang Seong-taek (d. 2013).

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<sup>46</sup> Dong Hui Mun, “N.Korean soldiers face punishment after breaking quarantine,” *Daily NK*, June 1, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korean-soldiers-face-punishment-breaking-quarantine/>.

<sup>47</sup> So Yong Jong, “N.Korea warns that a major crisis point in the COVID-19 outbreak could come in June or July,” *Daily NK*, June 3, 2022. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-warns-major-crisis-point-covid-19-outbreak-could-come-june-july/>.

<sup>48</sup> Hyemin Son, “‘Virus Free’ North Korea Fires Health Officials for Quarantine Failures,” *Radio Free Asia*, July 7, 2020. URL: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/health-officials-sacked-07092020182306.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Sewon Kim, “Hard Labor For North Koreans Who Don’t Wear Masks Under Tough New Coronavirus Measures,” *Radio Free Asia*, July 18, 2020. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/coronavirus-07162020220021.html?searchterm=utf8:ustring=%20Korea>.

<sup>50</sup> Myong-song Kim, “N.Korean Spy Chief ‘Demoted’ for Quarantine Failure,” *Chosun Ilbo*, September 29, 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Kim Jae Ryong appointed head of new “Organization Administrative Department,” *Daily NK*, September 3, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/kim-jae-ryong-appointed-head-new-organization-administrative-department/>.



After having Jang executed in 2013, Kim Jong-un disbanded the KWP Administration Department and subordinated the legal, security, and police political oversight to the KWP OGD's seventh Section. The OAD was then led by former North Korean premier, Kim Jae-ryong, who would reportedly answer directly to Kim Yeo-jeong, the leader's sister. The timing of a new legal/security systems department was an effort to ensure the security of the regime, while facing the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic and resource shortages shaped by international sanctions.

In September 2023, North Korea opened its borders with China and Russia after closing them for three years and seven months due to the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>52</sup> On August 23, 2023, North Korea's Air Koryo flew its first flight out of the North since the 2020 border closure. Even though the Kim regime lifted visitor restrictions concerning the coronavirus, imports from China must remain at the border for a week before entering the North.<sup>53</sup> The photograph below, at the top of the next section, is one of many showing North Korean officials dealing with coronavirus issues while standing in front of a pandemic-related propaganda poster.

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<sup>52</sup> Jeong-woo Park, "북,국제기구 직원 복귀 '미적' 속 지원용품은 수령 (North Korea, amid reopening, receives humanitarian aid despite 'minimal' return of international organization employees)," *Radio Free Asia*, September 29, 2023. [https://www.rfa.org/korean/in\\_focus/human\\_rights\\_defector/humanitarianaid-09292023153304.html](https://www.rfa.org/korean/in_focus/human_rights_defector/humanitarianaid-09292023153304.html).

<sup>53</sup> Colin Zwirko, "North Korea still isolating imports after easing visitor restrictions: Imagery," *NK News*, September 29, 2024. <https://www.nknews.org/pro/north-korea-still-isolating-imports-after-easing-visitor-restrictions-imagery/>.

## Section Three: Human Rights



Figure 9, Source: Liberty Korea Post News, May 24, 2022. <https://www.lkp.news/news/articleView.html?idxno=2040>

In addition to the economic woes suffered during the coronavirus pandemic, North Korean citizens were denied basic human rights protection by their government. Kim Jong-un prioritized the welfare of the elite and the development of nuclear weapons during the pandemic rather than the health and safety of his citizens.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the Kim regime consequently neglected fundamental sectors – namely, healthcare, food, and energy – which were needed by those living at the bottom of the socio-political spectrum of North Korean society.

### Healthcare

Hospitals were put in a precarious position during the pandemic, as most North Korean provinces and counties faced severe deficiencies in access to coal and firewood. Many hospitals

<sup>54</sup> Dave Maxwell, email exchange with the author, November 23, 2023.



were forced to send patients home if their symptoms were not severe enough because they did not have the energy facilities needed to properly take care of them. Furthermore, North Korean companies that supplied heating resources were unable to meet demand and transport those resources to the hospitals due to high vehicle fuel prices and limited supplies. Doctors at local hospitals were therefore forced to make their rounds visiting the homes of patients who needed care.<sup>55</sup> Kim Jong-un attacked hospitals for not doing enough on their end to manufacture medicines needed to help patients, even though the government does not provide these hospitals with the resources they need to produce these medicines in the first place.

The systemic neglect of North Korean hospitals, staff members, and patients is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, the decline in healthcare infrastructure harkens back to the extreme famine that took place in the mid-1990s, also known as the “arduous march.”<sup>56</sup> These issues continued well into the twenty-first century, as the regime failed to control the swine flu that swept through the country in late 2019 in what now seems like a prelude to the coronavirus public health crisis.

Even when citizens tried to be proactive about their healthcare during the pandemic, the Kim regime stood in the way of any progress. On November 26, 2022, the Kim regime ordered a heavy crackdown on ‘illegal medical activity’ per Kim Jong-un’s directive entitled “*Regarding the Phenomenon of Illegal Medical Activity*.” The ‘illegal’ activity in question was the importation of medicines from China, which only began because citizens did not have access to the medicines they needed in their own country. The KWP announced that anyone participating in this ‘illegal’ activity (i.e., unlicensed acupuncture and cupping) would be arrested and sent to forced labor brigades as punishment.<sup>57</sup>

The healthcare system in North Korea was and continues to be flawed, and the negligence of the North Korean government is largely to blame. According to Article 72 of the North Korean Constitution, “citizens shall have the right to receive free medical care, and persons who are no longer able to work due to old age, illness, or physical disability, and the old and children who do not have caretakers, shall have the right to receive material assistance. This right shall be

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<sup>55</sup> Ji-won Kang, “The country’s medical system continues its freefall into collapse, with hospitals sending patients back home due to lack of heating,” *Asia Press*, January 16, 2023. <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2023/01/society-economy/iryou/>.

<sup>56</sup> Donghui Mun, “N.Korea orders hospitals to manufacture their own medicines,” *Daily NK*, July 7, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-orders-hospitals-manufacture-their-own-medicines/>.

<sup>57</sup> Kang Ji-won and Jiro Ishimaru, “with the collapse of the medical system, Kim Jong-un orders crackdown on home remedies to treat illnesses...Why?,” *Asia Press*, January 18, 2023. <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2023/01/society-economy/torisimari/>.

guaranteed by free medical care, continuously expanding medical facilities that include hospitals and sanitariums, and the state social insurance and the social security system.” While these goals are admirable in theory, the Kim regime failed to resource the healthcare system to meet these lofty expectations.

To understand these shortcomings, it’s important to understand the inner workings of North Korea’s healthcare system. North Korea’s healthcare organization was originally designed to be run by the central government under KWP guidance. During the 1970s, North Korea’s healthcare system was effective and free of cost. However, beginning with the fall of international socialism in 1989, the resultant impact on the North Korean economy, and the party-state’s ability to resource the program, the effectiveness of healthcare services began to decline.

In Figure 10 below, the healthcare system is depicted. This figure emphasizes management of the healthcare system but also emphasizes core weaknesses such as a lack of resources and excessive dependence on traditional medicines.

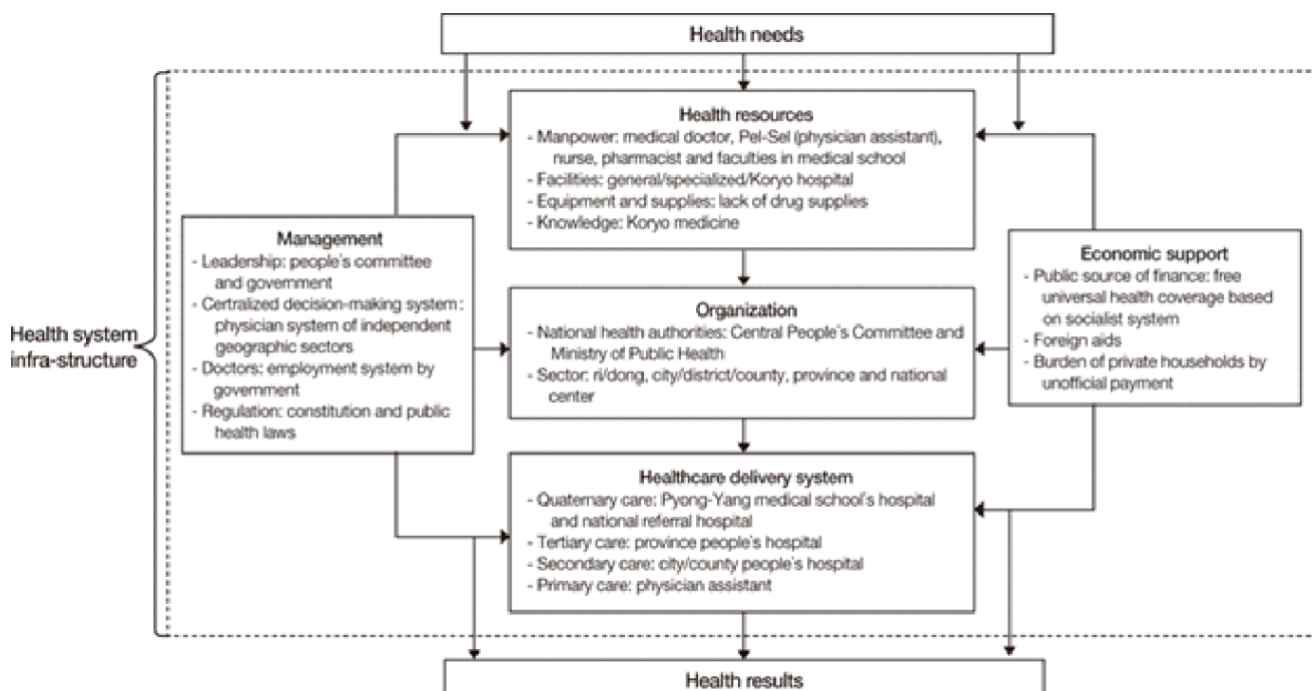


Figure 10, Source: Mijin Lee, PhD, Hannah Kim, MD, Danbi Cho, BS, and So Yoon Kim, MD, “Overview of healthcare system in North Korea,” *Journal of the Korean Medical Association*, 2013.

<https://jkma.org/journal/view.php?viewtype=pubreader&number=791#!po=40>

Figure 11 demonstrates how North Korea’s healthcare system is organized by treatment elements and how this supports regional health clinics. Of note, medical supplies and instruments

are emphasized in this organizational planning and implementation. It's also important to note that North Korea's elite class often circumvents this system to acquire better healthcare outside North Korea, thus impeding any possible leadership initiatives to support the general population.

Though the system appears well-organized on the surface, the figure deliberately highlights a lack of resources and a degree of dependency on Oriental (*Goryeouihak*) medicine in the system, though such medicine has little to no effect in treating communicable diseases, particularly the coronavirus. Furthermore, resourcing North Korea's healthcare system is severely restricted due to the Kim regime's financial priorities, designed to support North Korea's nuclear and missile programs over everything else.<sup>58</sup>

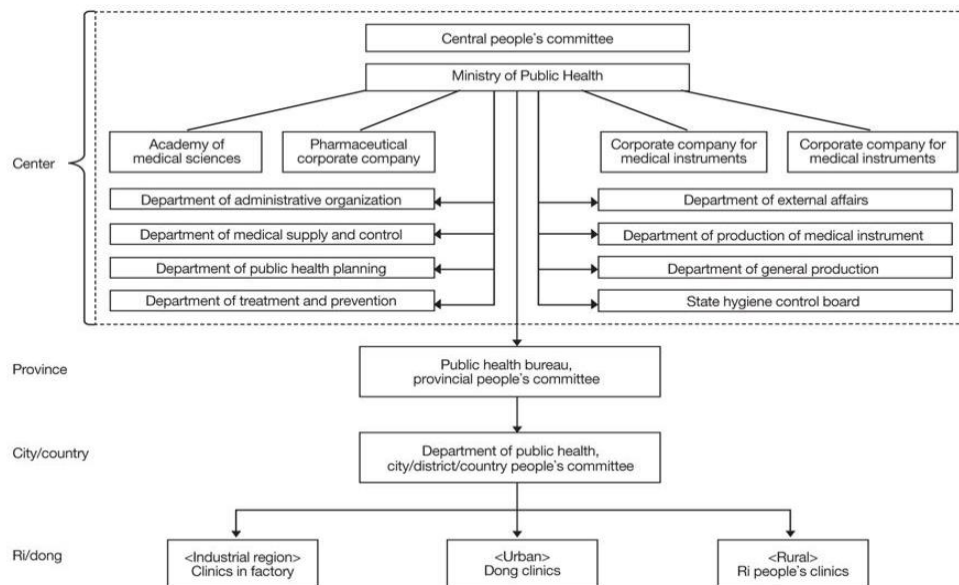


Figure 11, Source: Mijin Lee, PhD, Hannah Kim, MD, Danbi Cho, BS, and So Yoon Kim, MD, "Overview of healthcare system in North Korea," *Journal of the Korean Medical Association*, 2013. <https://jkma.org/journal/view.php?viewtype=pubreader&number=791#!po=40>.

There are four levels of health care in North Korea, as depicted in Figure 12. The basic level of primary care is emergency care clinics located at cooperative farms and factories at the village level. Above that, at the second level, are county hospitals which offer greater expertise. At the third level are provincial-level hospitals and university-level hospitals with greater

<sup>58</sup> Tae-il Shim, "Ask a North Korean: what is the healthcare system in the DPRK really like?," *NK News*, February 21, 2020. <https://www.nknews.org/2020/02/ask-a-north-korean-what-is-the-healthcare-system-in-the-dprk-really-like/>. See also Casey Lartigue Jr., "Is North Korea shooting COVID-19 patients?," *Korea Times*, April 12, 2020. <https://m.koreatimes.co.kr/pages/article.asp?newsIdx=287733>.

specialization, and at the highest level, there are central hospitals or specialty hospitals such as tuberculosis clinics. On average, most North Korean healthcare facilities had anywhere from

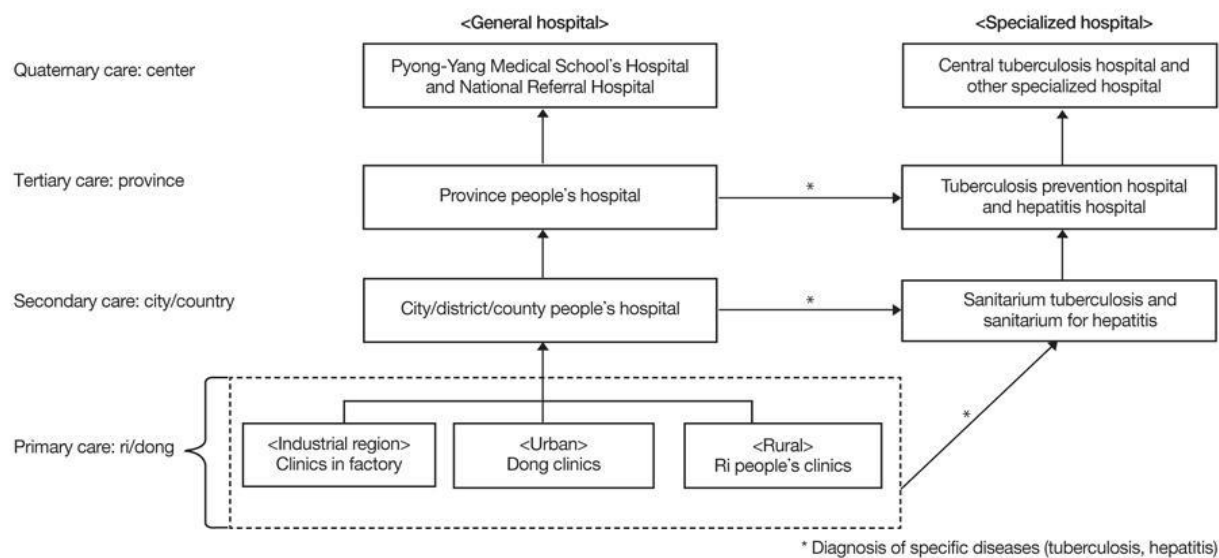


Figure 12, Source: Mijin Lee, PhD, Hannah Kim, MD, Danbi Cho, BS, and So Yoon Kim, MD, "Overview of healthcare system in North Korea," *Journal of the Korean Medical Association*, 2013. <https://jkma.org/journal/view.php?viewtype=pubreader&number=791#!po=40,9091>.

31,000 to 330,000 hospital beds and between 500 to 5,000 intensive care unit beds.<sup>59</sup>

However, what the chart does not reveal is the specialized care that the Kim regime elite receive at specific hospitals and clinics whose mission is to serve the upper classes of society. Some hospitals are available only to the elite of the Kim regime, establishing an unofficial fifth level. For the elite in Pyongyang, they are well served by the North's healthcare system. In Pyongyang, the No.11 Hospital, the Red Cross General Hospital, and the Kim Man-yu Hospital serve the upper classes. The core elite are served by the Namsan Hospital and Bonghwa Medical Office.<sup>60</sup> The Namsan Clinic is for vice ministers or higher, and some famous actors. The Bonghwa Clinic serves only members of the Kim Il-sung family line, as well as Party and government officials at the ministerial level or higher.<sup>61</sup> The best medical staff was concentrated in these specific facilities. For the remainder of the population, as one North Korean defector puts it, "how much money a patient has determines whether they live or die." If the elite official

<sup>59</sup> Kee Park, "The Impact of Coronavirus on North Korea," *United States Institute of Peace*, April 14, 2020. <https://www.usip.org/events/impact-coronavirus-north-korea>.

<sup>60</sup> Tae-il Shim, "Ask a North Korean: what is the healthcare system in the DPRK really like?," *NK News*, February 21, 2020. <https://www.nknews.org/2020/02/ask-a-north-korean-what-is-the-healthcare-system-in-the-dprk-really-like/>.

<sup>61</sup> Soo-am Kim, et al, "White Paper on North Korean Human Rights 2012," Korea Institute for National Unification, 2012; p.358-360. [http://www.kinu.or.kr/report/report\\_03\\_01.jsp](http://www.kinu.or.kr/report/report_03_01.jsp).

or family member is politically high-ranking enough, they can travel to countries with high-level medical systems as well if they deem it to be necessary.<sup>62</sup>

This system left most individuals in North Korean society vulnerable during the pandemic. Patients who were not a part of the elite had to buy their medicines, bandages, sedatives, and anything else required for their treatment.<sup>63</sup> According to a North Korean doctor who escaped to South Korea, most North Korean hospitals operated with outdated medical equipment, much of it dating back to the Kim Il-sung era. Doctor Choi Jung-hun, who graduated from Cheongjin Medical School, insisted that there were inadequate medicine supplies and a lack of training in distinguishing between the various types of viruses. Furthermore, he stated that only those who could provide doctors with some type of compensation would get local treatment, whether that is money, cigarettes, alcohol, or other desired compensation.<sup>64</sup>

U.S. State Department sanctions labeled “Kim Jong-un, the Korean Workers’ Party, banks, shipping companies, seagoing vessels, state agencies, and other individuals affiliated with the state’s security regime” only aggravated the situation.<sup>65</sup> The Kim regime shifted its focus and instead worked around United Nations sanctions to enhance its nuclear and missile program rather than spending those resources responsibly and finding a way to obtain the vaccine and secure resources to combat the virus.

The instances where North Korean scientists tried to conduct vaccine trials for the coronavirus were completely lackluster. Scientists of the Academy of Medical Science in North Korea were using angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 as the basis for their research.<sup>66</sup> North Korean scientists certainly have experience in working in biological research, given their extended history of developing potent biological weapons. Nonetheless, many North Korean medical scientists were unable to make any progress in developing a vaccine to counteract the spread of the virus.

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<sup>62</sup> Authors 2012 interview with North Korean physician.

<sup>63</sup> Tae-il Shim, “Ask a North Korean: what is the healthcare system in the DPRK really like?,” *NK News*, February 21, 2020. <https://www.nknews.org/2020/02/ask-a-north-korean-what-is-the-healthcare-system-in-the-dprk-really-like/>.

<sup>64</sup> Casey Lartigue Jr., “Is North Korea shooting COVID-19 patients?,” *Korea Times*, April 12, 2020. <https://m.koreatimes.co.kr/pages/article.asp?newsidx=287733>.

<sup>65</sup> Congressional Research Service, “North Korea: Legislative Basis for U.S. Economic Sanctions,” March 9, 2020; pp.2-3. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41438.pdf>.

<sup>66</sup> *Yonhap News*, “N. Korea claims it is developing coronavirus vaccine,” July 18, 2020. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200718000700320?section=news>.

The holes within the healthcare system, therefore, reflect the regime's deliberate failure to support the fundamental human rights of the North Korean citizen, including the right to health.<sup>67</sup> The Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security consequently ranked North Korea 193rd out of 195 countries in an index that assesses a given country's ability to handle a major disease outbreak. The Johns Hopkins Center even stated that North Korea had "nil" in the category of infection control practices and the availability of equipment."<sup>68</sup>

All these conditions persist despite North Korea's supposed international commitment to providing appropriate healthcare. Indeed, on September 14, 1981, North Korea signed the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR),<sup>69</sup> Article 12 of which states:

1. The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.
2. The steps to be taken by the States Parties to the present Covenant to achieve the full realization of this right shall include those necessary for:
  - (a) The provision for the reduction of the stillbirth rate and of infant mortality and for the healthy development of the child.
  - (b) The improvement of all aspects of environmental and industrial hygiene.
  - (c) The prevention, treatment, and control of epidemic, endemic, occupational, and other diseases.
  - (d) The creation of conditions that would ensure all medical services and medical attention in the event of sickness.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *United Nations Human Rights Council*, "Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," A/HRC/25/63, February 7, 2014, pp.10-11. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/co-idprk/reportofthe-commissionof-inquiry-dprk>

<sup>68</sup> Eunjung Cho, "Coronavirus Poses Major Threat to North Korea's Fragile Health System," *Voice of America*, April 14, 2020. <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/coronavirus-poses-major-threat-north-koreas-fragile-health>.

<sup>69</sup> The ICESCR was adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 2200A (XXI) of 16 December 1966, entry into force 3 January 1976, in accordance with article 27.

<sup>70</sup> *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights*, "International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights," Article 11, January 3, 1976. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>.



The Kim regime has yet to live up to any of these promises. External actors called attention to deficiencies within North Korea's healthcare system, as UNICEF once reported that the North Korean health system nationwide has neither the medicine nor the knowledge on how to treat malnutrition and childhood diseases.<sup>71</sup> Kim Jong-un even recognizes the shortcomings within the North Korean medical system. According to the *Rodong Sinmun*, Kim stated, "Frankly speaking, at our Party Plenary Meeting on the country's health and medical treatment sector, the current state of reality was thoroughly, scientifically, and honestly evaluated, and it pained my heart to criticize the fact that our country's capital does not have wholly modern medical treatment facilities."<sup>72</sup>

However, to its credit, the Kim regime made sure to prioritize fighting the coronavirus over the economy. The *Rodong Sinmun*, which always pushes the Party line, stated that fighting the coronavirus outbreak was more critical than the state's economic achievements.<sup>73</sup> This was a necessary conclusion as the virus began to spread rapidly throughout the country. According to a *Daily NK*<sup>74</sup> source, as of June 2020, 865 people were quarantined after showing symptoms of the virus. In 2020, North Korea's Central Emergency Disease Control Command stated there were 123 cases in Jagang Province, 77 in Ryanggang Province, 140 in North Hwaseong Province, 212 in North Pyeongan Province, 29 in Kangwon Province, 32 in South Hwanghae Province, 9 in North Hwanghae Province, 32 in Rason Special City, and 37 in Nampo City. According to *Daily NK* sources, there were no cases in Pyongyang as all such cases were immediately moved to the South Pyeongan Region.<sup>75</sup> The health woes continued as the pandemic wore, as there were 21 cases of "excessive fever during this time."<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, four North Korean doctors died in April 2020 of the coronavirus in Nampo at the North Korean Navy's West Sea Fleet Command's

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<sup>71</sup> Ifang Bremer, "North Korean clinics lack medicine and knowhow to treat childhood disease: UN," *NK News*, February 5 2024. <https://www.nknews.org/2024/02/north-korean-clinics-lack-medicine-and-knowhow-to-treat-childhood-disease-un/>.

<sup>72</sup> Colin Zwirko, "Kim Jong Un orders large new Pyongyang General Hospital to be built by October," *NK News*, March 17, 2020. <https://www.nknews.org/2020/03/kim-jong-un-orders-large-new-pyongyang-general-hospital-to-be-built-by-october/>.

<sup>73</sup> *Yonhap News*, "N.K.'s newspaper says anti-virus efforts more important than economic achievements," *Yonhap News*, July 10, 2020. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200710009700325?section=nk/nk>.

<sup>74</sup> "Special Report on North Korea: How is North Korea Dealing with Covid-19?" *Daily NK*, May 5, 2022. [https://www.dailynk.com/english/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/06/How-the-North-Korea-is-Dealing-with-COVID\\_FINAL.docx.pdf](https://www.dailynk.com/english/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/06/How-the-North-Korea-is-Dealing-with-COVID_FINAL.docx.pdf).

<sup>75</sup> Seul Gi Jang, "N. Korea has quarantined 865 suspected COVID-19 cases," *Daily NK*, June 12, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-quarantined-865-suspected-covid-19-cases/>.

<sup>76</sup> Dong Hui Mun, "Fever outbreak in Ryanggang Province sparks fears of COVID-19," *Daily NK*, May 4, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/fever-outbreak-ryanggang-province-sparks-fears-covid-19/>

Hospital.<sup>77</sup> Waterborne diseases such as cholera and typhus were also quite common during this period. Due to unsanitary conditions prevalent throughout the country, many North Korean citizens suffer from parasites.<sup>78</sup> These poor environmental conditions enabled the coronavirus to spread more rapidly and exacerbated the pre-existing humanitarian crisis at hand.

Between the rampant spread of the coronavirus and waterborne diseases, the number of patients and victims naturally grew. The Kim regime tried to downplay the severity of these issues; however, there are reports from the period that paint an accurate portrait of the ongoing disaster. As of late August 2020, North Korea had quarantined just over 30,000 citizens, a figure based on World Health Organization (WHO) reporting. The WHO also reported that all but 1,004 victims had been released.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, the WHO representative in North Korea explained that most quarantined citizens were from the Sinuiju area, which is the primary traffic route from China to North Korea.<sup>80</sup> There were even reports speculating that the coronavirus had spread to North Korea's infamous political prison camps.<sup>81</sup> An August 5, 2020, WHO report stated that 382 foreigners had been quarantined.<sup>82</sup>

In March 2020, Doctors Without Borders was approved by the UN Sanctions Committee on North Korea to send diagnostic equipment, including 13,700 euros worth of anti-infection and control supplies. The items provided to North Korea included medical glasses, cotton swabs, stethoscopes, and other major medical supplies needed to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This was in response to North Korea's Ministry of Health's request from Doctors Without Borders in early February 2020.<sup>83</sup> However, global financial contributions fell well short of desired goals. The United Nations' Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19 only amassed five

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<sup>77</sup> Jeong Tae Joo, "Four N. Korean military hospital doctors die from symptoms similar to COVID-19," *Daily NK*, April 13, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/four-north-korean-military-hospital-doctors-die-symptoms-similar-covid-19/>.

<sup>78</sup> Hye-kyung Lee, "Hygiene in Pyongyang," *JoongAng Ilbo*, Dec. 13, 2017. <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3042071>.

<sup>79</sup> Jeongmin Kim, "North Korea tested more than 2,700 people for COVID-19 – all results negative," *NK News*, August 27, 2020. <https://www.nknews.org/2020/08/north-korea-tested-more-than-2700-people-for-covid-19-all-results-negative/>.

<sup>80</sup> Jeongmin Kim, "North Korea has now tested 922 people for COVID-19: World Health Organization," *NK News*, June 30, 2020. <https://www.nknews.org/2020/06/north-korea-tested-922-people-so-far-for-covid-19-all-tested-negative-who/>.

<sup>81</sup> Seui Gi Jang, "Eleven Chongori prisoners die after suffering from respiratory issues," *Daily NK*, March 25, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/eleven-chongori-prisoners-die-after-suffering-from-respiratory-issues/>.

<sup>82</sup> Jeongmin Kim, "WHO: North Korea Tested Redefector for Covid-19 but Results are 'Inconclusive,'" *NK News*, August 5, 2020. <https://www.nknews.org/2020/08/who-confirms-north-korea-tested-redefector-for-covid-19-results-inconclusive/>.

<sup>83</sup> Hee-jung Yang, "MSF 'Delivery of Corona 19 aid to North Korea through Dandong,'" *Radio Free Asia*, March 12, 2020. URL: [https://www.rfa.org/korean/in\\_focus/coronakaid-03122020162354.html](https://www.rfa.org/korean/in_focus/coronakaid-03122020162354.html).



percent of its target funding for North Korean COVID-19 relief resources. In the plan, North Korea ranked near the bottom of financial aid efforts along with Tanzania, Uganda, and Benin.<sup>84</sup>

Based on an April 11, 2020, meeting, the KWP Politburo put out a “Joint Decision Statement” to the KWP Central Committee, the State Affairs Commission, and the government cabinet instructing them to strengthen all efforts related to the pandemic issue. During this meeting, the North Korean government passed a criminal code designed to punish those who did not perform their anti-epidemic work responsibly, as illustrated below:

#### **Article 203 (Negligence of anti-epidemic work)**

A person who performs his or her anti-epidemic task irresponsibly and thus causes a serious consequence shall be committed to discipline through labor of less than one year. In case the foregoing act constitutes a grave offence, he or she shall be committed to reform through labor of less than three years.

#### **Article 204 (Negligence of quarantine of border-crossing objects)**

A person who irresponsibly conducts quarantine of persons, goods, animals, or plants that cross the border and thus causes an epidemic or harmful insects to spread shall be committed to discipline through labor of less than one year. In case the foregoing act constitutes a grave offence, he or she shall be committed to reform through labor of less than two years.<sup>85</sup>

Should a future pandemic threaten the stability of the regime, Kim Jong-un’s own de-prioritization of resources to this system will haunt regime leadership and contribute to further instability moving forward.

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<sup>84</sup> So-hyun Kim, “UN says only 5% of funds to tackle COVID-19 in NK,” *Korea Herald*, September 1, 2020. <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200901000566>.

<sup>85</sup> David Hawk and Amanda Mortwedt, “The Parallel Gulag: North Korea’s “*An-jeon-bu*” Prison Camps, *HRNK*, 2017, p.112. [https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Hawk\\_The\\_Parallel\\_Gulag\\_Web.pdf](https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Hawk_The_Parallel_Gulag_Web.pdf).

## Food Insecurity

A ROK Ministry of Unification ten-year survey of 6,351 North Korean defectors found that food sources were extremely scarce during the pandemic.<sup>86</sup> The food insecurity crisis was largely based on the Kim regime's isolationist policy. The Kim regime closed its northern borders with Russia and China, restricting agricultural trade at a critical time. Furthermore, whenever a village member contracted the virus, Kim Jong-un isolated the village by restricting travel in and out of the area. The ostracization led to mass starvation among individuals in these villages, as they were cut off from regular food sources and deprived of affordable food options.<sup>87</sup> It is evident that the leadership understood the increasing food crisis, as Kim Jong-un publicly warned that North Korea was facing another "arduous march," reflecting the great famine of the mid-1990s.

The regime responded to this food crisis in all the wrong ways. Instead of finding ways to nourish its populace, the Kim Regime focused on securing loyalty and maintaining power. Government surveillance and crackdowns were ubiquitous during the pandemic. One defector even testified that citizens feared for their lives as individuals who violated laws were sent to labor camps as punishments or worse.<sup>88</sup>

The government also prioritized its nuclear program rather than addressing the food crisis. According to the *Chosun Ilbo*, a leading South Korean newspaper, intelligence authorities estimated in 2013 that North Korea had spent US\$2.8–US\$3.2 billion on its nuclear program. This amount of money would have been enough to buy 9.33–10.66 million tons of grain which could have fed the North Korean population for three years.<sup>89</sup>

Even though its actions suggest otherwise, the Kim regime is aware of the right to food. North Korea joined the United Nations and publicly (if only tacitly) acknowledged the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 25, which addresses the right to adequate food.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Jamin Anderson and Jeong Eun Lee, "Broad survey of escapees indicates worsening quality of life in North Korea," *Radio Free Asia*, February 8, 2024. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/survey-02082024192021.html>.

<sup>87</sup> Jean MacKenzie, "The North Korean family who risked execution to escape by boat," *BBC News*, December 5, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67610240>.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> "What Did N.Korea's Nuclear Program Cost?," *Chosun Ilbo*, February 13, 2013. [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2013/02/13/2013021301335.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2013/02/13/2013021301335.html).

<sup>90</sup> United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," 1948. <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/03/udhr.pdf>; as cited in Diletta De Luca, "The Arduous March and North Korea's Denial of the Right to Food," *hrnk.org*, September 14, 2023. <https://www.nkhiddengulag.org/blog/the-arduous-march-and-north-koreas-denial-of-the-right-to-food>.

Also, in 1981, the North Korean state also signed onto the 1966 ICESCR, which defined the right to food as “the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger.”<sup>91</sup>

Despite agreeing to these international conventions, Kim Jong-un used the food insecurity crisis to control the North Korean population. The regime elite and city dwellers often had access to food and supplies, but the same could not be said for those who lived in rural areas. Rural residents were unable to obtain food in their villages, and they were not able to move outside their villages to obtain needed survival items, particularly food.<sup>92</sup>

Kim Jong-un has been leveraging food security for regime loyalty for decades. Over the past thirty years, the Kim regime prioritized the nutritional needs of the upper classes over the lower classes via the regime’s established *songbun* social classification system.<sup>93</sup> The Kim regime’s exploitation of its citizens left them especially vulnerable to the coronavirus pandemic. Forty percent of the North Korean population did not have access to food.<sup>94</sup> Food insecurity was so severe that ten million North Koreans faced severe food shortages, as reported by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.<sup>95</sup>

The closure of the China-North Korea border also had a serious impact on food security due to interrupted agricultural resource exchange. During the pandemic, vinyl coverings that were used for creating greenhouse effect for farming became scarce as most of these coverings were imported from China. Without the vinyl, the farmers insisted they could not meet the quotas required by the government, thereby aggravating the food insecurity crisis.<sup>96</sup> Farming conditions were indeed so dire that North Korea extended the mandatory military service time for both men and women. Men had to serve 10-11 years and women had to serve eight years, so that soldiers could assist farmers in increasing crop outputs to stave off starvation.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> United Nations General Assembly, “International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,” Art. 11, para 2, 1966. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/cescr.pdf>; as cited in Diletta De Luca, “The Arduous March and North Korea’s Denial of the Right to Food,” *HRNK*, September 14, 2023. <https://www.nkhiddengulag.org/blog/the-arduous-march-and-north-koreas-denial-of-the-right-to-food>.

<sup>92</sup> Dong Hui Mun, “Restrictions on movement in North Korea are causing “severe side effects,” *Daily NK*, January 20, 2021. URL: <https://www.dailynk.com/english/restrictions-movement-north-korea-causing-severe-side-effects/>.

<sup>93</sup> Robert Collins, “Marked for Life: *Songbun*, North Korea’s Social Classification System,” *HRNK*, 2012. [https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK\\_Songbun\\_Web.pdf](https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK_Songbun_Web.pdf)

<sup>94</sup> World Food Program, “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) - FAO/WFP Joint Rapid Food Security Assessment,” May 2019. <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/b08bed4d-75d3-4dfe-8ef1-ce806bc11229/content>

<sup>95</sup> *KBS World*, “FAO Warns of Acute Food Shortage in N. Korea due to COVID-19,” July 18, 2020. [http://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news\\_view.htm?lang=e&Seq\\_Code=154937](http://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news_view.htm?lang=e&Seq_Code=154937).

<sup>96</sup> Kang Mi Jin, “N. Korea’s collective farms face difficulties obtaining needed supplies,” *Daily NK*, May 28, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-collective-farms-face-difficulties-obtaining-needed-supplies/>.

<sup>97</sup> Jieun Kim, “Where else in the world is there this kind of slavery?,” *Radio Free Asia*, March 10, 2023. [https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/military\\_service-03102023183528.html](https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/military_service-03102023183528.html).

The border closures not only impacted agricultural resource acquisition, closing the borders with China made it difficult for North Korea to import grains.<sup>98</sup> The Kim regime tried to assuage the issue, even limiting the number of people who lived in Pyongyang through national police efforts to evict anyone unauthorized to live in the capital city.<sup>99</sup> The Kim regime also tried to mobilize housewives at one point to help increase agricultural production. Nonetheless, all such efforts proved futile as citizens in Pyongyang were left without food supplies for three months.<sup>100</sup> People in Pyongyang had to sell some of their goods to buy food at “grasshopper markets” from four in the morning to seven. The United Nations’ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated that 10.4 million North Koreans (40% of the population) desperately needed nutritional support, with children being the most threatened.<sup>101</sup> Even pre-coronavirus pandemic, in a report highlighting poor rainfall in 2019, the United Nations’ World Meteorological Organization reported that up to forty percent (ten million) of the North Korean population urgently needed food assistance due to poor food production.<sup>102</sup>

In 2020, the annual summer monsoon season made the situation even worse. North Korea’s *Korean Central News Agency* reported on August 16, 2020, that Kim Jong-un had delved into his private food supply to help feed the people during the monsoon floods that destroyed large portions of the agricultural sector. Thae Yong-ho, a high-ranking diplomat defector from North Korea who served in the South Korean National Assembly, insisted this was cause for worry because such food is only meant for wartime. He insisted that such an emergency action indicates the food crisis in North Korea was extremely severe.<sup>103</sup>

In addition to using his own food supply, Kim Jong-un turned to force to deal with the food insecurity issues at hand. The 2023 public execution in Hyesan of nine people who were accused of running a beef smuggling ring serves as a prime example. Approximately 25,000 residents

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<sup>98</sup> He-suk Choi, “COVID-19 worsening food shortage in North Korea: Unification Ministry,” *Korea Herald*, May 19, 2020. <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200519000733>.

<sup>99</sup> Jang Seul Gi, “N.Koreans in Pyongyang face three months without rations,” *Daily NK*, June 15, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-koreans-pyongyang-face-three-months-without-rations/>.

<sup>100</sup> Mi Jin Kang, “N. Korea’s women are called on to support farming activities,” *Daily NK*, June 11, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-women-called-on-support-farming-activities/>.

<sup>101</sup> OCHA Services, “DPR Korea Needs and Priorities 2020,” April 22, 2020. URL: <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-peoples-republic-korea/dpr-korea-needs-and-priorities-2020-issued-april-2020>.

<sup>102</sup> *Yonhap News*, “10 mln N. Koreans in urgent need of food assistance: U.N. report,” March 12, 2020. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200312001100325?section=nk/nk>.

<sup>103</sup> David Choi, “North Korea’s leader is tapping his own private food reserve to feed the country, and it could be a worrying sign,” *Business Insider*, August 17, 2020. <https://www.businessinsider.com/north-korea-private-reserve-of-food-to-feed-people-2020-8>.

were compelled to watch the execution by firing squad, which emphasized the Kim regime's policies of rule by fear.<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, the Kim regime prioritized the production of nuclear weapons rather than the production of food, which intensified the crisis. The ROK's Korean Institute for Defense Analysis has estimated the Kim regime has spent \$560 million on ballistic missile launches – short-range, intermediate-range, and intercontinental-range in 2022, yet the North Korean population needed \$417 million of food to be properly fed and to avoid general malnutrition.<sup>105</sup>

### Malnourishment

Even before the pandemic, North Korean citizens suffered from malnourishment. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, approximately 12.2 million North Koreans were malnourished during the period 2017-2019.<sup>106</sup> That was nearly half of the North's population. Only seven percent of North Korean households had an acceptable diet.<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, protein-nourishing products were so insufficient that 80 percent of North Koreans were increasingly malnourished, suffering from an insufficient protein intake below the estimated average requirement based on their body weight. The core class, which numbers approximately 22,000 or about 0.1 percent of the population, as assessed by the ROK, was adequately fed.<sup>108</sup>

North Korean children especially suffered from malnutrition. According to Tapan Mishra, former United Nations Resident Coordinator in the DPRK, 43 percent of all North Koreans are malnourished and “one in five children stunted due to chronic undernutrition.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Jieun Kim, “Korea publicly executes 9 people for running beef smuggling ring,” *Radio Free Asia*, September 5, 2023. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/beef-09052023141651.html>.loc

<sup>105</sup> Michael Lee, Jeong Jin-Woo, Chung Yeong-Gyo, “North Korea spends money it needs for food on missiles,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, December 12, 2022. <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2022/12/12/national/northKorea/Korea-North-Korea-food-insecurity/20221212190148616.html>.

<sup>106</sup> United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, “The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World,” 2020. <http://www.fao.org/publications/sofi>.

<sup>107</sup> Based on World Food Program analysis. World Food Program, “Democratic People's Republic Of Korea (DPRK) - FAO/WFP Joint Rapid Food Security Assessment,” May 2019. <https://www.wfp.org/publications/democratic-peoples-republic-korea-dprk-faowfp-joint-rapid-food-security-assessment>.

<sup>108</sup> Jo Hyon, “What N. Korea needs to do in 2024 to solve its food shortages,” *Daily NK*, January 15, 2024. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/what-north-korea-needs-do-2024-solve-food-shortages/#:~:text=With%20a%20North>

<sup>109</sup> Edith M. Lederer, “Over 43 per cent of North Koreans are malnourished: UN report,” Associated Press, March 7, 2019. <https://globalnews.ca/news/5029484/north-korea-malnutrition-food-insecurity-un/>.

More recently, North Korea was identified by the United Nations' report entitled "2022 *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World*" as one of the world's most malnourished countries, with 41.6 percent of the population being malnourished.<sup>110</sup> During the coronavirus pandemic, 10.7 million North Koreans, 41% of the state's population, were either very hungry or malnourished, according to a United Nations report.<sup>111</sup>

Malnutrition was also pointedly obvious during the recent anniversary of the KWP's founding. The KWP Central Committee mandated that regional party committees recruit senior high school students and recently deactivated soldiers to work on projects important to the KWP. However, the recruitment effort ultimately failed as the committee denied 7,000 volunteers from participating because they were in "poor health."<sup>112</sup>

Many North Korean families tried everything in their power to feed their families. Some North Korean citizens created small plots of land on hills outside the jurisdiction of the North Korean state's Provincial Rural Economy Committee and the National Land Inspection Bureau, which controlled land status. The Kim regime shut these efforts down immediately, however, denying many people the emergency actions they needed for survival in an egregious violation of the basic human right to food.<sup>113</sup>

## Human Rights

"What we've seen is that the human rights situation in North Korea has worsened," Julie Turner, the former U.S. State Department's special envoy on the country's human rights issues, told reporters during a visit to Tokyo. "Covid-19 allowed the North Korean government to tighten many of the controls inside North Korea," she said.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (SOFI) Report - 2022*, July 7, 2022. [https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000140990/download/?\\_ga=2.166537143.822104784.1671276365-431266521.1671276365](https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000140990/download/?_ga=2.166537143.822104784.1671276365-431266521.1671276365); as cited in Diletta De Luca, "The Arduous March and North Korea's Denial of the Right to Food," *HRNK*, September 14, 2023. <https://www.nkhiddengulag.org/blog/the-arduous-march-and-north-koreas-denial-of-the-right-to-food>.

<sup>111</sup> Ifang Bremer, "41% of North Koreans face malnourishment during pandemic: Report," *NK News*, July 8, 2022. <https://www.nknews.org/2022/07/41-of-north-koreans-face-malnourishment-during-pandemic-report/>.

<sup>112</sup> Jang Seui Gi, "N.Korea dials up recruitment drive for construction workers," *Daily NK*, July 1, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-dials-up-recruitment-drive-construction-workers/>.

<sup>113</sup> Jeon Sung-jun and Kang Ji-won, "Government confiscates private plots of farmland and forces people to return farming," *Asia Press*, April 16, 2024. <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2024/04/society-economy/privateplots/>.

<sup>114</sup> John Herskovitz, "North Korea is Sending Workers Abroad Again Amid fresh Crackdown on Human Rights," *Time*, February 14, 2024. <https://time.com/6695185/north-korea-workers-abroad-human-rights/>.

When the United Nations Security Council held a meeting in August 2023 to address human rights abuses in North Korea, Kim regime officials publicly declared the action as "a violent infringement upon its dignity and sovereignty."<sup>115</sup>

## Indoctrination

During the coronavirus pandemic, the Kim regime enforced political loyalty even more strongly. Beginning in pre-school, young children studied *Juche* ideology and its components – the Ten Principles of Monolithic Ideology, the Monolithic Guidance System, and the Monolithic Ideology System. In that vein, a North Korean source reported that the KWP Propaganda and Agitation Department instructed local party committees to monitor trends by the younger generations relative to their loyalty to the KWP. The KWP insisted that North Koreans must defend regime norms based on prescribed “ethical values.”<sup>116</sup> The regime also emphasized that citizens should sacrifice their lives to defend norms that embody “ethical values” and loyalty to the regime, even in the face of a national pandemic.

## Information Control

The KWP PAD dominates all information releases and conforms to supreme leader and KWP Politburo strategies as to how to shape the domestic and external information environments. A North Korean source has reported that the KWP PAD instructed local party committees to monitor local trends affecting the younger generations relative to their loyalty to the KWP.<sup>117</sup>

Because the coronavirus pandemic led to the Kim regime closing its borders with China and Russia, thus further restricting outside information access, individual North Koreans took more concentrated yet risky actions to obtain outside information. To crack down on North Korean citizens accessing foreign information and “anti-socialist” videos, the Kim regime confiscated unregistered laptops and tablets. If caught in possession of one of these, the North Korean citizen was treated as if he/she were a spy. Each neighborhood watch unit warned residents that they

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<sup>115</sup> Kim Eun-jung, “Pyongyang opposes UNSC meeting on N. Korea’s human rights,” *Yonhap News*, August 15, 2023. [https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230815004800315#:~:text=SEOUL%2C%20Aug.%2015%20\(Yonhap,upon%20its%20dignity%20and%20sovereignty.%22](https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230815004800315#:~:text=SEOUL%2C%20Aug.%2015%20(Yonhap,upon%20its%20dignity%20and%20sovereignty.%22)

<sup>116</sup> Hyon Jo, “N.Korea’s monitoring of political tendencies won’t work,” *Daily NK*, May 9, 2024. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-monitoring-political-tendencies-wont-work/>

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.



must officially register their computer or laptop, and not to do so will result in punishment, even execution.<sup>118</sup> North Korea's Gwangmyeong software enables the state to monitor all who access the North's intranet.<sup>119</sup>

To punish North Koreans for distributing self-made videos on cell phones and computers, the Kim regime instituted the "April 27 Directive." The directive intended to suppress the making and distribution of videos that are deemed non-socialist and unapproved by the state. Examples are videos demonstrating how to date and how to kiss. Other examples are how to use honorifics when speaking to others.<sup>120</sup>

## Population Control

The coronavirus pandemic enabled the Kim regime to intensify all the population control measures that were currently in place at the start of the pandemic up through today. These measures – legislation, policing policies, and political policies – focused on social classification, culture, language, education, travel, communications, and foreign access.

### Songbun

Every North Korean citizen is categorized socially based on family history, beginning on August 15, 1945, the time of Korean liberation from Japanese occupation. This impacts everyone's quality of life, including housing, nutrition, education, residence location, employment, and opportunity.<sup>121</sup>

### Culture

The Kim regime has banned North Korean citizens from smuggling, viewing, and distributing "reactionary" and "anti-socialist ideology and culture" materials. In December 2020, North Korea's SPA, presumably with direction from the KWP, passed the Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Law. This law was designed to enable investigations of listening to, recording, distributing, or promoting foreign broadcasts or foreign printed materials. Punishment

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<sup>118</sup> Seonghwi Moon, "North Korea cracks down on unregistered laptops and tablets," *Radio Free Asia*, November 20, 2023. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/laptop-11202023164619.html>.

<sup>119</sup> Hyemin Son, "North Korea requires cellphone users to install invasive surveillance app," *Radio Free Asia*, July 8, 2022. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/app-07082022150535.html>

<sup>120</sup> Jeon Sung-jun and Kang Ji-won, "Crackdowns aren't focused just on the "South Wave" anymore...Hands down the "April 27 Directive" to intensify crackdowns on the form of videos made by domestic individuals," *Asia Press*, May 23, 2024. <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2024/05/society-economy/domestic-video/>.

<sup>121</sup> Robert Collins, "Marked for Life: *Songbun*, North Korea's Social Classification System," *HRNK*, 2012. [https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK\\_Songbun\\_Web.pdf](https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK_Songbun_Web.pdf).

for such acts can be as severe as imprisonment in political prison camps or even execution. The Kim regime has held responsible the representatives working as propagandists and agitators in the KWP's PAD for ensuring North Koreans comply with the new legislation. A North Korean source has reported that the KWP PAD instructed local party committees to monitor local trends by the younger generations relative to their loyalty to the KWP.<sup>122</sup>

Being “non-socialist” or “anti-socialist” is against KWP and Kim regime policy through divorcing a spouse, watching a South Korean movie, having a birthday party, or even being unemployed. Over the years, the Kim regime has activated various working groups to hunt down and prosecute individuals and groups that contribute to “anti-socialist” behavior. Those officials – members of both party and security services – who manipulate North Korean law to their advantage are promoted based on the number of cases they investigate whether “justified” or not.<sup>123</sup>

### Language

North Korea's SPA passed the Pyongyang Cultural Language Protection Act in early 2023. This law is designed to control the verbiage used by each North Korean through eliminating foreign influence, particularly that of South Korea. The Kim regime's primary propaganda and information platform, the *Rodong Sinmun*, reported that parents must play a key role in educating their children on the correct language usage. “Mothers play a very important role in making sure that children properly maintain our linguistic culture. All women with children must become intimate supporters and strict educators for their children's linguistic lives and guide their children from a young age to properly nurture the unique and special qualities of our language.” Even KWP workers were highly encouraged to adhere to the language standards.<sup>124</sup>

North Koreans are prevented from using South Korean slang at the risk of severe punishment. A common phrase from the South is the term “fighting,” which in South Korea

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<sup>122</sup> Hyon Jo, “N.Korea's monitoring of political tendencies won't work,” *Daily NK*, May 9, 2024. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-monitoring-political-tendencies-wont-work/>.

<sup>123</sup> Min-ho Jong, “North Korea intensifies war against South Korean culture,” *Korea Times*, January 199, 2023. [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/01/103\\_343943.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/01/103_343943.html).

<sup>124</sup> Han-bin Choi, “North Korea emphasizes use of Pyongyang Cultural Language through state-run media,” *Daily NK*, June 26, 2023. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-emphasizes-use-pyongyang-cultural-language-through-state-run-media/>.

means “hang in there.” North Korean police randomly check civilian cell phones to find such slang from the South.<sup>125</sup>

### Education

The government enacted the Youth Education Guarantee Law in September 2021, which banned young people from copying foreign culture and reoriented them to a “socialist lifestyle.” Within this lifestyle, public executions of offenders were permitted, which increased a sense of fear and alarm among the population.<sup>126</sup>

### Travel

On July 6, 2020, the Ministry of Social Security (North Korea’s national police renamed from the Ministry of Public Security in May 2020) announced that family members of inmates in forced labor camps could bring food and other essentials to the prisoners. Those families were able to meet the prisoners during the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>127</sup> Given the record of prisoner guards’ manipulation of prisoners, it is unlikely that the prisoners got more than a small percentage of whatever had been brought.<sup>128</sup> It is most likely that the announcement was designed to support the prison guards and administrators.

The Kim regime made travel across the northern borders much more dangerous for those wanting to leave North Korea – the perils include death, family consequences, and/or imprisonment.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Hyemin Son, “No more “fighting” texts in North Korea,” *Radio Free Asia*, December 4, 2023. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/fighting-12042023164137.html>.

<sup>126</sup> Dong Hui Mun, “North Korean young people stupefied by strong punishments in ‘Youth Education Guarantee Act’,” *Daily NK*, February 17, 2022. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korean-young-people-stupefied-strong-punishments-youth-education-guarantee-act/>.

<sup>127</sup> Yuna Ha, “N.Korea permits families to visit imprisoned relatives,” *Daily NK*, July 20, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-permits-families-visit-imprisoned-relatives/>.

<sup>128</sup> Robert Collins and Amanda Mortwedt Oh, “Cradle to Grave: The Path of North Korean Innocents,” *Committee for Human Rights in North Korea*, 2017; pp38-44. [https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Collins\\_Cradle\\_to\\_Grave\\_WEB\\_FINALFINAL.pdf](https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Collins_Cradle_to_Grave_WEB_FINALFINAL.pdf).

<sup>129</sup> Kang Ji-won and Jiro Ishimaru, “Authorities threaten defectors with firing squads and imprisonment at neighborhood watch unit meetings...Massive search launched to find suspected defector,” *Asia Press*, February 2, 2024. <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2024/02/society-economy/escape/>.

## Housing

The quality and location of individual housing was controlled by Kim regime policies designed to favor the elite and disadvantage those considered disloyal to the regime based on an individual's *songbun*, policy obedience, and criminal history. (The ROK Korea Institute for Defense Analyses estimates the regime elite to be about 65,000 personnel.)<sup>130</sup> This was exacerbated by the pandemic, as the elites were always prioritized at the expense of lower socio-economic classes.

## Energy insecurity

North Koreans cannot get enough electricity to support the drastic needs they experience in their homes. Some have tapped into factory electric lines by bribing factory officials for access. Those that are caught are immediately sent to labor camps.<sup>131</sup>

People in northern North Korea are so cold that they are stealing anything they can burn to keep warm. In one incident, someone had their outdoor toilet's wooden door stolen.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Michael Lee, "Kim Jong-un spends \$1.82 billion per year on elite perks, report says," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, May 1, 2024. <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2024-05-01/national/northKorea/Kim-Jongun-spends-182-billion-per-year-on-elite-perks-report-says/2037774>.

<sup>131</sup> Chang Gyu Ahn, "North Korea cracks down on theft of electricity meant for industry," *Radio Free Asia*, January 26, 2024. <https://www.nknews.org/2022/12/explainer-how-north-korea-is-developing-drones-into-weapons-of-war/>.

<sup>132</sup> Chae Un Lee, "People facing bitter cold in Hyesan steal anything that burns to keep warm," *Daily NK*, January 11, 2024. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/people-facing-bitter-cold-hyesan-steal-anything-burns-keep-warm/>.

## Section Four: Economy



Figure 13 4, Source: Naver, May 25, 2022. <https://n.news.naver.com/mnews/article/081/0003275448>. Graphic states, “Maximum emergency quarantine system, absolute compliance,” and “Are you following the emergency quarantine regulations?”<sup>133134</sup>

As detailed by Nicholas Eberstadt, one of the world’s foremost demographers, North Korea displays the worst economic performance in the world.<sup>135</sup> The coronavirus pandemic crippled the North Korean economic system, just as it did to many other countries. The difference is that the North Korean economy was already facing server stagnation. According to the Bank of Korea, North Korea’s economy shrank by 4.5 percent in 2020, the worst since the great famine of the mid-1990s.<sup>136</sup> In comparison, in 2017, the North Korean economy shrank by 3.5 percent and in

<sup>133</sup> Julian Ryall, “What’s behind North Korea’s increasing belligerence?” *DW*, January 8, 2024.

<https://www.dw.com/en/north-korea-whats-behind-pyongyangs-rising-belligerence/a-67918587>.

<sup>134</sup> Ellie Cook, “The End of North Korea,” *Newsweek*, January 27, 2024. <https://www.newsweek.com/north-korea-kim-jong-un-south-korea-nuclear-weapons-1863632>.

<sup>135</sup> Nicholas Eberstadt, “The Economics of a Korean Unification: Thinking the Unthinkable?,” *AEI*, December 27, 2023. <https://www.aei.org/research-products/speech/the-economics-of-a-korean-unification-thinking-the-unthinkable/>.

<sup>136</sup> Jon Herskovitz and Jeong-Ho Lee, “Kim Jong Un’s Erratic Behavior Shows North Korea is Stuck,” *Bloomberg*, June 24, 2020. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-24/kim-jong-un-s-erratic-behavior-shows-north-korea-is-stuck>.

2018 by 4.1 percent.<sup>137</sup> Furthermore, the Kim regime was limited in its ability to deal with the economic repercussions of the pandemic. Notably, North Korea has no relations with the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, or the International Monetary Fund. External assistance was out of the question, as the international sanctions remained in place.

North Korea's economy has suffered for decades under United Nations sanctions. The Kim regime has been employing "backdoor" methods to get around the international sanctions, to sustain itself. Whether manipulation of international and U.S. currency markets,<sup>138</sup> taking advantage of Chinese and Russian willingness to violate oil and coal sanctions on the high seas,<sup>139</sup> exportation of weapons and ammunition to Iran and Russia, or other forms of illicit activity primarily led by Office 39<sup>140</sup> of the KWP, the Kim regime has enabled the continuation of regime financial priorities, while practically ignoring the general population's welfare. Consistent with this, the North Korean government used its May 19, 2020 statement to the 73rd World Health Assembly regarding the coronavirus to clearly state its support for China and "urge" countries to stop unilateral sanctions.<sup>141</sup>

### Quarantines and the Economy

The pandemic and resulting quarantines deeply impacted the North Korean economy. Pyongyang announced that "all unnecessary imports" would be restricted until the end of 2020 as part of the North's efforts to combat the spread of the coronavirus.<sup>142</sup> On August 25, 2020, the KWP Central Committee issued an order to cease all foreign trade and smuggling activity for the purpose of completely shutting down the North Korea–China border.<sup>143</sup> This action was part of the overall coronavirus pandemic control effort. It was also meant to specifically prevent the

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<sup>137</sup> Choe Sang-hun, "In North Korea, Coronavirus Hurts Like No Sanctions Could," *New York Times*, July 4, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/04/world/asia/north-korea-sanctions-coronavirus.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

<sup>138</sup> Andrew W. Lehren and Dan De Luce, "Secret documents show how North Korea launders money through U.S. banks," *NBC News*, September 21, 2020. <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/09/20/secret-documents-show-how-north-korea-launders-money-through-us-banks.html?msockid=2e4981c7440f6579096e9515457364db>

<sup>139</sup> *Agence France-Presse*, "North Korea defies sanctions with China's help, UN panel says," *The Guardian*, April 18, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/18/north-korea-defies-sanctions-with-chinas-help-un-panel-says>.

<sup>140</sup> Office 39 is the Kim regime's primary organization to support the regime's "court economy," not supporting the general economy. It employs front companies, relationships with overseas crime syndicates, spying and general smuggling activities to bring in hundreds of millions of dollars for Kim Jong-un's personal fiscal priorities. See Wikipedia, "Room 39," August 31, 2020.

<sup>141</sup> General Statement Democratic People's Republic of Korea Seventy-Third World Health Assembly (Geneva, 18-19 May 2020). [https://apps.who.int/gb/statements/WHA73/PDF/Democratic\\_People's\\_Republic\\_of\\_Korea.pdf](https://apps.who.int/gb/statements/WHA73/PDF/Democratic_People's_Republic_of_Korea.pdf).

<sup>142</sup> Jeong Tae Joo, "N. Korea announces all 'trivial' imports restricted until end of the year," *Daily NK*, April 23, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/n-korea-announces-all-trivial-imports-restricted-until-end-year/>.

<sup>143</sup> Ha Yoon Ah, "N.Korea orders suspension of all trade across Sino-North Korean border," *Daily NK*, August 26, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-orders-suspension-all-trade-across-sino-north-korean-border/>.



spread of the virus during the October 10, 2020 celebration parade for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the KWP founding. As a result of closing the border with China on January 21, 2020, North Korea suffered devastating effects on its economy. While humanitarian exemptions were in place, existing sanctions aimed to eliminate foreign exchange earnings remained and, as a result, Chinese trade with North Korea declined 24 percent in January and February 2020.<sup>144</sup> During the first quarter of 2020, China's imports from North Korea declined by 79 percent while its exports to North Korea dropped by 53 percent. China's imports from North Korea during March 2020 amounted to only \$616,000, down 96 percent from the same period the previous year.<sup>145</sup> Given that China is North Korea's largest trading partner, these effects were profound.

Smaller quarantines further impacted various industries such as fishing and steel. North Korea's restrictions in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic had an immediate and lasting impact on the North's fishing industry as fishing vessels were severely restricted in areas of operation, ultimately impacting the price of fish and impairing the ability of the average citizen to afford fish.<sup>146</sup> At one point, North Korean authorities closed off the city of Cheongjin, the capital of North Hamgyeong Province, due to a coronavirus outbreak in two large factories in the city of 625,000 people. The Kim Chaek Iron and Steel Complex and the Second Metal Construction Complex there are major contributors to North Korea's economy; thus, their closure had a national economic impact and a severe impact on the food security of the factory workers and their families due to the resulting job insecurity and unemployment.<sup>147</sup> North Korean workers at all factories and enterprises were required on January 2, 2023, to bring carts full of scrap metal, as the steel plants, though operational, failed to meet the demand for steel products.<sup>148</sup> The quarantines further exacerbated the existing struggles these plants face.

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<sup>144</sup> Bradley Babson, "The North Korean Economy Under Sanctions and COVID-19," *38 North*, May 22, 2020. <https://www.38north.org/2020/05/bbabson052220/>.

<sup>145</sup> Troy Stangarone, "Pandemic's Impact on North Korea's Trade with China." *Korea Times*, May 26, 2020. [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2020/09/738\\_290121.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2020/09/738_290121.html).

<sup>146</sup> Ji-won Kang and Jiro Ishimaru, "How is the country's fishing industry doing? COVID and shrinking fishing grounds major problems...Kim regime's restrictions on fishing lead some fishermen to financial collapse," *Asia Press*, December 25, 2023. <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2023/12/society-economy/fisheries/>.

<sup>147</sup> Jieun Kim, "North Korean City of Chongjin on Lockdown After New COVID-19 Outbreak," *Radio Free Asia*, June 24, 2020. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/chongjin-06242020195325.html>.

<sup>148</sup> Chang Gyu Ahn, "North Koreans step up scrap metal collection to support struggling steel works," *Radio Free Asia*, January 5, 2023. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/steel-01052023190847.html>.



## Natural Disasters

Complicating North Korea's economic woes were a series of natural disasters, which hindered the Kim regime's strategy in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic. North Korea was hit heavily in August and early September 2020 by typhoons "Bavi," "Maysack" and "Haison," which caused significant damage to the North Korean countryside, particularly South Hamgyeong Province. This prompted Kim Jong-un to mobilize approximately 12,000 volunteers from the Pyongyang citizenry to aid in disaster response.<sup>149</sup> The damage from the three typhoons to the rice fields significantly decreased food supplies to the entire population. The *Korean Central News Agency* reported that at a Central Military Committee meeting held on September 8, "The Supreme Leader said that due to the unexpected damage by typhoon we are faced with the situation in which we cannot help but change the direction of our struggle after comprehensively considering the year-end [economic] tasks that were under way with the nationwide efforts."<sup>150</sup>

Even though severe floods from a monsoon led to severe damage in agricultural areas, Kim Jong-un prevented any aid from other countries. At a KWP Politburo meeting on August 14, 2020, Kim Jong-un stated that North Korea should not accept any outside flood aid due to the risk of importing coronavirus contamination. He also insisted on tighter border security.<sup>151</sup> Such restrictive measures ensured that international efforts to aid North Korea in its fight against the pandemic would be feeble at best, if not a total failure. Such failure would surely have threatened the stability of the Kim regime in ways the regime could not anticipate.

## Rural Struggles

North Koreans in rural areas most acutely felt the economic impacts of the pandemic. Reportedly, cows in North Korea were being better fed than farmers to increase agricultural production. North Korean cooperative farms normally employ 300-400 farmers in four to six work groups; each group divided into five or six teams. Three to six cows are raised by each team.<sup>152</sup> This means approximately three to six cows to be fed for every 15 North Korean farmers. Another indicator that the economy was bad in the countryside was that North Koreans

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<sup>149</sup> Koh Byung-joon, "N.K. leader holds party meeting to discuss typhoon damage at large mine area," *Yonhap News*, September 9, 2020. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200909000451325>

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Wonju Yi, "N.K. leader warns against accepting outside flood aid due to virus risk," August 14, 2020. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200814001652325>

<sup>152</sup> *Radio Free Asia*, "North Korean farmers question prioritization of 'cows over people,'" January 7, 2023. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/cows-12282022181455.html>.

were forced to bury deceased relatives in a nearby hill without a marker. For the rural North Korean, the costs of official burial or cremation were too high under the present economic conditions, but they cannot mark these places, as local government officials routinely hunt for “illegal” graves.<sup>153</sup>

The leadership does appear to understand the rural discrepancy. In his January 15, 2024 speech, Kim Jong-un stated that he would institute a “20x10 Policy for Rural Development,” aiming to bridge the economic gap between urban and rural areas and their citizenry. The local population is mobilized to build factories in 20 counties over the next ten years. They will be required to bring their own building supplies (such as shovels, pickaxes, crowbars, ropes) and will only be allocated food at their work site.<sup>154</sup> It remains to be seen how and if this program will rebuild the countryside.

### Reactions to Economic Difficulty

During the coronavirus pandemic, there were reports of ‘panic buying’ in Pyongyang of goods, particularly foreign-produced food.<sup>155</sup> North Korea has more than 400 black markets – *jangmadang* – that would facilitate such panic buying but are likely to maintain the highest potential for rapid spread of the coronavirus. Such panic buying would only apply to the elite in Pyongyang because they are the only ones who would have both information about the spread of coronavirus and enough money to do such hoarding. The average North Korean, including non-elite (over 90% of the population at the local level), would have neither sufficient information nor the funds to engage in “panic buying.” Even Kim Jong-un admitted that the North’s economy was in poor condition.<sup>156</sup> At a KWP conference on January 23-24, 2024, Kim publicly stated, “Today, failure to satisfactorily provide the people in local areas with basic living necessities including condiments, foodstuff and consumption goods has arisen as a serious political issue that our party and government can never sidestep.”<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Chang Kyu Ahn, “North Koreans secretly bury ancestors in unmarked graves to avoid funeral costs,” July 26, *Radio Free Asia*, 2022. [https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/unmarked\\_graves-07262022192238.html](https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/unmarked_graves-07262022192238.html)

<sup>154</sup> *Asia press*, “Preparation for construction mobilizations for Kim Jong-un’s “20x10 policy” are complete, but there’s already unrest and complaints among workers over supplies of food, March 4, 2024. <https://www.asiapress.org/rimjin-gang/2024/03/society-economy/ration/>.

<sup>155</sup> Chad O’Carroll, “North Koreans ‘panic buying’ at Pyongyang shops, sources say,” *NK News*, April 22, 2020. <https://www.nknews.org/2020/04/north-koreans-panic-buying-at-high-end-pyongyang-shops-sources-say/>.

<sup>156</sup> Lee Joeng-ho, “Kim Jong Un acknowledges dire state of the economy, urges action,” *Radio Free Asia*, January 24, 2024. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/nk-economy-warn-01242024213121.html>.

<sup>157</sup> Micah McCartney, “Kim Jong Un Warns North Korea Reaching Poverty Crisis,” *News Week* January 29, 2024. <https://www.newsweek.com/kim-jong-un-north-korea-food-shortage-poverty-crisis-1864691>.

## Overall Economic Impacts

The coronavirus impact on North Korea led to three consecutive years of negative growth in its gross domestic product. According to the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency, due to international sanctions, the coronavirus pandemic, and North Korea's voluntary closure of its border with China, North Korea's foreign trade fell 17.3 percent, its exports fell by 8.2 percent, and imports fell by 18.4 percent in 2021.<sup>158</sup> Negative growth in 2022 was -0.2 percent, -4.5 percent in 2021, and -0.1 percent in 2020. In 2022, North Korea's gross domestic product was 1/60<sup>th</sup> of that of South Korea. China accounts for 96.7 percent of all trade with the North.<sup>159</sup> That said, those statistical data do not consider the exportation of North Korean artillery shells, artillery pieces, ballistic missiles, and soldiers to Russia, which are a major source of hard currency procurement for the regime at the moment. Despite all the weaknesses these statistics indicate, North Korea's *Rodong Sinmun* continues to praise the North's economic accomplishments.

Besides the overall economic decline, there are a couple of longer term political and military effects caused by the economic struggles of covid. The North's poor economic conditions have driven more women to work in the economic sector. This has led to a lower birth rate of 1.38 children per woman.<sup>160</sup> A birthrate of 2.1 per woman is required to maintain a country's population level. This will have an obvious impact on the North's military strength in the future, particularly for a country with the highest population military service rate in the world. In the political realm, after the coronavirus outbreak, North Korea has closed its embassies in Senegal, Guinea, Angola, Nepal, Bangladesh, Spain and Uganda. Most North Korean embassies have severe economic problems even though making money is one the requirements levied on them by the Kim regime.<sup>161</sup> The closure of these embassies not only prevents them from serving as a future economic source for the Kim regime but also will have diplomatic implications for North Korea.

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<sup>158</sup> Yong-sop Kwak, "N.Korea trade sinks 17.3 pct in 2021 on sanctions, pandemic," *Yonhap News*, July 14, 2022. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20220714005900320>

<sup>159</sup> Suk-yeon Jung, "North Korean-South Korean Income Gap Reaches 30x Difference, Trade Disparity Soars to 892x Difference," *Business Korea*, December 21, 2023. <https://www.businesskorea.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=208274>.

<sup>160</sup> Kim Soo-yeon, "N.K.'s total fertility rate estimated at 1.38, far lower than U.N. estimate: BOK report," *Yonhap News*, December 29, 2023. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20231229005000315?section=nk/nk>.

<sup>161</sup> *Yonhap*, "N.Korea pulls out of Senegal, Guinea in series of embassy closures: official," *Yonhap News*, December 5, 2023. <https://m-en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20231205008000315>.

## Section Five: Military and Security



Figure 14, Source: Naver, August 28, 2021. <https://blog.naver.com/kimhs2769/222486772693>

The coronavirus pandemic exposed and worsened deep systemic flaws within North Korea's military, particularly its rigid 'control and command' structure, where corruption, loyalty-based decisions, and misinformation undermined effective response and decision-making. In early March 2020, there were reports of 180 North Korean soldiers stationed along the Chinese border dying of the coronavirus, while 3,700 were in quarantine.<sup>162</sup> North Korea's primary military strengths—its nuclear weapons and missile programs—are significantly undermined by the regime's reliance on a "control and command" system, as opposed to the more effective "command and control" model. This structure, plagued by corruption and falsified reporting, has long hindered sound military decision-making. The impact of the coronavirus pandemic further exposed these weaknesses, hitting the trust-based system harder than it would

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<sup>162</sup> Tae Joo Jeong, "Sources: Almost 200 soldiers have died from COVID-19," *Daily NK*, March 9, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/sources-almost-200-soldiers-have-died-covid-19/>.

have a conventional Western-style command structure. Within this system, perceived loyalty often dictated who received protection from the virus, rather than operational necessity or merit.

With an estimated 25–30% of North Korea’s GDP allocated to the military, the coronavirus pandemic poses a direct and immediate threat to the Korean People’s Army (KPA). The virus risks severely undermining force readiness by disrupting training, hindering logistical support, and causing widespread infections among personnel. No military could maintain operational effectiveness under such conditions. For the KPA, the threat is even more acute due to persistent food insecurity within the ranks, which weakens soldiers' ability to resist illness. Reports from new recruits highlight growing concerns over inadequate food supplies in the military.<sup>163</sup>

Military food reserves emerged as a concern by late 2023. In October of that year, Kim Jong-un directed the replenishment of stockpiles that had been depleted during the coronavirus pandemic. The shortage of reserves stems directly from insufficient agricultural production capacity, which was further exacerbated by a sharp decline in trade with China—limiting the import of essential farming materials.<sup>164</sup>

Recently frontline corps had been directed by the KPA General Staff headquarters to reduce military training in the summer of 2024 by 50 percent so that soldiers could contribute agricultural support to increase productivity.<sup>165</sup> The North Korean military is the Kim Regime’s most important tool for staving off widespread instability once it starts but it is also the regime’s greatest instrument for human rights violations at the same time.

While the KWP OGD is the regime’s primary oversight organization to control the population, guns are required to down a rebellion. The Kim Regime also turned the coronavirus pandemic into an opportunity to further refine its population control measures. Kim Regime leaders have employed the North Korean military to address civilian issues several times in the past and did so again during the pandemic.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Chang Gyu Ahn, “Young North Korean recruits tell parents they are fed meager rations,” *Radio Free Asia*, May 13, 2024. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/new-army-recruits-complain-of-not-having-enough-food-north-05132024115812.html>.

<sup>164</sup> Sung Hui Moon, “Kim Jong Un orders military food reserves restored ‘at all costs’,” *Radio Free Asia*, October 30, 2023. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/military-food-reserves-10302023164337.html>.

<sup>165</sup> Tae Joo Jeong, “N.Korean military exempts certain soldiers from participating in summer exercises,” *Daily NK*, June 15, 2024. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/n-korean-military-exempts-certain-soldiers-from-participating-in-summer-exercises/>.

<sup>166</sup> Hyemin Son and Jieun Kim, “Smugglers Beaten as North Korea Applies Military Law in COVID-19 Response,” *Radio Free Asia*, April 3, 2020. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/smugglers-04032020175211.html>.



To reinforce security along the border, the Kim regime sent 3,000 soldiers of the KPA's Storm Corps (special operations forces) to bolster already ongoing security efforts meant to address the coronavirus pandemic. Most of these soldiers were sent to Ryanggang Province in the central north of North Korea.<sup>167</sup> Furthermore, the Kim regime has ordered its military troops and police to shoot any citizen that approaches within one kilometer of the Chinese border.<sup>168</sup> This is the most draconian of measures designed to close off the border to prevent the spread of the coronavirus pandemic into North Korea. Concurrently, this action represents a new low for crimes against humanity in the North, going beyond individual executions to blunt, across-the-board executions by low-level officials.

In a parallel action, the KPA General Staff Department instructed military units deployed along North Korea's borders and coastline to block all "quarantine contaminants" trying to cross into North Korea.<sup>169</sup> No action describes the consequences of this directive better than the shooting and burning of a South Korean fisheries official in September 2020. For some reason the official fell into the water near the sea-based boundary line between the North and the South.<sup>170</sup> As the official drifted north, the North Korean Navy engaged the official, shot him, and burned his remaining floating equipment. The North Korean Navy shot the South Korean official "on official orders and following policies approved by the regulations of the Coastal Security Bureau."<sup>171</sup> The vessel that killed the South Korean official was assigned to the Eighth Squadron of the West Coast Fleet of the North Korean Navy. The crew was reportedly praised for their "hard work."<sup>172</sup> The day after Kim Jong-un apologized for the killing of the South Korean

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<sup>167</sup> Kang Mi Jin, "Large number of Storm Corps troops sent to Sino-North Korean border," *Daily NK*, August 8, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/large-number-storm-corps-troops-sent-sino-north-korean-border/>. It is not the first time that members of the Storm Corps were deployed along the same border. In 2011, elements of the Storm Corps were deployed for two months to counter the high number of defections as well as illicit drug smuggling.

<sup>168</sup> Sewon Kim, "North Korea Orders Troops and Police to Shoot Citizens Who Approach the Chinese Border," *Radio Free Asia*, August 26, 2020. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/border-08262020194153.html>.

<sup>169</sup> Tae Joo Jeong, "N. Korean military told to block 'quarantine contaminants' at border," *Daily NK*, October 8, 2020 <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korean-military-told-block-contaminants-border/>.

<sup>170</sup> The Northern Limit Line was established in 1954 by the United Nations Command for the purpose of separating forces. It was established as a control measure to prevent ROK vessels from going into North Korean waters. It is not and was never intended to be a recognized international boundary.

<sup>171</sup> Republic of Korea Office of the President, "Briefing of the head of the National Security Office, Seo Hoon, on the North Korean Notice," September 25, 2020. <https://www1.president.go.kr/articles/9237>.

<sup>172</sup> Jang Seul Gi, "After slaying S. Korean official, N. Korean patrol boat crew commended for 'hard work,'" *Daily NK*, September 28, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/after-slaying-south-korean-official-north-korean-patrol-boat-crew-commended-hard-work/>.

official, and he ordered the KPA to “unwaveringly complete preparations for battle” and to “rigorously deal with any violations of [North Korea’s] territorial waters.”<sup>173</sup>

Though the Kim regime had set stringent guidelines in quarantining its borders, the North Korean military was not immune from the coronavirus and consequently experienced operational challenges:

- In March 2020, the then commander of the ROK-US Combined Forces Command, General Robert Abrams, assessed North Korea suffered from coronavirus infections due to a virtual shutdown of North Korean military air activity.
- Reportedly, the KPA First Corps, which is stationed along the east coast of the DMZ, was greatly impacted by the spread of paratyphoid fever. On June 22, 2020, Kim Jong-un ordered the Ministry of People’s Armed Forces (MPAF) to resolve the issue. MPAF sent a team of military doctors to First Corps to help; however, commanders in the First Corps reported that there was a shortage of medicine to deal with the outbreak and asked military families to provide medicines.<sup>174</sup> It is certainly possible that the disease was the coronavirus. If so, the First Corps would inevitably have suffered command and control problems, not to mention a severe reduction in readiness. Such a situation is a direct threat to regime stability as the inability to control certain areas of the country and/or major units in the military could theoretically expand to other areas and units.
- KPA soldiers who broke quarantine and suffered from symptoms associated with coronavirus were punished for violating national orders focused on disease control. They were expelled from the military and the party,<sup>175</sup> which means they were primarily officers.
- Apparently concerned about the loyalty of the North Korean military, Kim Jong-un ordered intensified ideological instruction for military leaders at an expanded meeting of the KWP Central Military Committee in July 2020. The meeting was attended by

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<sup>173</sup> Jang Seul Gi, “Kim Jong Un orders military to “rigorously” handle violations of territorial waters,” *Daily NK*, September 29, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/kim-jong-un-orders-military-rigorously-handle-violations-territorial-waters/>.

<sup>174</sup> Tae Joo Jeong, “N.Korea’s 1st Corps faces paratyphoid fever outbreak,” *Daily NK*, July 2, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-1st-corps-faces-paratyphoid-fever-outbreak/>.

<sup>175</sup> Mun Dong Hui, “N.Korean soldiers face punishment after breaking quarantine,” *Daily NK*, June 1, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korean-soldiers-face-punishment-breaking-quarantine/>.



high-ranking commanders and political officers,<sup>176</sup> the latter for indoctrinating the former.

- The Kim Regime ordered the military to create restrictive travel measures as one of its social actions combating the coronavirus spread. Reportedly, Kim Jong-un issued orders in April 2023 to the MSS to set up checkpoints along Jagang Province's borders to protect sensitive facilities in the province. Kim's orders stated the province must be "war-ready" and that Jagang Province must be able to serve as a second capital. The checkpoints were manned by both MSS and MSC officers.<sup>177</sup> Jagang Province is well-known to be the heart of North Korea's military-industrial complex and travel to the province is normally restricted. Foreign elements such as international humanitarian efforts have never been allowed to visit Jagang Province or specific counties in other northern provinces where political prison facilities exist.

Another factor that has reduced military readiness and created operational challenges is the wave of typhoons that have brought about disaster and devastation to the general population. In August 2020, the KPA Supreme Command ordered all military units to minimize summer exercise training and to assist in rebuilding communities that were damaged by severe flooding. In response to military support to typhoon-damaged villages in southwest North Korea, the Korean Central News Agency reported that Kim Jong-un praised the North Korean military by stating, "The People's Army is made up of creators of all miracles on this land."<sup>178</sup> It is unusual for Kim to publicly praise soldiers but demonstrating leadership during times that are a political threat to the regime is an important action.

An additional factor contributing to further reduction in readiness is the regime's focus on military parades for commemorative purposes. For example, approximately 23,000 soldiers were assigned to participate in the October 10, 2020, parade in Kim Il-sung Square and thus did

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<sup>176</sup> *KCNA Watch*, "Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Guides Enlarged Meeting of WPK Central Military Commission," July 17, 2020. <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1595107150-31323817/supreme-leader-kim-jong-un-guides-enlarged-meeting-of-wpk-central-military-commission>.

<sup>177</sup> Jang Seui Gi, "N.Korea tightens flow of people in and out of Chagang Province," *Daily NK*, April 27, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/n-korea-tightens-flow-of-people-in-and-out-of-chagang-province/>.

<sup>178</sup> Thomas Maresca, "Kim Jong Un hails troops as 'miracle' makers after North Korea typhoons," *UPI*, September 15, 2020. [https://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2020/09/15/Kim-Jong-Un-hails-troops-as-miracle-makers-after-North-Korea-typhoons/3291600139414/](https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2020/09/15/Kim-Jong-Un-hails-troops-as-miracle-makers-after-North-Korea-typhoons/3291600139414/).

not participate in summer military drills.<sup>179</sup> To quote retired U.S. Army Colonel David Maxwell, “soldiers that are operationally ready, do not parade well, and soldiers that parade well are not operationally ready.”<sup>180</sup> Kim Jong-un has been inconsistent with his personal protective mask policy as it applies to soldiers and parades. During the massive military parade in honor of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the KWP on October 10, 2020, none of the thousands of parading soldiers could be seen wearing a mask. However, days after that parade, another parade at the same location was attended by hundreds of soldiers wearing masks. Complicating an apparently confusing policy implementation is the fact that a similar military parade scheduled for February 8 to observe the founding of the KPA was cancelled altogether. The Kim regime even ordered no contact between soldiers and civilians, apparently in an attempt to prevent theft of military supplies. Soldiers were stealing those resources and selling them to civilians who would then sell them at the marketplace.<sup>181</sup>

There are several other factors in North Korean military life that contribute to susceptibility to the potential spread of the virus. Some of these were:

- The sleeping situation of the average KPA soldier is confinement to common open-air sleeping spaces in close (within one meter) proximity to fellow soldiers on both sides.
- Crew-served weapons create common contact issues on the systems themselves.
  - Artillery guns’ fire control system is touched by all gun crew members
  - Naval ship three-tiered sleeping systems quarters and ladders/railing
  - Aircraft crews servicing mechanical/weapons/fueling issues
  - Crew cabs on missile systems
  - Tanks and armored personnel carriers, with close quarters and common entry points
  - Special operations teams do close-quarter mission isolation for extended periods prior to carrying out missions or training
  - Losing one or more crew members will degrade the rate of fire or system effectiveness

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<sup>179</sup> Tae Joo Jeong, “Summer military drills stalled as soldiers sent to flood-ravaged areas,” *Daily NK*, September 3, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-summer-drills-stalled-soldiers-sent-flood-ravaged-areas/>.

<sup>180</sup> Interview with Colonel Maxwell.

<sup>181</sup> Sung Hui Moon, “North Korea bars contact between soldiers and civilians,” *Radio Free Asia*, November 30, 2023. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/military-11302023133953.html>.

- Although many of these systems are isolated from one another, especially artillery positions along the demilitarized zone, logistical support procedures and personnel become a virus conduit threat to these crews.

Notwithstanding, the KPA remains a formidable force. It is manned by a force of approximately 1.2 million soldiers. Though the KPA has many weaknesses, the sheer size of the KPA is a quality of its own<sup>182</sup> and remains an extremely fierce threat to the Republic of Korea and Northeast Asia, even beyond its rapidly developing nuclear and ballistic missile programs. Many analysts describe the KPA's conventional elements as "an artillery force with a scheme of maneuver." Despite these strengths, there are several echelons of weaknesses within the KPA that create conditions for enabling a quicker potential spread of the coronavirus in rear (northern) KPA areas of operation. To understand these echeloned weaknesses, it is necessary to understand the KPA's geographical deployment.

Within the KPA, there are three echelons of deployment and capability. Those echelons in general from south to north are forward forces (70% of KPA forces within 100km of the Demilitarized Zone between the North and the South), operational exploitation forces directly behind the forward forces, and homeland defense forces to the north. Within this context, the KPA's echeloned weaknesses are as discussed below.

- Political control of commanders: This political dynamic is ubiquitous at every echelon of the KPA. However, quality political officers<sup>183</sup> from the General Political Bureau (GPB), like commanders, are deployed forward. The exception to this is senior, more politically reliable GPB officers deployed with military units in Pyongyang. Less capable political officers, in terms of background reliability and lower political performance, are assigned to units further away from the front lines located along the DMZ. The control structure is mirrored at every level by the assignment of a Military Security Command (MSC) officer. At all levels, the regime emphasizes control over command<sup>184</sup> to ensure the

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<sup>182</sup> Assessment by General John Tilelli in 1997 while serving as the Commander, Republic of Korea – United States Combined Forces Command during 1996-99.

<sup>183</sup> A political officer's background, indeed every North Korean's background, is critical to professional success. For an understanding of "*songbun*" and its role in North Korean society, see Robert Collins, *Marked for Life: Songbun, North Korea's Social Classification System* (Washington, DC: Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012).

<sup>184</sup> The standard military term for command dynamics is "command and control." However, the Kim regime emphasizes extreme political control through the assignment of each unit's General Political Bureau's political officer

political officer and the security officer control the unit commander. This suppresses adaptability and results, while impairing flexibility in battlefield decision-making.

The threat of the coronavirus to this dynamic was that the incapacitation of unit GPB or MSC officers due to virus infection impairs the Kim regime's principle of control over command.

- Outdated equipment: Though KPA weapons systems and equipment are generally outdated, newer and better equipment is forward deployed. This is particularly true of artillery systems. Equipment and weapons systems from the 1950s are deployed in northern North Korea, assigned to homeland defense. Forces along North Korea's border with China would be an exception, albeit limited.
- Logistical resources: Logistical support prioritizes forward-deployed forces above all others. As units are stationed further north, they receive progressively less support, both in terms of quantity and quality. Exceptions to this pattern include special operations forces at all levels and units stationed in Pyongyang, which continue to receive priority resourcing. This uneven distribution contributed to the rapid spread of the coronavirus among the under-resourced units in northern North Korea.
- Malnutrition: Approximately 40% of North Korea's general population suffers from malnutrition. Food distribution is prioritized for forward-deployed military units, with support diminishing for units stationed further north. Exceptions to this trend include special operations forces and units based in Pyongyang, which continue to receive preferential treatment. Despite these priorities, the military as a whole faces significant food insecurity. In 2020, workers in the military-industrial complex—primarily located in Chagang Province—along with military units and special agencies, were provided with only 15 days' worth of food rations per month over a five-month period. Military reserve

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and the Military Security Command's security officer alongside the unit commander to ensure the unit commander carries out the will and directives of the Supreme Leader and the KWP. Thus the Kim regime's rule over the KPA would more accurately be described as "control and command." GPB political officers are located in every unit from battalion up to the KPA General Staff Department, as well with frontline companies.

rations were running short due to the forced early distribution<sup>185</sup> brought on by the sanctions and closed border with China.

- The worst-fed unit in the KPA is likely the 12<sup>th</sup> Corps based in Hyesan near North Korea's border with China. Soldiers there are known to local civilians as "beggars."<sup>186</sup>
- Malnutrition in North Korea has contributed to cognitive disabilities among children and young people. This has forced the North Korean state to lower minimum height and weight requirements for military service. As far back as 2008, U.S. intelligence projected that approximately 17 to 29 percent of potential military conscripts between 2009 and 2013 would likely have cognitive deficiencies disqualifying them for service.<sup>187</sup> KPA soldiers are now smaller than 30 years ago and less capable of individually traversing the mountainous terrain of the Korean peninsula. It should be noted that failure to serve in the military worsens one's socio-political standing and future employment considerations.
- Class distinction: The forward deployment of enlisted forces is based on social classification. Loyal and wavering classes make up the forward-deployed contingents. Hostile class servicemembers are rarely assigned to forward forces, except to serve in construction units. All Pyongyang-based forces belong to the loyal class.
- Ubiquitous Corruption: Corruption is the biggest weakness within the Kim regime. Any study of the weaknesses of the Kim regime unmistakably points to corruption at all levels and all agencies of authority as the foremost point where exception to authority is most prevalent.<sup>188</sup> As directives are forwarded by the KWP to lower party, government and military authorities, the leaders at all levels create methods to extract bribes in any form to either enrich themselves or to collect forms of revenue to pay expected bribes demanded by higher authorities. Reportedly, "the General Political Bureau, the General

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<sup>185</sup> Seul Gi Jang, "N.Koreans in Pyongyang face three months without rations," *Daily NK*, June 15, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-koreans-pyongyang-face-three-months-without-rations/>.

<sup>186</sup> Dong Hui Moon, "12<sup>th</sup> Corps on Sino-North Korean border still facing appalling conditions," *Daily NK*, April 4, 2019. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/12th-corps-on-sino-north-korean-border-still-facing-appalling-conditions/>.

<sup>187</sup> Karen Monaghan, "Strategic Implications of Global Health," National Intelligence Council (Wash, DC, ICA 2008-10D, 2008).

<sup>188</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council, "Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," A/HRC/25/63, February 7, 2014, pp.85, 88, 90, 97,

98. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/ReportoftheCommissionofInquiryDPRK.aspx>.

Staff Department, the Ministry of People's Armed Forces and the MSC have recently been competing with each other to carry out all kinds of inspections."<sup>189</sup> Historically, these inspections are designed to garner corruption-based profits for those doing the inspections. Loyal class soldiers in forward units have more resources to bribe commanders/leaders to avoid training and difficult tasks. This negatively impacts the regime leadership's view of forward unit competency.

Probably the greatest weakness for the Kim regime is the potential for miscalculation by Kim Jong-un during times of crisis. The regime leadership is notorious for propagandizing perceived threats coming from the ROK-US Alliance or counter-threats against the alliance. It is not inconceivable that such "information warfare" could escalate to levels where threat assessments by the Kim regime elite, predominantly "yes-men" telling Kim what they think he wants to hear, lead to miscalculation at the tactical, operational and strategic levels by Kim personally. Such miscalculations would quite likely lead to the deaths of tens, hundreds, even millions on both sides of the Korean Demilitarized Zone. This would be the ultimate human rights violation, as outlined in several United Nations documents including the ICESR.

## Nuclear Weapons

There is a human rights-nuclear weapons nexus in North Korea. Investment in the nuclear program severely impacts the human rights and humanitarian situation of the North Korean people. During the coronavirus pandemic, the regime ensured that nuclear scientists and technicians would be prioritized for support over the general population. All of this was happening while the general population was placed under draconian, restrictive measures.

North Korea held its first meeting on its "nuclear trigger" management system on April 22, 2024, under the direction of Kim Jong-un. The exercise was designed to simulate a nuclear counterattack.<sup>190</sup> It was well covered by the North Korean media, both in print and recorded material, to ensure the outside world would see the exercise.

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<sup>189</sup> Tae Joo Jeong, "N.Korean military agencies trip over each other to extract bribes," *Daily NK*, September 2, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korean-military-agencies-trip-over-each-other-extract-bribes/>.

<sup>190</sup> Ju Min Park, "North Korea conducts first 'nuclear trigger' simulation drills, state media says, *Reuters*, April 23, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-koreas-kim-guides-nuclear-counterattack-simulation-drills-kcna-says-2024-04-22/>

Additionally, South Korea's Korean Institute for Defense Analyses assesses that North Korea has built 80-90 nuclear warheads to date.<sup>191</sup> The chart below demonstrates the future direction of nuclear warhead development up to the year 2028.

Figure 3.1  
Projecting the North Korean Nuclear Weapon Inventory

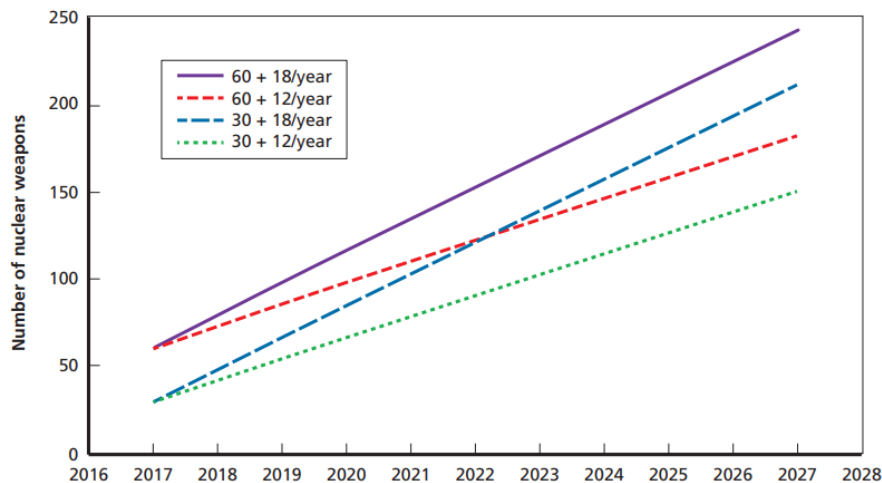


Figure 155, Source: Bennett, Bruce, Bruce Bechtol, et. al. "Countering the Risks of North Korean Nuclear Weapons | Rand." *Countering the Risks of North Korean Nuclear Weapons*, April 12, 2021 <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1015-1.html>



Figure 16: Kim Jong Un inspecting several Hwasan-31 nuclear warheads. Source: Shreyas Reddy, "Activity at North Korea's light water reactor raises 'serious concerns,' US says," *NK News*, December 25, 2023, <https://www.nknews.org/2023/12/activity-at-north-koreas-light-water-reactor-raises-serious-concerns-us-says/>.

<sup>191</sup> Min-ho Jung, "N. Korea will likely keep amassing nuclear warheads until next negotiation," *Korea Times*, December 24, 2023. [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/12/103\\_365695.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/12/103_365695.html).



## Missiles

During the coronavirus pandemic, it was not only the nuclear scientists and technicians who were prioritized for support over the general population, but also the missile scientists and technicians. In 2023, the Kim regime sought to declare its military power by declaring November 18 as “Missile Industry Day.”<sup>192</sup> During 2022 and 2023, North Korea carried out 80 launches of tactical and strategic ballistic missiles.<sup>193</sup> North Korea has launched its Hwaseong-18 intercontinental ballistic missile, which can reach any target in the United States.<sup>194</sup> In 2023, Pyongyang’s investment in missile launches was between \$638 million and \$946 million.<sup>195</sup> Additionally, according to a report issued by Seoul’s Korean Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA) in December 2023, the total cost of the ballistic missiles launched by the North in 2022 is likely to have exceeded \$560 million, which would have been more than enough to feed North Korea's population that year. The shorter the range of the missile, the cheaper it is to purchase; however, even short-range ballistic missiles, SRBMs (KN-23, KN-24, KN-25), cost \$3-5 million apiece. Intercontinental ballistic missiles, ICBMs, cost between \$20 to \$30 million per missile.<sup>196</sup>

In 2023, Pyongyang launched at least 36 missiles, including a rocket that carried its first spy satellite into orbit. Some of these missiles included the liquid-fuel Hwasong-15 and Hwaseong -17. The regime also tested other missiles, including two Hwasong-18 solid-fuel ICBMs launched in April and July of that year. The ICBMs are not the only missiles in the North’s dizzying and growing arsenal, which includes the KN-23, KN-24, and KN-25 SRBMs and the Bukgeukseong line of submarine-launched ballistic missiles, SLBMs, which are in various stages of development or deployment.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Soo-yeon Kim, “S.Korea deplores N. Korea’s designation of ‘missile industry day’,” *Yonhap News*, November 6, 2023. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20231106003800315>.

<sup>193</sup> Loren Thompson, “Next-Gen Interceptor Is Pentagon’s Only Option For Defeating Future North Korean ICBMs,” *Forbes*, December 21, 2023. [https://www.forbes.com/sites/lorenthompson/2023/12/21/next-gen-interceptor-is-pentagons-only-option-for-defeating-future-north-korean-icbms/?sh=4d40c67a24ac&mc\\_cid=34da1bf115&mc\\_eid=70bf478f36](https://www.forbes.com/sites/lorenthompson/2023/12/21/next-gen-interceptor-is-pentagons-only-option-for-defeating-future-north-korean-icbms/?sh=4d40c67a24ac&mc_cid=34da1bf115&mc_eid=70bf478f36).

<sup>194</sup> Photograph by Korea Central News Agency, December 19, 2023. See Min-ho Jung, “N. Korea will likely keep amassing nuclear warheads until next negotiation,” *Korea Times*, December 24, 2023. [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/12/103\\_365695.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/12/103_365695.html).

<sup>195</sup> Mi-geon Kim, “Exclusive: Kim Jong-un’s annual expenditures are enough to feed people for three years,” *Chosun Ilbo*, April 26, 2024. <https://www.chosun.com/english/north-korea-en/2024/04/26/4MEIB4BF6VGX7IM3AXAPO4PHRY/>

<sup>196</sup> Michael Lee, “Why does North Korea keep firing missiles?” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, December 23, 2024. <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2023-12-23/national/northKorea/WHY-Why-does-North-Korea-keep-firing-missiles/1942226>.

<sup>197</sup> Michael Lee, “Why does North Korea keep firing missiles?,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, December 23, 2023. <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2023-12-23/national/northKorea/WHY-Why-does-North-Korea-keep-firing-missiles/1942226>.

North Korea is also developing a fleet of submarine-launched nuclear-capable missiles. The Bukgeukseong-1 and Bukgeukseong-3, along with the Hwasal-2 project land attack cruise missiles, are being developed, which would give the North the extra advantage of attacking land targets in the ROK and Japan from the sea.<sup>198</sup>

Russia is providing technical assistance to North Korea, particularly ballistic missiles. Furthermore, solid fuel missiles over liquid fuel increase North Korea's responsiveness during crisis because it allows for quicker reaction times. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un claimed that the country succeeded in "nuclear weaponization of all types of missiles," including the hypersonic "Hwaseong-16 Type-B missile." Based on these developments, North Korea can now fire solid fuel-based short, intermediate, and long-range missiles tipped with maneuvering warheads.<sup>199</sup>

However, the regime's investment in the missile program has deprived the conventional forces of food security and adequate health care. This exacerbated the inability of the regime to adequately care for soldiers being impacted by the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>200</sup>

### Internet Hacking

Following the end of the coronavirus pandemic, the activities of the Kim regime's hackers operating overseas have increased via deployments outside of China and Russia, through insertion into the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia.<sup>201</sup> This ramped-up deployment increases online theft, thus making a greater amount of funds to support the Kim regime's WMD and missile programs.

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<sup>198</sup> Vann H. Van Diepen, "The Sleeper Has Awakened: Six Key Takeaways From the Rollout of North Korea's Tactical Nuclear Attack Submarine," *38 North*, September 11, 2023. <https://www.38north.org/2023/09/the-sleeper-has-awakened-six-key-takeaways-from-the-roll-out-of-north-koreas-tactical-nuclear-attack-submarine/>.

<sup>199</sup> Won-gon Park, "Can North Korea launch a nuclear strike?," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, April 14, 2024. <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2024-04-14/opinion/columns/Can-North-Korea-launch-a-nuclear-strike/2025137>.

<sup>200</sup> Michael Lee, "Why does North Korea keep firing missiles?," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, December 23, 2023. <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2023-12-23/national/northKorea/WHY-Why-does-North-Korea-keep-firing-missiles/1942226>.

<sup>201</sup> Glenn Chafetz, "Fox in the Henhouse: The Growing Harms of North Korea's Remote IT Workforce The Growing Harms of North Korea's Remote IT Workforce," *The Diplomat*, May 21, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/05/fox-in-the-henhouse-the-growing-harms-of-north-koreas-remote-it-workforce/>.

## Glorification and Security of Supreme Leader

A key function of the regime and military is to not only protect Kim-Jong-un, but to also glorify the regime. Though the Kim regime continues to suppress what the Korean people in the North can say or read, Kim Jong-un, in another effort at self-glorification, has now authorized the use of the “Hymn of General Kim Jong-un”, which is designed to replace that of his father and predecessor, the “Hymn of General Kim Jong-il.” The latter hymn began to be used in 1997 when it replaced the “Hymn of General Kim Il-sung,” the first of the three-generation Kim dynasty. The hymn is sung at the beginning of public events.<sup>202</sup>

While Christianity, violations of pandemic restrictions, defection attempts, anti-ideological acts, and disloyalty to the Supreme Leader are all reasons the regime employs to execute its citizens, the regime has also executed many members of the military for various “crimes” or acts deemed disloyal by the regime. According to a report by the Transnational Justice Working Group, interviews of 600 escapees from the North revealed 323 accounts of executions by the Kim Jong-un regime.<sup>203</sup>

To prevent attempts at armed rebellion, only members of the KPA Unit 974, the Supreme Leader’s bodyguards, are permitted to carry arms in the presence of Kim Jong-un.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> *Radio Free Asia*, “Hymn to Kim Jong Un becomes official song at state events,” *Radio Free Asia*, November 11, 2023. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/song-11152023155401.html>.

<sup>203</sup> Olivia Enos, “North Koreans Executed By Kim Regime For Violating COVID,” *Forbes*, January 17, 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/oliviaenos/2024/01/17/north-koreans-executed-by-kim-regime-for-violating-covid-restrictions/?sh=f766a216d8ca>.

Olivia Enos, “North Koreans Executed By Kim Regime For Violating COVID,” *Forbes*, January 17, 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/oliviaenos/2024/01/17/north-koreans-executed-by-kim-regime-for-violating-covid-restrictions/?sh=f766a216d8ca>

<sup>204</sup> *Donga*, “김원홍도 벌벌 떠는 북한 김정은의 ‘974부대’ (North Korea’s Kim Jong-un’s ‘Unit 974’ is shaking even Kim Won-hong), July 7, 2016. <https://voda.donga.com/3/all/39/663399/1>

## Section Six: North Korean Leadership



Figure 17, Source: VOA Korea, May 24, 2022. <https://www.voakorea.com/a/6586707.html>.

The coronavirus pandemic became a serious challenge to the stability of the Kim regime, and while the regime's stability may certainly be at risk, predicting what will happen with accuracy is extremely difficult at best. Consequently, the group of North Koreans that fear regime instability the most are the regime elite.

What motivates the elites during this crisis? The answer is that most of the elite are faced with a formidable combination of the regime's pervasive internal security and the availability of privilege to those that prove their loyalty to Kim Jong-un and the KWP. For the elites, failure to sufficiently display one's loyalty results in immediate expulsion from the party, loss of all privileges, and imprisonment. The families of disloyal members of the elite would likely face similar punishments.

The elite of North Korea dominate all the major positions in the KWP and the state government, as well as senior officers in the military.<sup>205</sup> Since hereditary links are important within the Kim regime, the children of the elite get the best of everything the party has to offer, including healthcare. However, their personal fortitude is likely lacking when faced with

<sup>205</sup> One must be a party member to be an officer in the military.

competition from the new aggressive entrepreneurial class associated with North Korea's markets, also known as the *jangmadang*.

To be politically and professionally successful within North Korea's Kim Regime, one must publicly support the daily propaganda of the KWP. By the time an individual succeeds in reaching a position of influence within the regime, regardless of the institution or profession, one's lifestyle is fully dependent on loyalty to the supreme leader and the party. This focus on "loyalty first" provides a road to success for the elite. Demand for such loyalty is a key component to the Kim Regime's longevity strategy and is key to holding the regime together in the face of the pandemic.

The guidebook for directing these priorities is the Ten Great Principles of Monolithic Ideology (TPMI), which emphasize the glorification of the supreme leader, methodologies of loyalty expression, and recognition of the supreme leader's authority. TPMI dominates political and personal life throughout North Korean society. Every resident of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), from government ministers and senior party aficionados to the lowest compensated laborer studies the TPMI. Contrary to practice in democracies, the constitution is not relevant to the reality of life in North Korea, nor is it studied as a norm.<sup>206</sup>

There are 3.2 million members in the KWP out of a population of roughly 25 million, making it the highest percentage of party membership within any communist state's population. Those that excel at the loyalty methodologies, coupled with membership in the KWP, succeed within the Kim Regime personally and professionally. Every North Korean knows that the road to success is through the KWP. With that membership comes privilege – the higher the position, the higher the privilege. The degree of privilege is relative to one's position within the KWP but in every case the privilege gives the KWP member better housing, better food, better education, better schooling for one's children, better healthcare, and, most importantly, better opportunity. In a fiercely competitive environment, leadership roles within the party attract individuals seeking to leverage influence and bribes for political bargaining that enhances their personal lives and career prospects. Abandoning these opportunities is antithetical to success within the regime.

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<sup>206</sup> Author interviews with several dozens of North Korean escapees.

## Surveillance and Social Control

The Kim regime monitors this privilege with a strategy of surveillance that is extensive, oppressive, and tightly centralized. The Ministry of Social Security (national police), the MSS (political police), and the MSC (police functions within the military) conduct overlapping surveillance of every North Korean citizen from government minister to common laborer, with no exceptions. All three internal security agencies focus on internal political security far more than on other police tasks and missions. The national police recruit three out of every ten citizens to report on the doings of those in their work group. This takes place at every organization, whether a government agency or the most isolated farming community in the countryside. In the face of the pandemic, these internal security policies and practices were intensified to ensure there was no lapse in loyalty to the supreme leader while fighting the coronavirus pandemic.

As part of heightened surveillance measures, even the families of agency or workgroup members are monitored through their housing arrangements. Agency workers live in specific housing communities designed to house only workers from those agencies. The housing is surrounded by fencing or walls with a single entrance/exit point with security guards who record all comings and goings of each family as well as any visits to the family quarters. This practice enables the regime to detect inter-agency collusion between workers or their families. Furthermore, the workers are fully aware that their housing is likely bugged with listening devices that record their conversations.

These various recordings are provided to the security agencies that develop profiles of the families and add this to the personal profiles of the individual workers. The aim of this scrutiny is to identify, as early as possible, any actions that could be interpreted as conspiratorial against the regime or its supreme leader. If a family member engages in suspicious activity, the responsibility falls on the family sponsor. Therefore, heads of families must train family members to be discreet politically and personally. Even Hwang Jang-yop, the highest-level defector from North Korea ever, wrote in his memoirs that he had to train his five-year-old granddaughter on what not to say or do. Regime security forces will extend their practices to include monitoring the spread of the coronavirus within families, groups, and agencies.

Leaders in all fields of society receive far more concentrated attention from the security services, particularly the general-grade officers in the KPA. Within the military, every commander from battalion to the Army's general staff (including frontline company

commanders) has a political officer from the General Political Bureau on his staff to ensure the unit commander carries out the party's guidance as well as to conduct evaluations of the commander's everyday decisions. From battalion up, every commander also has a security officer from the MSC who monitors his/her actions, focusing on the political loyalty and professional efficiency aspects. Considering the threat posed by the pandemic, both the political officer and the security officer were also tasked with detecting and suppressing the spread of the coronavirus.

At the heart of this surveillance system is the KWP Organization and Guidance Department, known to be the "party within the party." The mission of the OGD is to guarantee the success and continuity of the supreme leader and the KWP. Not only does the OGD set the priorities of surveillance for the internal security agencies, but it also organizes a monitoring system targeting the political performance of every leader in every sector of society, including the security services and the military. Every party department, government agency, military unit, factory, cooperative farm and all other organizations has an embedded KWP committee that guides the activities and policy implementation of that organization. Additionally, the organization secretary of each embedded committee evaluates the loyalty performance and adherence to the TPMI of each member of that organization, particularly those in a leadership position. These evaluations are reported directly to the OGD's Party Life Guidance Section which conducts a bottom-line assessment of that member/leader's performance within the context of the regime priorities.

The surveillance of one's personal and professional life places overwhelming pressure on the North Korean elites to meet the expectations of the Kim Regime. The elites understand that missing opportunities to secure or enhance their privileges risks losing their status. Consequently, their readiness to intensify human rights suppression during the pandemic only grew more pronounced.

Fear, privilege, and opportunity are the conditions the Kim Regime manipulates to maintain relative stability among the elites who are responsible for maintaining the regime's security. In the future, weakening the regime's internal security apparatus, decreasing privileges for the elite and eliminating opportunity for them are key to weakening Kim Jong-un's hold on power.



## Succession Scenarios

Though the Kim Regime is in its eighth decade, it seems unlikely that a group of anti-Japanese partisans could sustain such a dynamic rule over that period of time. However, in the assessment of the Republic of Korea's Korea Institute for National Unification, the reason the regime remains relatively stable is the prescribed obligations demanded by the KWP of every institution and citizen. To that effect, Party organizational life, institutional organization, required revolutionary study, and self-critique "keep the North Korean regime afloat."<sup>207</sup> As the coronavirus pandemic increasingly threatened the stability of the Kim regime, every North Korean citizen – from third grader to highest of the elite – would have been compelled to confess how they failed to support the supreme leader Kim Jong-un in the battle against the pandemic during their weekly self-critique.<sup>208</sup> This one ideological dynamic is as threatening to regime stability as any other factor. The reason of these self-critiques, particularly those involving the most senior of the regime, enable the supreme leader and his staff (KWP OGD) to eliminate any senior leader based on their confessions of insufficient support in the battle against the pandemic.

Beyond that, the policies and practices, overseen by the KWP OGD, create conditions for human rights denial. Such policies and practices have developed over the decades from the earliest days of the regime when Korean revolutionaries entered the North with the Soviet military in 1945, to the internecine factional conflicts of the 1950s, to the socio-political classification of each North Korean individual beginning in the 1960s, and the ideological commitment of everything to the *Suryeong* – supreme leader – since the 1970s.

The evolution of the OGD over that period, especially under the leadership of Kim Jong-il, cemented the human rights denial policies and practices that developed from the dynamics. The OGD is the citadel of political terror and Pyongyang is the capital of Kim Family Regime power. The two create the center of human rights denial for the North Korean people. Since the OGD is the regime's control tower, its durability is critical to the continued success of the supreme leader position.

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<sup>207</sup> Young Tae Jeung, et al, "Comprehensive Analysis of the State of North Korea's Organizations by Sector and Changes in Organizational Culture: Focusing on the Condition of KWP Agencies within Party/Government/Military and Economic/Social Organizations," Korea Institute of National Unification, KINU Research Abstract 11-04, 2011, pp.3-4.

<sup>208</sup> For an explanation of the self-critique system, see Robert Collins, "Denied From The Start: Human Rights at the Local Level in North Korea," *HRNK*, 2018, pp.78-85.

However, the Kim regime's structure and function is not set up to permit flexibility. The Kim regime's loss of governing authority would require, among other things, a failure of the OGD's societal control through failure of its policies and practices, and the coronavirus pandemic is a direct threat to that.

The existence and survivability of the KWP OGD is highly dependent on the position of the supreme leader. The potential death of Kim Jong-un due to a pandemic or any other cause in the future would necessitate the OGD choosing the next supreme leader.<sup>209</sup> The regime has spent most of its ideology and propaganda justifying the Kim Family as the only true and capable leader family of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the military, and the Party. Should Kim Jong-un die, the OGD's Kim Family-based options would be:

- Kim Jong-cheol is the full-blooded (same father and mother) older brother (born in 1981) of Kim Jong-un. He has served as a Section Chief within the OGD Party Life Guidance Section but he is treated as an OGD Vice-Director, which is two ranks above the aforementioned position title. The older Kim has little real power and his position is likely ceremonial. He was not chosen by Kim Jong-il to be his successor due to Kim Jong-cheol's easy-going personality. Educated in Switzerland, he speaks English and German (level of expertise unknown). He has consistently demonstrated he is far more interested in music and guitar playing than politics.
- Kim Yeo-jeong is a Vice-Director within the KWP. She accompanies Kim Jong-un to on-site visits of all kinds outside of the military field. She spent two years being educated in Switzerland along with Kim Jong-un. She has been rumored to have married a college professor with a science background. Another rumor has her marrying Choe Ryonghae's second son.<sup>210</sup> Kim has reportedly also been appointed as an OGD First Vice-Director and is referred to by other Party cadre as North Korea's "No.2." In the OGD, issues that require Kim Jong-un's ratification go through Kim Yeo-jeong. Party cadre are reported to

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<sup>209</sup> Hwang Jang-yop, the highest ranking North Korean defector (ranked 23 on the protocol list) insisted that the OGD would choose the next supreme leader should the current leader die. See Pak Hyon-min, "노동당 조직지도부가 후계자 세울 것" ("Korean Workers' Party Organization and Guidance Department Will Determine Who Becomes Successor"), *Chogabje*, September 22, 2008. [http://www.chogabje.com/board/view.asp?C\\_IDX=24593&C\\_CC=AZ](http://www.chogabje.com/board/view.asp?C_IDX=24593&C_CC=AZ)

<sup>210</sup> Kim Ho-joon, "대북소식통 "北 김여정, 과학분야 대학교수와 결혼한 듯" (North Korean Sources Report Kim Yo-jong Marries College Professor Scientist)," *Daily Hankook*, March 28, 2016. <http://daily.hankooki.com/lpage/politics/201603/dh20160328090755137590.htm>.

both fear and respect her. She is likely treated that way given that the North Korean media always mentions her with Party cadre who are serving at that level.<sup>211</sup>

- Kim Pyong-il, step-brother (different mother) to Kim Jong-un's father, Kim Jong-il. Born in 1954, Kim Pyong-il was considered a political threat to Kim Jong-il by their father Kim Il-sung. He was sent to a diplomatic posting in eastern Europe. He has since returned to North Korea.<sup>212</sup>
- Kim Sol-song is the stepsister (different mother) of Kim Jong-un. Historically, she stays out of the limelight and serves behind the scenes. Born in 1974 to Kim Yeong-suk, Kim Jong-il's third of five wives, Kim Sol-song has consistently been reported as being involved heavily in supreme leader security, both for her father, Kim Jong-il and now for her brother, Kim Jong-un. Two separate reports state she is chief of Kim Jong-un's personal secretariat.<sup>213</sup> Though Kim Sol-song rarely appears in public, her influence is likely quite significant.
- Kim Kyong-hui is Kim Jong-il's sister and Kim Jong-un's aunt. Born in 1946, her age and reports of ill-health likely disqualify her from serious consideration as a successor to the position of supreme leader. Her past senior positions were Director of the KWP Light Industry Department for several years; member of the KWP Politburo beginning in 2010; Vice-Director of the KWP International Department; member of the KWP Central Committee; and member of the SPA. She was married to Jang Songtaek who was executed by Kim Jong-un in 2013 for his abuse of authority.

The elevation of a non-Kim family member to the supreme leader position would be a perilous enterprise for the OGD. The most logical choice would be Choe Ryonghae, Chief Executive of the SPA Presidium since 2019. His family at least carries the history of anti-Japanese partisans, which is a major historical component of current regime ideology.

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<sup>211</sup> *Chosun*, "김여정, 북서 '2번 동지'로 불려...간부 인사 다루는 조직지도부 1부부장 임명 (Kim Yo-jong Referred to as the North's #2...Cadre Treat Her as a OGD 1<sup>st</sup> Vice-Director)," March 25, 2014.  
[http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2014/03/25/2014032504324.html](http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2014/03/25/2014032504324.html)

<sup>212</sup> Daily NK, "Photos of Kim Jong Il's Brother, Kim Pyong Il and Recent Visits," May 9, 2007.  
<https://www.dailynk.com/english/photos-of-kim-jong-ils-brother-kim/>

<sup>213</sup> Ministry of Unification, "김설송, 그녀는 누구인가 (Who Is the Woman, Kim Sol-song?), January 8, 2017.  
<https://unikoreablog.tistory.com/6726> see also Cho Yong-bin, "北 김정은 이복누나 김설송 "숨은 권력자 (North Korea's Kim Jong-un's Step-sister Kim Sol-song Is the Hidden Authority Figure)."

Certainly, the experience of the coronavirus pandemic and the likelihood of future pandemics will play a role in the OGD's backing of a candidate to succeed a dying or dead Kim Jong-un. Choosing one of the older family members would likely be a risk for another death-in-place soon. This would only contribute to regime instability. Furthermore, the concept of a female taking the ruling lead in North Korea's male-dominated society would be difficult to defend domestically in that her off-spring would likely have a different name than Kim, thus guaranteeing the end of the dynasty. If Kim Jong-un had a son (reports of three children, but gender not identified other than the oldest is a girl; many North Korean analysts believe she is being groomed as the successor), one of the sisters could conceivably be a temporary fill-in until a son of Kim Jong-un was in his twenties. That is two decades away and beyond reasonable estimates at this point.

### Local Power Structures and Survival Dynamics

The decision-making power and policy implementation authority of North Korea's elite will have a significant impact on the average North Korean citizen at the lower levels. The interface between local leaders and the general population is one of the former manipulating the latter. The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated this dynamic. Expanded corruption accommodates the open marketplaces, providing opportunity for bureaucrats to manipulate for personal gain within the populace and erode regime authority.

The survival mechanisms for local leaders and the general population are very different. The local leaders must survive the personal dilemma of operating between the senior elite and the general population. What are their survival mechanisms during this pandemic?

- hoarding resources
- political maneuvering
- threats to subordinates and general population<sup>214</sup>
- escape plan
- survival at all costs

How does the general population survive?

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<sup>214</sup> Yuna Ha, "Sinuiju officials intensify bribe demands amid wider economic malaise," *Daily NK*, October 29, 2020. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/sinuiju-officials-intensify-bribe-demands-amid-wider-economic-malaise/>.

- scourge for food in the mountains
- resist orders of restrictions
- hoard food and drink
- take drastic measures for money or opportunity, i.e., theft, prostitution
- small group resistance
- bribe local leaders, troops and police restraining movement

Lower-level bureaucrats from the local party and people's committee historically do not tell higher echelons the truth in any projects for which they are responsible. Thus, reporting on local coronavirus infections and deaths was no doubt suppressed so the local officials could avoid blame and even punishment. This was an enabler for instability scenarios, one the elite may not have been able to detect in time to deter such scenarios. Additionally, extortion of residents by local party officials interferes with efforts by the regime's top elites to prey on the newly developed *donju* class (those who have developed capitalistic practices to enrich themselves).<sup>215</sup>

The coronavirus pandemic has intensified existing challenges to the stability of the Kim regime, exposing the delicate balance maintained through pervasive surveillance, rigid loyalty demands, and elite privilege. While the regime's survival hinges on the unwavering control exerted by the KWP and its Organization and Guidance Department, the pressures of the pandemic have magnified internal vulnerabilities and heightened elite fears of losing status and influence. The tightly controlled system leaves little room for flexibility or dissent, and the interplay between fear, privilege, and opportunity continues to drive elite compliance—even at the cost of escalating human rights abuses. As the regime faces potential succession challenges and the unpredictability of future crises, weakening the mechanisms that sustain elite loyalty and internal security may prove critical to undermining Kim Jong-un's grip on power. Ultimately, the regime's durability remains uncertain, shaped as much by ideological control as by the evolving realities confronting the North Korean people and leadership alike.

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<sup>215</sup> Edward White, "Kim Jong Un demands money from North Korea's elite," *Financial Times*, May 31, 2020. Extracted from David Maxwell's email-based News and Commentary.

## Section Seven: Looking Ahead, Where Do We Go From Here?



Figure 18, Source: Ruliweb, June 15, 2022. <https://bbs.ruliweb.com/pc/board/300143/read/57561552>

The coronavirus pandemic posed a serious threat to the Kim regime's stability as it had the potential to impact the supreme leader, key party officials, military leaders, as well as a major portion of the general population. Any future pandemic could lead to regime instability, which could further exacerbate the North Korean human rights situation. The paths to crises on the Korean Peninsula vary and are as unpredictable as the type of crisis itself. Defining each of the paths must be simplistic as the political, military, economic, and social variables differ dramatically. However, one constant that remains with each of these paths is the resultant humanitarian disaster that would accompany any crisis and the related toll in human suffering.



## Five Primary Paths to Crisis

There are some assumptions one can make that will help define those paths. Five stand out dramatically today: a public health crisis such as the coronavirus pandemic, North Korean military provocations including nuclear and missile testing, the failure of the North Korean command economy, other major natural disasters, and the relative instability of the top tiers of the Kim Jong-un Regime. These are not the only paths, but they are the ones we can easily understand today. Those paths to crisis that we understand less would include resistance to regime rule by elements of the population, nuclear disaster, coup d'état, and civil war within North Korea.

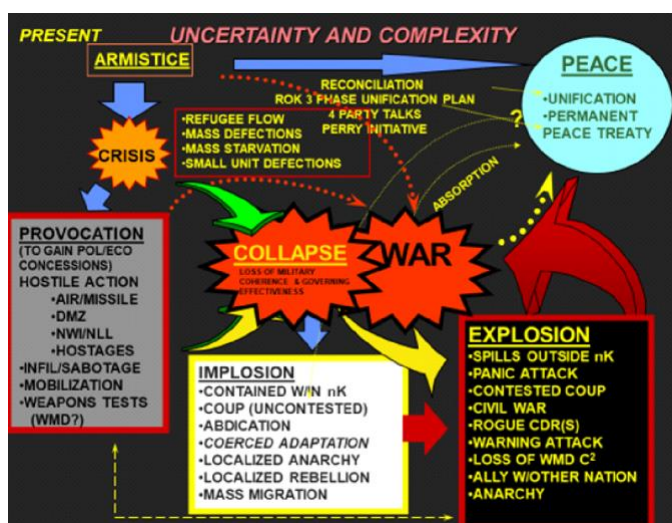


Figure 19, Source: Graphic by David Maxwell demonstrating the complexity of Kim Regime instability and its consequences.

North Korea is not unpredictable but collapse scenarios are. Modeling the collapse of the Kim Regime is difficult at best, but preparing for the things we know amount to great political-military challenges is not so obscure. To be sure, the strengths of the regime – world-class counterintelligence institutions and processes, effective use of political terror, and political micro-management of personnel at every level – have been successful at suppressing popular rebellion for more than seven decades. However, the combination of the coronavirus pandemic, a shattered economy with priorities that ignore the needs of the people, and multiple typhoons bringing historic damage pushed the Kim Regime to the brink of a stability-instability matrix that the regime has not seen since the great famine of the mid-1990s.



## Scenarios That Threaten KWP and OGD Control

There are several potential scenarios where the KWP's (and specifically the OGD<sup>216</sup>) ability to control society would be disastrously impacted and thus threaten the future of the supreme leader system and the KWP itself. Those scenarios include natural or manmade disasters (with the coronavirus pandemic being a threat example), regional rebellion, coup-d'état, internal civil war, or war with the Republic of Korea.

- Natural or manmade disasters, depending on the size, would have a severe impact on local party committees and government people's committees from communicating with central party and government institutions in Pyongyang.
- Another potential example would be a volcanic eruption of Mt. Paektu on the North Korea-China border. Such an incident would impact the entire northern area of North Korea, not to mention the Chinese northeast. The collapse of the Kim regime's ability to govern the resulting chaos could potentially undermine the ability of the KWP to control society and enable other institutions such as the military or security services to take the lead in regime survival.
- A Chernobyl-type nuclear accident at North Korea's Yongbyon Nuclear Complex in Yeongbyeon County, North Pyongan Province, would be disastrous for the local population and the several counties around it. Chernobyl contaminated 63,000 square miles with a contaminated radius of 19 miles. The land is so contaminated that it should not be used for agriculture. One estimate of a Yeongbyeon nuclear catastrophe is that it could put at risk 100 million people in Northeast Asia.<sup>217</sup> Based on the Chernobyl-sized impact, such a catastrophe at Yeongbyeon would also impact the trafficability of National Highway 1, which is the primary trade route between Pyongyang and Dandong, China. It would also disastrously impact the political prison camps located nearby, where the regime is highly unlikely to provide aid and assistance to unwanted political prisoners. Political Prison Camp 14 at Gaecheon, Camp 18 at Bukchang, and Choma-bong Camp are all just south of Yeongbyon. The prevailing winds that move west to east would soon cover Camp 15 at Yodok. These winds would also blow over and contaminate the central

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<sup>216</sup> To understand the role of the KWP OGD's control over North Korean society, see Robert Collins, "North Korea's Organization and Guidance Department: The Control Tower of Human Rights Denial," *HRNK*, 2019. [https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Collins\\_ODG\\_Web.pdf](https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Collins_ODG_Web.pdf).

<sup>217</sup> Oleg Shcheka, "Should We Worry About a North Korean Chernobyl?," *38 North*, April 19, 2018. <https://www.38north.org/2018/04/oshcheka041918/>.

east of North Korea, throwing panic in at least one-fourth to one-third of the country. With these developments, KWP control through local party committees would be seriously impaired.

- Rebellion, whether regional or in Pyongyang, is the least likely scenario to negatively impact the KWP's ability to control society. Indeed, the KWP's policies and practices are designed to prevent any resistance whatsoever at every level of society. The KWP OGD's direct control of all internal security agencies and the judicial system directly facilitate this control. However, rebellion is a distinct possibility because of other scenarios that impact governing control such as war, natural or manmade disasters, coup d'état, or civil war.
- Internal civil war<sup>218</sup> in North Korea would obviously have a devastating impact on North Korean society and on the KWP. Should some elements of the KPA find a way to suppress internal political control and initiate combat operations against the regime, the local KWP OGD-related Organization Departments of Local Party committees would be suppressed by the force rebelling against the Kim regime. The fact that the Military Department of KWP committees at local levels assign a military mission to every able-bodied local civilian makes for the likely disregard of observance of the 1977 Protocols of the Third Geneva Convention of 1949.<sup>219</sup> However, if the Kim regime wins that civil war, nothing will change for the KWP except for their increased focus on purging and ordering the execution of the regime's surviving opponents. If the Kim regime falls, it is the probable end of the KWP.
- War with the Republic of Korea and their American allies would have obvious disastrous effects on the entire country. Under such conditions, the supreme leader would lead the country from the position of KPA Supreme Commander. The KWP's ability to control society would be minimized in the face of martial law and military dominance, even though the KWP OGD controls the General Political Bureau that politically controls the

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<sup>218</sup> For this report, the author uses the term "internal civil war" to speak to war internal to the DPRK. Many analysts refer to war between North and South Korea as civil war. Author refers to war between the North and South as war with the ROK-US Alliances

<sup>219</sup> These protocols protect domestic and international victims during war and establish limits on how wars are fought. See International Committee of the Red Cross, "The Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols," October 29, 2010. <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/war-and-law/treaties-customary-law/geneva-conventions/overview-geneva-conventions.htm>.

KPA. Losing the war likely means the end of the KWP in its current form, including the OGD. Those that served in the OGD would likely be sought for prosecution for their role in human rights abuses. However, war begs the question of whether the KWP OGD and its facilities in Changkwang-dong, Chung-kuyok, Pyongyang, should be a justifiable operational target. The roughly 300 OGD officials serving in the OGD Military Directorate are assigned military ranks (the first vice-director is a four-star general). However, the rest of over 1,000 personnel in the OGD are not. That would depend on “the U.S. three interdependent principles for targeting – military necessity, humanity, and honor – which provide the foundation for other law of war principles, such as proportionality and distinction, and most of the treaty and customary rules of the law of war.”<sup>220</sup>

- There are two main types of assassination scenarios: group assassinations and lone assassinations. In a group assassination, a team of planners coordinates the attack and has a strategy for what follows. In contrast, a lone assassin acts without a broader plan. Within lone assassinations, there are two subtypes: one where the assassin has no personal connection to the target and is driven by ethical beliefs or policy disagreements, and another where the assassin has a personal relationship with the target, motivated by revenge. Regardless of the scenario, an assassination would cause significant turmoil, severely straining the regime’s structure and operations. Given the previously discussed issues, processes, and potential successors, such an event would likely destabilize the regime profoundly. In response, the KWP Organization and Guidance Department would probably implement harsh measures to maintain control while selecting a new successor based on family evaluations.

Regime collapse could conceivably result from any of the scenarios. It should be noted that the Kim regime was able to withstand a highly debilitating famine in the 1990’s, demonstrating resiliency at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives. At the same time, the security services went through severe internal purging when 25,000 security services and related party officials and families were aggressively purged during the *Shimhwajo* incident. Jang

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<sup>220</sup> Department of Defense (DoD) Law of War Manual (June 2015, updates December 2016), 50

Songtaek, then OGD Deputy Director, led the group that conducted the purges.<sup>221</sup> The combination of these two situations created the condition for the Kim regime's weakest time since the end of the Korean War.

Additionally, KWP OGD may be its own worst enemy. Abuses of power, corruption and internal competition have all been addressed in this report. As the Kim Regime deals with international sanctions, those issues will magnify and likely cause internal disruption within the OGD, thus degrading its effectiveness at societal control and service to the directives of the supreme leader. The OGD's greatest vulnerabilities are the triple reporting system of the military,<sup>222</sup> span of control (slows down the decision-making cycle, stress of over-responsibility), lack of subject matter experts in the decision-making cycle, and loss of privilege which would create worse corruption.

Regardless of the scenario of future KWP failure, future success for the Kim regime and the security of the supreme leader is based on the effectiveness of the KWP OGD and continued societal loyalty to the Monolithic Guidance System<sup>223</sup> and the Monolithic Ideology System.<sup>224</sup>

In addition to party control, the Kim Regime has several other tools of oppression to maintain that control. The Kim Regime's counter-instability strategy is essentially the regime security strategy initially developed by Kim Il-sung and significantly refined by Kim Jong-il to deal with potential political instability due to leadership challenges. Essentially, the concept of counter-instability has been there since the beginning of the Kim Family Regime. Regime stability has always required the establishment of security institutions, instability-suppression

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<sup>221</sup> Hwang Il-do, "전 북한 핵심 관료가 옥필로 쓴 '김정일 권력장악 비화 (Former North Korean Bureaucrats Write "Secret Story of Kim Jong Il's Rise to Power ")," *Shindonga Monthly*, October 2005, pp.120-151. [http://shindonga.donga.com/docs/magazine/shin/2005/09/28/200509280500048/200509280500048\\_1.html](http://shindonga.donga.com/docs/magazine/shin/2005/09/28/200509280500048/200509280500048_1.html); see also Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, "North Korea's Control over its People and the People's Safety Agency," June 20, 2016. [http://eng.nkhumanrights.or.kr/eng/datacenter/related\\_write.php?mode=view&bbs\\_idx=4503&search\\_mode=&search\\_word=&pg=2](http://eng.nkhumanrights.or.kr/eng/datacenter/related_write.php?mode=view&bbs_idx=4503&search_mode=&search_word=&pg=2); see also Kim So-jong, "장성택 주도 2만5천명 숙청 '심화조 사건' 전말이...(The Whole Story About the Shimhwajo Incident Where Jang Sung-taek Led the Purge of 25,000 People)," *Dailian News*, April 26, 2014. <http://www.dailian.co.kr/news/view/429849/?sc=naver>.

<sup>222</sup> In each KPA unit battalion through the General Staff, there is a commander reporting chain, a political reporting chain, and a military security officer reporting chain. Discrepancies in these reports lead to confusion, delay, inflexibility and distrust.

<sup>223</sup> The Monolithic Guidance System establishes sole authority in the position of the *Suryong* (supreme leader). The *Suryong's* words and directives are above the law in all cases. See Robert Collins, "Pyongyang Republic: North Korea's Capital of Human Rights Denial," *HRNK*, 2016. [https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Collins\\_PyongyangRepublic\\_FINAL\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Collins_PyongyangRepublic_FINAL_WEB.pdf).

<sup>224</sup> The Monolithic Ideology System establishes one central ideology for following the precepts of the supreme leader's ideological thought. See Robert Collins, "From Cradle to Grave: The Path of the North Korean Innocents," *HRNK*, 2017. [https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Collins\\_Cradle\\_to\\_Grave\\_WEB\\_FINALFINAL.pdf](https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Collins_Cradle_to_Grave_WEB_FINALFINAL.pdf).

policies, and money to fund the execution of suppression objectives. Tight social control policies and practices have enabled dispersed suppression capabilities at the local level. Any requirement for mass suppression would be carried out by the North Korean military.

### *Juche* Ideology and The Limits of Self-Reliance

The Kim Regime has always seen the population as a threat, even from the first days of the revolution. Only revolutionaries and those at the bottom of the social scale at the beginning of the revolution were seen as trustworthy. Implementation of the “*songbun* socio-political classification of the entire population”<sup>225</sup> was the direct result of the demands of the supreme leader’s ideology.<sup>226</sup>

Kim Il-sung, the first dictatorial ruler of North Korea, established in 1955 a North Korea-centric ideology known as *Juche*, which focuses on self-reliance. Its four basic tenets are “autonomy in ideology, independence in politics, self-sufficiency in economy, and self-reliance in defense.”<sup>227</sup> This *Juche* ideology has evolved to dominate the Kim regime’s strategy of “going it alone.” However, with one of the world’s worst healthcare systems, prioritization of the regime’s nuclear and missile programs, and a failing economy crippled by regime priorities, natural disasters, and international sanctions, the Kim regime has little if any ability to “go it alone” without sacrificing the health and welfare of a significant percentage of its population.

Prioritizing its nuclear and missile programs has made it difficult for North Korea to combat the coronavirus. While deliberate planning for military operations is a strong point for the KPA, the North Korean government, under the guidance of the KWP, does not adequately plan for contingencies that serve the security of the North Korean people. In an obvious reference to its nuclear program, North Korea’s U.N. Ambassador Kim Song stated that his country has a “reliable and effective war deterrent for self-defense.”<sup>228</sup>

Since the Kim regime continues to focus on this defense priority, it is evident that the regime diverts “critically needed resources away from the people in North Korea at tremendous

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<sup>225</sup>See Robert Collins, *Marked for Life: Songbun – North Korea’s Social Classification System*, HRNK, 2012. [https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK\\_Songbun\\_Web.pdf](https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK_Songbun_Web.pdf).

<sup>226</sup>See Robert Collins, *Pyongyang Republic: North Korea’s Capital of Human Rights Denial*, HRNK, 2016. [https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Collins\\_PyongyangRepublic\\_FINAL\\_WEB.pdf](https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Collins_PyongyangRepublic_FINAL_WEB.pdf).

<sup>227</sup> Zack Beauchamp. “Juche, the State Ideology That Makes North Koreans Revere Kim Jong Un, Explained.” Vox, 18 June 2018, [www.vox.com/world/2018/6/18/17441296/north-korea-propaganda-ideology-juche](http://www.vox.com/world/2018/6/18/17441296/north-korea-propaganda-ideology-juche)

<sup>228</sup> Michelle Nichols and David Brunnstrom, “North Korea tells U.N. that now it has 'effective war deterrent' it will focus on economy,” *Reuters*, September 30, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-assembly-northkorea-idUSKBN26K318>.

cost when they have great unmet needs.” The regime’s human rights abuses have consequently risen to levels unseen since the great famine of the 1990s. Indeed, the attitude of the Kim regime to the challenges discussed here is in a 2020 *Rodong Sinmun* headline: "The biggest enemy... is weakness of spirit and dependence on others."<sup>229</sup>

Consequently, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and international sanctions against North Korea have directly impacted the stability of the Kim Family Regime more than at any time since the great famine of the mid-1990s. Prolonged absences of Kim Jong-un, suspensions of North Korean military training, and focused efforts at promoting younger sister Kim Yo-jong’s leadership actions are all unusual activity rarely seen in regime behavior. These actions have led to a trickledown effect of worsening the human rights of each North Korean. There are several issues that deserve considerable attention to those that study North Korea for both humanitarian and national security reasons.

- Will Kim Jong-un’s advisors, both political and military, be willing to shape information input to Kim in order to control panic both among the elite and within the general population?
- Does Kim Jong-un’s penchant for hiding during a time of pandemic give other political and military leaders an opportunity to increase their own power, perhaps to the level of challenging that of Kim in certain political or military areas?
- How draconian will military and internal security social control measures be in dealing with future pandemics?
- Did the degradation of human rights lead to greater regime inability to cope with the pandemic?
- Will future Korean Workers’ Party Congresses establish more competent measures in dealing with future pandemics?
- How will future pandemics and Kim regime measures to combat them impact regime survival? How will they impact the regime’s continued crimes against humanity?

As Eliot Cohen and John Gooch state in their treatise on military miscalculation, “all military misfortune is the result of three things...failure to learn, failure to adapt, failure to

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<sup>229</sup> *Chosun Ilbo*, “N.Korean Border Guards 'Under Shoot-to-Kill Orders',” August 28, 2020. [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2020/08/28/2020082802261.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2020/08/28/2020082802261.html).

anticipate...”<sup>230</sup> That certainly applies to the current security conditions on the Korean Peninsula where a variety of scenarios could lead to war, including regime collapse. But the same could be said about human rights conditions under such a scenario in terms of preparing for human rights deterioration. After all, accountability for human rights denial has no expiration date and there is no statute of limitations.

### Conclusion: A Fragile Future

In conclusion, the coronavirus pandemic served as a critical stress test for the Kim regime, exposing deep vulnerabilities in North Korea’s political, economic, and social systems. The regime’s reliance on extreme information control, ideological repression, and militarized responses in lieu of effective public health and humanitarian measures underscored its prioritization of regime survival over citizen welfare. As the crisis unfolded, it intensified the regime’s existing weaknesses, including food insecurity, healthcare collapse, and economic stagnation—conditions that disproportionately impacted the general population while elites and the military were insulated through preferential treatment.

While the pandemic further entrenched Kim Jong-un’s grip on power through heightened surveillance, border militarization, and elite loyalty enforcement, it also revealed the fragility of this control. The regime’s refusal of foreign aid, crackdown on dissent, and dependence on illicit financial activities underscored its unsustainable approach to governance. The structural corruption, elite self-preservation, and bureaucratic inefficiency worsened crisis management, contributing to long-term vulnerabilities within the state’s core institutions, including the Korean People’s Army and the Workers’ Party apparatus.

Ultimately, North Korea’s pandemic-era policies accelerated a trajectory of internal decay and worsened the human rights situation. The compounded effects of sanctions, natural disasters, and systemic repression are eroding social cohesion and undermining the regime’s capacity to maintain absolute control. Future shocks—whether political, economic, or health-related—could trigger instability or even regime failure, making North Korea’s path forward increasingly precarious.

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<sup>230</sup>Eliot Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Free Press Publisher, 2006).



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### 3. Figures:

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- Figure 3, Source: Graphic at Lee Sung-Hyon, “북, 발열환자 연이틀 10만명대 감소세, 완치율은 약 83% (In North Korea, the number of fever patients has decreased by 100,000 for two days in a row, and the cure rate is about 83%)., *Tongil News*, May 23, 2020. <https://www.tongilnews.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=205102>.

Translation of graphic: “With our faith, will, and unity,” and “Let us overcome the created quarantine crisis and firmly protect the well-being of our country and people” and at the bottom “Unscientific fear, lack of faith, weak will.

- Figure 4, Depiction of confirmed cases of the coronavirus in North Korea, as reported in April 2020. Source: Jieun Kim, “Ruling Party Lecturers Admit COVID-19 is Spreading in North Korea, Contradicting Official Claims,” Radio Free Asia, April 17, 2020. URL: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/confirmed-coronavirus-04172020192920.html>.
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- Figure 8, Source: Hyung-Jin Kim “Kim, other N. Koreans attend large funeral amid COVID worry” Seattle Times, May 23, 2022. <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/kim-other-n-koreans-attend-large-funeral-amid-covid-worry/>.
- Figure 9, Source: Liberty Korea Post News, May 24, 2022. <https://www.lkp.news/news/articleView.html?idxno=2040>
- Figure 10, Source: Mijin Lee, PhD, Hannah Kim, MD, Danbi Cho, BS, and So Yoon Kim, MD, “Overview of healthcare system in North Korea,” Journal of the Korean Medical Association, 2013. <https://jkma.org/journal/view.php?viewtype=pubreader&number=791#!po=40.9091>.
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Figure 16, Kim Jung Un inspecting several Hwasan-31 nuclear warheads. Source: Shreyas Reddy, “Activity at North Korea’s light water reactor raises ‘serious concerns,’ US says,” NK News, December 25, 2023. <https://www.nknews.org/2023/12/activity-at-north-koreas-light-water-reactor-raises-serious-concerns-us-says/>.

Figure 17, Source: Graphic at Kim Hwang-yong, “북한 '코로나 봉쇄'에 민생고 악화...전문가 "장마당 폐쇄 등 한계 올 것" (North Korea's 'Corona blockade' worsens people's livelihood...Expert: "There will be limits, including the closure of markets"),” *VOA Korea*, May 24, 2022. <https://www.voakorea.com/a/6586707.html>.

Figure 18, Source: For graphic, see Ruliweb, “요즘 북한 프로파간다 보면 예전같은 맛이 없음 (When you look at North Korean propaganda these days, it doesn't taste like it used to),” *Ruliweb*, June 15, 2022. <https://bbs.ruliweb.com/pc/board/300143/read/57561552>. Graphic translation: “The entire people unite” and “Let’s achieve victory in the economic construction and quarantine war.”

Figure 19, Source: Graphic by David Maxwell demonstrating the complexity of Kim Regime instability and its consequences.