

**Statement on the UPR Pre-session of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)
Delivered by the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB)**

28 August 2024

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This statement is presented on behalf of the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB), a non-governmental, non-political, and non-religious organization. Since 2003, NKDB has interviewed over 20,000 North Korean escapees to investigate and document human rights abuses committed in the DPRK. As of August 2024, NKDB's database has 144,175 entries on these abuses. NKDB has made submissions for the 3rd and 4th UPR of the DPRK and for the 4th UPR of China.

Due to the DPRK's restrictions on the entry and operation of human rights organizations, NKDB has consulted 20 North Korean escapees who had lived in the DPRK during the review period. In-depth interviews with these escapees, along with a review of laws, official statements, and satellite imagery, serve as the basis for NKDB's submissions for the UPR.

This statement will address three thematic: (1) freedom of expression and access to information, (2) freedom of movement, and (3) freedom of religion.

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ISSUE 1: FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION

During the 3rd UPR, the DPRK accepted 8 recommendations on the freedom of expression and access to information. These recommendations include reforming laws and ensuring the pursuit and communication of all forms of information and ideas.

Despite these recommendations, the DPRK has enacted 3 laws that criminalize the rightful exercise of these freedoms. Namely, the Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act of 2020 prohibits the consumption of unapproved media, especially South Korean media, and the use of unregistered devices. The Youth Education Guarantee Act of 2021 prohibits non-conformity with socialist mannerisms, while the Pyongyang Cultural Language Protection Act of 2023 prohibits the use of a South Korean accent and any language linked to South Korean culture. The failure to abide by these laws can result in severe punishments, including forced labor and even the death penalty. While the DPRK has long oppressed the freedom of expression—considering any statement unfavorable to the leadership to be treason—the country's recent enactment of new laws highlights its increasingly draconian “rule by law” system.

In addition, the DPRK has installed detectors against unauthorized transmissions and deploys task forces, known as *grouppa* or *sangmu*, to conduct random inspections of personally owned media and to arbitrarily detain citizens, with a particular focus on youth.

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Therefore, we recommend that the DPRK:

- Repeal the Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Law, the Youth Education Guarantee Law, and the Pyongyang Cultural Language Protection Act, and decriminalize actions that amount to the legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

- Allow individuals to freely access all types of media and information, including online.

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ISSUE 2: FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

During the 3rd UPR, the DPRK accepted 3 recommendations on the freedom of movement. However, all North Korean escapees interviewed by NKDB have unanimously reported that the DPRK still requires permits for any travel outside of one's designated city or province. DPRK citizens must submit their purpose of travel to obtain these permits, often relying on bribery to secure approval.

Furthermore, most DPRK citizens are prohibited from traveling abroad, with passports issued only to those visiting relatives in China or to state-appointed officials for work-related purposes. Those who attempt to defect and are forcibly repatriated face harsh punishments, including forced labor.

Under the pretext of the COVID-19 pandemic, the DPRK also tightened control of its border with China, a significant avenue of defection and smuggling of essential goods. Satellite imagery reveals that the government constructed 482 kilometers of fencing and thousands of posts since January 2020.¹ In addition, the DPRK has implemented a "shoot-on-sight" policy against anyone approaching the border without permission.² Consequently, fewer than two dozen North Koreans are reported to have successfully escaped the country since the start of the pandemic. Along with the heightened border control, the DPRK's refusal of entry to humanitarian agencies has contributed to an alarming level of isolation during the review period.

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Therefore, we recommend that the DPRK:

- Guarantee the right to freedom of movement, including the right to leave one's country, in accordance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
- Release all individuals who have been forcibly repatriated to the DPRK from China.

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ISSUE 3: FREEDOM OF RELIGION

During the 3rd UPR, the DPRK accepted 3 recommendations on the freedom of religion. These recommendations include eliminating religious persecution and promoting religious tolerance and dialogue.

Despite these recommendations, the DPRK continues to view the exercise of Christian and other unapproved beliefs as acts of treason. As a result of longstanding religious persecution, almost all North Koreans interviewed by NKDB since 2003 have had no exposure to religious activities before defection, indicating a near-extinction of organized religion in the country. The very few individuals who practice religion have been sentenced to forced labor, sent to political prison camps, or executed upon being

¹ Muzaffar, M. (2024, March 8). *Satellite images show how North Korea has transformed its border with China*. The Independent. <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/east-asia/north-korea-border-satellite-images-china-b2509180.html>

² Mun, D. H. (2023, May 12). *North Korea hands down shoot-on-sight orders for personnel guarding train tracks near border*. Daily NK. <https://www.dailynk.com/english/north-korea-hands-down-shoot-on-sight-orders-personnel-guarding-train-tracks-near-border/>

caught. Amid the near-extinction of organized religions like Christianity, recent North Korean escapees have reported the sporadic practice of fortune-telling and shamanism. However, these activities are likewise subject to crackdowns in the DPRK.

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Therefore, we recommend that the DPRK:

- Allow the free exercise of religious beliefs, including organized meetings and access to religious texts, that is independent from state supervision.
- End the practice of treating individuals as political criminals based on their religious or ideological beliefs.

We call for member states to raise clear and informed recommendations to the DPRK in line with international standards on the freedom of expression and access to information, freedom of movement, and freedom of religion.

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Thank you for your time and attention.