

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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South Korean President Moon Jae-In attends an interview with Reuters at the Presidential Blue House in Seoul, South Korea June 22, 2017. 2017 Reuters/Kim Hong-Ji

(Washington, DC, June 29, 2017) [South Korean](#) President Moon Jae-In should raise the perilous situation of more than 38 [North Korean](#) refugees detained in [China](#) in his meetings with US President Donald Trump in Washington, DC, on June 29 and 30, 2017, Human Rights Watch said today. The refugees are at risk of imminent return to North Korea, where they face torture and long-term detention.

North Koreans forcibly returned by China regularly endure torture while being interrogated about their activities abroad. They then can disappear into North Korea's horrific prison camp system, where prisoners face torture, sexual violence, forced labor, and other inhuman treatment.

Moon should also call for a global partnership to seek improvements on the human rights situation for North Korea people.

Phil Robertson

President Moon should urge President Trump to join South Korea in calling on China's leaders not to send these 38 North Korean refugees back into harm's way, said [Phil Robertson](#), deputy Asia director. Moon should also call for a global partnership to seek improvements on the human rights situation for North Korea people.

The death of the US student [Otto Warmbier](#) after apparent mistreatment in custody in North Korea has already alerted Trump administration officials to the dangers faced by prisoners in North Korean prisons.

Activists and family members have informed Human Rights Watch that at least 51 North Koreans have been detained in China since July 2016, including a baby born in detention, four children ages 10 to 16, and three elderly women in frail health. Based on their information, Human Rights Watch believes that at least 13 North Koreans have already been forcibly returned to North Korea, meaning that at least 38 remain in China. Human Rights Watch is unaware of reliable estimates of the total number of North Koreans in custody in China, or the number of refugees returned to North Korea.

China routinely labels North Koreans as illegal [economic migrants](#) and regularly repatriates them to North Korea, where they face abuses by prison guards, and forced labor in harsh and dangerous conditions. Those defying the rules of the camps, or seeking to escape face arbitrary punishments, including public executions. Leaving North Korea without official permission is a crime for which abuse and punishment is certain among those sent back to North Korean state security (*Bowibu*).

As a result, Human Rights Watch has determined that all North Koreans in China who left North Korea without permission should be considered *refugees sur place* people who become refugees as a result of fleeing their country or due to circumstances arising after their flight and thus in need of protection. North Korea's Ministry of Peoples Security enforces a decree that makes defection from North Korea a crime of treachery against the nation that is harshly punished, including in some cases through executions.

Among the 38 North Koreans are a [group](#) of eight who were detained in March. People monitoring their situation believe they are still held in Suizhong county in Liaoning province. Among the group are two women who escaped after being sold to Chinese men and two women with serious health problems. On June 27, the US government downgraded China in its Trafficking in Persons Report to a Tier 3 country, noting the Chinese government's continued forced repatriations to North Korea without protections for victims of trafficking.

In a recent case of five North Koreans at risk of repatriation, Human Rights Watch wrote a [letter to Chinese President Xi Jinping](#) on June 24, requesting their release and free passage to a safe third country. The latest information received by a family member, Lim, on June 27 was that Chinese authorities were still detaining the five near Yanji city in Jilin province. Plans to move them to Helong city had reportedly changed and the group was scheduled to be moved to Tumen city, across the border from the North Korean city of Namyang. Human Rights Watch remains concerned that these five North Koreans could be forced across the border to North Korea at any time.

Lim remains very concerned about her family's treatment if sent back because police detained and forcibly disappeared her father in 2010. When detainees vanish without information on their whereabouts, trial dates, or result of an administration or judicial procedure, it is common for North Koreans to assume the person has been sent to a political prison camp (*kwanliso*). Lim fears that because of their father's status, her family will be lost in the *kwanliso* system.

A 2014 United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea found that those fleeing the country are targeted as part of a systematic and widespread attack against populations considered to pose a threat to the political system and leadership of the DPRK to isolate the population from contact with the outside world. It also found that crimes against humanity, including torture, execution, enslavement, and sexual violence are committed against prisoners and people forcibly returned to North Korea from China. The Commission of Inquiry also criticized China for failing to meet its obligations as a party to the UN Refugee Convention.

President Moon should remind President Trump that it is not just Americans who suffer at the hands of the authorities in Pyongyang and that together they can take a stand to support these desperate North Korean refugees, Robertson said. China should provide them asylum or allow them to make their way to another country that will protect them.

A Decade of Enforced Disappearances in Bangladesh

Abuses and Due Process Violations in Pretrial Detention in North Korea



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