

Submission on North Korea's Implementation of Recommendations from the Third and Fourth Cycles of the Universal Periodic Review for the Special Rapporteur's Report

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Human Rights Watch welcomes the opportunity to assess the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) implementation of selected Universal Periodic Review (UPR) recommendations from the third (2019) and fourth (2025) cycles.

Drawing on research from 2015 to 2025, we find little to no demonstrable progress by North Korea in implementing most of the UPR recommendations it accepted. North Korea took some limited steps toward inclusion for persons with disabilities, such as amendments to existing laws to remove derogatory terms referring to persons with disabilities and initiatives to spread awareness, but they appeared to be largely symbolic and lacked sustained, verifiable impact. Strict controls on information prevent access to reliable information and monitoring efforts. Since 2019, repression has intensified, especially on the rights to freedom of expression and movement. During the last two UPR cycles, repeated recommendations show no measurable advancement, and the DPRK continues to reject meaningful cooperation with international mechanisms, including the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on human rights in the DPRK.

1. **Among the recommendations made during the third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review related to the rights to movement, work, food, and persons with disabilities, are there any recommendations that you think the DPRK has implemented or made progress? If so, please explain in detail.**

   Right to Freedom of Movement

   North Korea accepted three recommendations on freedom of movement related to ensuring people's ability to travel within and outside the country, but the government continues to tightly control internal and external movement, and punish unauthorized travel. The government also punishes forced returnees, most of them are returned from China, subjecting them to severe punishment including imprisonment, torture, sexual violence, enforced disappearances, and even executions. The 2014 Commission of Inquiry report found these abuses amounted to crimes against humanity.

   Right to Work

   North Korea accepted one recommendation, to reduce discrimination against women in employment, but there have been no meaningful reforms. The government has failed to adequately address the widespread and pervasive discrimination against women at work and at home, sexual and gender-based violence, as well as enforcement of rigid gender stereotypes.

   Right to Food

   The government accepted 15 recommendations, including cooperating with international organizations, strengthening anti-discrimination safeguards, and improving access to food to at-risk groups including children. However, since the start of Covid-19, food insecurity has worsened, discrimination in access to food and services remains pervasive, and access for United Nations agencies remains restricted.

Rights of Persons with Disabilities

North Korea has taken some positive steps on this issue. In the third cycle, it accepted 11 recommendations, including commitments to expand inclusive education, improve accessibility, and protect the rights of persons with disabilities. In 2025, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities found that the government had removed some physical barriers in workplaces between 2016 and 2020, developed Korean braille in 2019, and enacted amendments to existing laws in 2024 to remove derogatory language. However, the Committee concluded that these efforts were limited and largely symbolic. The legal framework lacks explicit protections against disability-based discrimination and does not recognize denial of reasonable accommodation as discrimination. The Committee also raised concerns about persistent stigma, preferential treatment for former soldiers, and continued segregation of children with disabilities in special schools.

2. **Among the recommendations made during the third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review, are there any other recommendations that you think the DPRK has implemented or made progress?**

Cooperation on Health

In its third cycle, North Korea supported four recommendations related to cooperation with the international community on health, nutrition, and food security. After border closures in 2020 and the departure of all UN international staff in early 2021, there has been some re-engagement. UN workers have not permanently returned, but the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) restarted childhood immunization support in 2023, Food and Agriculture Organization conducted a visit in 2024, and in October 2025, UNICEF and the World Health Organization announced preparations for a joint visit in November.

The health system faces chronic shortages of medicine and medical supplies, outdated infrastructure, and limited access to modern treatments. Prolonged border closures between 2020 and 2023 further constrained care and led to a shortage of essential medicines. Malnutrition remains a concern, exacerbated by rising prices and economic instability.

Humanitarian Access to Prisoners

North Korea accepted one recommendation to allow humanitarian access to vulnerable groups, including prisoners. Access has not yet been granted. However, the September 2025 10-year assessment report by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), consistent with Human Rights Watch research, found nominal improvements in detention conditions, such as reduced violence by guards and improved treatment of pregnant women. DPRK has also enacted and amended laws to guarantee access to legal representation and appeals for all under trial, and to hold public officials accountable for misconduct. However, arrests without a warrant, lack of proper police

investigations, access to adequate or effective legal counsel, and fair-trial concerns persist.

The 2014 Commission of Inquiry found that North Korea committed crimes against humanity against those detained in political prison camps and in the ordinary prison system. In 2021, OHCHR reported reasonable grounds to believe such crimes continued and also expanded to pretrial detention facilities.

3. **Among the recommendations accepted by the DPRK during the Third and Fourth Cycles of the Universal Periodic Review, are there repeated recommendations without seeing any progress?**

International Human Rights Treaties

In both UPR cycles, North Korea supported several recommendations to ratify core human rights treaties but has made no progress. These include the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. The last core treaty that North Korea ratified was the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2016. Since then, it has neither signed nor ratified additional human rights treaties, nor meaningfully engaged with the monitoring mechanisms for those it has ratified. North Korea permitted a 2017 visit by the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, but it was allowed limited access. No other treaty body or special procedure has been granted access. North Korea also rejects cooperation with the OHCHR Seoul office and the Special Rapporteur on North Korean human rights. It continues to block independent monitors and dismisses allegations of rights violations as politically motivated.

Freedom of Movement

North Korea supported a recommendation from France in both cycles to ensure the freedom of movement of all its citizens but has shown no meaningful implementation. Instead, it tightly restricts freedom of movement within the country and treats unauthorized travel abroad as a serious offense. Those caught leaving without permission or forcibly returned, mostly from China, face severe punishment. As of November 2025, border guards along the north remained under orders to "unconditionally shoot" anyone trying to leave without permission, based on a 2020 decree to protect the country against Covid-19.

Internally, travel between provinces and to special zones, like Pyongyang or border areas, requires official travel permits, which are difficult to obtain. Some loosened enforcement through bribes before 2020 has reversed. Since January 2020, domestic movement controls have tightened significantly.

Right to Work

North Korea accepted one recommendation in 2019 to reduce discrimination against women in employment, and three in 2025 on International Labour Organization engagement and safe working conditions. However, no reforms have been documented.

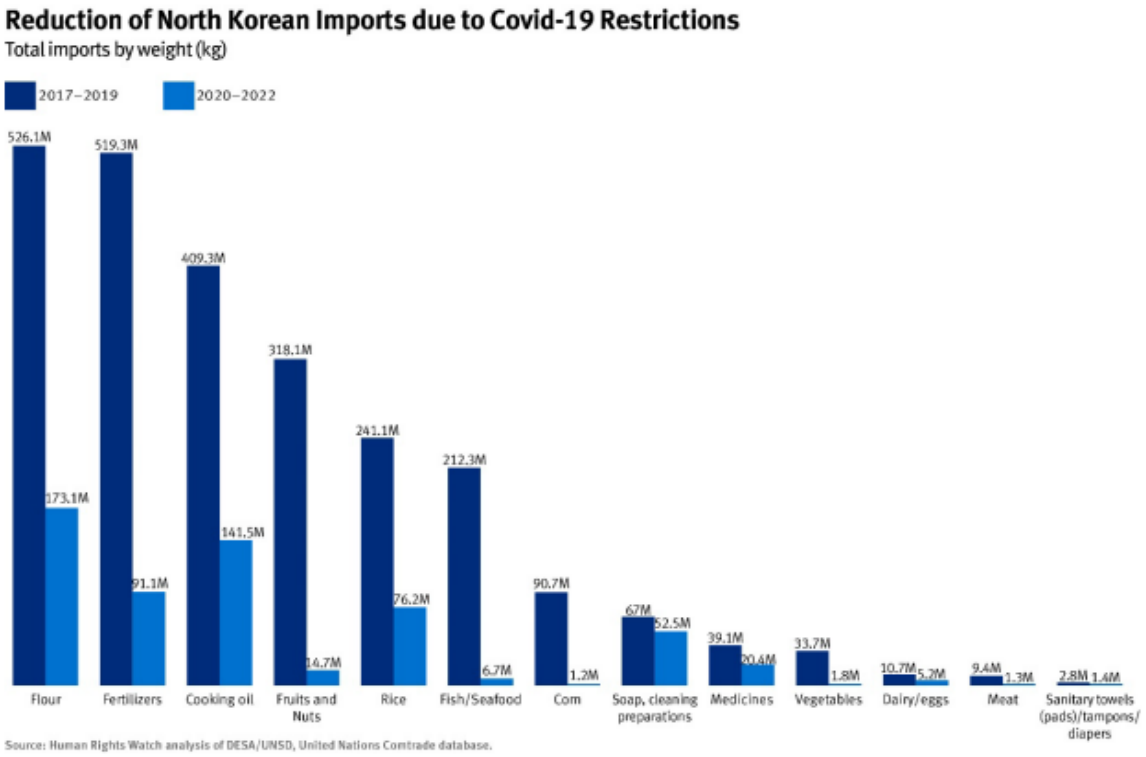
People are not allowed to choose their profession. The government assigns jobs after school, the army, or university. Official wages are symbolic and insufficient to allow for an adequate standard of living, so most households depend on side income from private trading and informal work. Gender roles shape this survival economy: married women are permitted, and expected, to leave their assigned jobs to financially support the family. Married men have to work at their state assigned jobs or have to pay a fee to their workplaces to be excused from work, so they can operate their own businesses.

Since 2013, North Korea adopted limited economic reforms, amending laws to support entrepreneurship and tolerating informal markets. However, many of these activities remained classified as illegal or unregulated, leaving people vulnerable to arbitrary crackdowns. Since 2020, new economic restrictions have reversed these limited reforms, weakening private actors and increasing state control. Forced labor remains widespread, including among children, detainees, and overseas workers. Rather than improving the right to work, North Korea has deepened control over labor and uses forced labor as a tool of exploitation, surveillance, and indoctrination.

Right to Food

North Korea accepted 15 recommendations in the third UPR and 12 recommendations in the fourth UPR cycle, to cooperate with international organizations, ensure non-discrimination, and improve access to food. Yet, cooperation remains limited and conditional, and there have been no structural reforms toward increasing food production or distribution.

The Public Distribution System (PDS) exists on paper with subsidized sales, but in practice coverage is erratic, with rations depending on location, season, and a household's status. As a result, most households rely on markets, even though domestic production is insufficient and the country depends heavily on imports, largely from China. In early 2020, North Korea blocked almost all foreign trade, limiting access to food, fertilizer, and other necessities. Although official trade partially resumed since 2022, volumes until 2024 remained below pre-pandemic levels.



Food insecurity and malnutrition have been chronic since the mid-late 2000s. In July 2023, the UN estimated that 46 percent of the population faced food insecurity between 2020 and 2022.

Right to Freedom of Expression

North Korea supported recommendations from Luxembourg in both cycles to ensure freedom of expression and media independence. Nevertheless, the North Korean government has increased restrictions on freedom of expression since 2019. Access to information is heavily controlled. Access to unsanctioned phones, computers, televisions, radios, or other media is illegal and considered "anti-socialist" behavior. The government has enacted a number of laws that prohibit citizens from viewing, possessing, and distributing unsanctioned content, including South Korean movies, books, news, or publications, punishable with fines, detention, hard labor, and even the death penalty.

Women's Rights

North Korea accepted recommendations from Uruguay (third cycle) and Germany (fourth) to fulfill its obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). However, North Korea is yet to submit its fifth report to CEDAW, which was due in November 2021, and continues to deny access for in-country monitoring.

Women and girls remain severely marginalized, facing sexual and gender-based abuses, structural discrimination, and entrenched gender stereotypes. In February 2023, the

Special Rapporteur on the DPRK highlighted the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 restrictions on women and girls and declining economic participation of women who are the main breadwinners in most families, and flagged a possible increase in domestic violence. The government has failed to address these concerns.

4. **Among the recommendations made during the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review, please select one or two recommendation(s) related to the rights to movement, work, food and persons with disabilities and suggest concrete steps that the DPRK could take to implement the recommendation(s).**

Right to Food

- Improve access to adequate food and health care and allow international humanitarian organizations unimpeded access to provide food and medical aid.
- Restore and expand monitored humanitarian access for UN agencies and non-governmental organizations, including field visits and routine monitoring.
- Fast track approvals for in-country transport of food and nutrition and healthcare supplies by relaxing travel/transport permits for food, healthcare, and humanitarian shipments.
- Prioritize Public Distribution System (PDS) rations for children under 5, pregnant and lactating women, older persons, persons with disabilities, and prisoners, and publicly communicate province-level allocation schedules.
- Publish basic harvest and PDS allocation figures.
- Implement nutrition and social protection programs, such as providing school meals and fortified blended foods, ensuring community-based treatment for acute malnutrition, and independent monitoring of these programs.
- Revise PDS norms to guarantee an adequate minimum standard of living, including adequate food, clothing, housing and the continuous improvement of living conditions, and ensuring survival rations during lean seasons.
- Launch an agriculture support package (improved seed distribution, repair hubs for small machinery, and trainings) with an emphasis on bridging seasonal harvest gaps.

Rights of Persons with Disabilities

- Continue to implement comprehensive measures to support persons with disabilities.
- Prohibit disability-based discrimination in employment, education, housing and movement, and require reasonable accommodation across ministries and state enterprises for persons with disabilities.
- Designate a high-level government focal point for the implementation of the Convention of the Right of Persons with Disabilities and disseminate convention guidance nationwide.
- Prohibit institutionalization and segregation of persons with disabilities, remove restrictions on their freedom to choose where and with whom they live.
- Amend core laws to explicitly ban disability-based discrimination, define reasonable accommodation, and replace plenary guardianship with supported decision-making.
- Launch a de-institutionalization roadmap in pilot municipalities: develop community-based services, inclusive education pathways, and accessible public transport passes that remove permit-based barriers to local movement.

- Create an accessible employment plan such as incentives for hiring persons with disabilities in state enterprises, a central fund for workplace adaptations, and vocational training linked to real vacancies.