

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Media Briefing

AI index: ASA 24/001/2011

**Under Strict Embargo: 19.00 GMT on 3 May 2011,**

### North Korea: Political Prison Camps

Amnesty International is releasing new footage and testimony to highlight the horrific conditions of political prison camps in North Korea at a time when there is fear of a potential new crackdown in preparation for a possible succession in leadership.

The basis of the briefing comes from testimony from 15 former inmates and prison guards – a majority of whom have decided to remain anonymous for their own security.

#### **Amnesty International's demands:**

Amnesty International is calling on the North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, , to::

- Acknowledge the existence of political prison camps in North Korea
- Immediately close all political prison camps in North Korea
- Immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience, including relatives held on the basis of “guilt-by-association”.
- Release all other inmates unless they are charged with an internationally recognisable offence, remanded by an independent court and given a fair trial

Individuals can help by signing Amnesty's online petition

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/appeals-for-action/north-korean-political-prison-camps> or by writing a letter to the North Korean delegation in Geneva.

## **Collateral**

*All available by request to the Amnesty International press office*

### **Spokespeople**

- Rajiv Narayan (Amnesty International North Korea Researcher)
- Sam Zarifi (Amnesty International Asia-Pacific Programme Director)

### **Satellite images:**

- Prison camp 15 (from April 2011 and comparison from 2003)
- Prison camp 14 (Feb 2011)
- Prison camp 18 (Feb 2011)
- Prison camp 22 (Feb 2011)

### **Stills:**

- One picture of the inside of political prison camp 15 at Yodok – the only one known to exist
- Pictures of case studies
- Generic pictures of North Korea

### **Reconstruction stills**

- Torture: 4ft x 4ft cube solitary cell
- Torture: Water immersion
- Torture: Airplane
- Food: Quantity of

### **B-roll footage:**

- Analysis of the satellite images
- Reconstructions of the torture techniques used in the political prison camps
- Reconstruction of the food served in the camps
- Generic footage from inside North Korea
- An interview with our Asia-Pacific Programme Director, Sam Zarifi
- An interview with a former inmate

### Kwanliso (political prison camps)

#### **People sent to camps include:**

- Those who have criticised the leadership (mostly officials);
- officials or cadres who are perceived to have failed in the implementation of policies;
- those who contacted South Koreans in other countries (in most cases when they were in China);
- those who were believed to be part of anti-government groups, including those who have criticised the government for its policies on the food crisis;
- those caught listening to South Korean broadcasts;
- un-repatriated prisoners of war from the Korean War (1950-1953);
- those North Koreans who were caught in China after crossing the border on their way to South Korea with South Korean NGOs or with religious texts or if linked to the military or political leadership.

**Estimated 200,000** offenders and families in total held in two types of zones:

- **Total Control Zone** – those whom the authorities perceive to have committed serious crimes, including anti-regime crimes. No one is ever released
- **Revolutionary Zone** – those whom the authorities perceived as having committed less serious crimes including being critical of government policy or illegally crossing the border. Sentences can range from a few months to ten years.

#### **Camp conditions in Yodok**

- Average winter temperatures vary between -20 and -30 C in South Hamkyung province where Kwanliso 15 is based. In most camps there are no blankets
- One toilet for every 200 people
- No adequate access to medicine.
- Public executions take place in front of prisoners

Apart from the political prison camp in Yodok (Kwanliso 15), Amnesty International has very limited information on the conditions in the other camps – we knew only their locations, and from satellite imagery an estimate on the numbers of people who are held and the goods that are produced.

Nearly all the information available to Amnesty International comes from those who have been released from political prison camps in North Korea and have managed to leave the country. These are primarily former detainees of the Revolutionary Zone at Yodok.

#### **Statistics**

- Only three people are known to have EVER escaped from **Political Prison Camps 14 and 18 in the Total Control Zones** and managed to leave the country.
- One, a child, was held for eight months in a tiny 'torture cell' where it is impossible to stand or lie down .
- An estimated 40 per cent of inmates die from malnutrition.
- Every former inmate interviewed witnessed at least one public execution.
- The number of public executions across North Korea (ie those not in the camps) has risen sharply over the last few years. This is believed to be part of the crackdown on possible dissent before the expected leadership succession from current leader Kim Jong-il to his third son Kim Jong-un. In 2010 60 people were known to have been publicly executed, up from at least seven the year before.



## **Punishments and torture in the camps**

### **Executions**

They are either by shooting or hanging and take place at the discretion of the prison officials.

### **Solitary cells**

Those deemed disruptive are thrown into cells where it is impossible to either stand or lie down. The minimum period in the cell is one week. Amnesty International is aware of one case where a 13-year-old boy was thrown into the cell for eight months. He was kept inside the cell for the entire period.

### **Immersion in water**

A plastic bag placed over the head and submerged in water for long periods of time

### **“Hung-up as an airplane”**

Prisoners are beaten with their hands and feet tied behind them and their bodies strung up so that they hang against the ground. Arms tied and hung for half hour periods – up to five times a day.

Other torture includes sleep deprivation, sharp bamboo pieces placed under the fingernails, handcuffing and suspension by the wrists

### **Yeon-jwa-je (guilt by association)**

Tens of thousands of people are believed to being held in Kwanliso for ‘guilt by association’. These are people sent to the camps because one of their relatives has been sent to one of the camps.

In just one camp – Kwanliso 15 at Yodok – which covers some five valleys, it is estimated that the number held there through guilt by association runs into thousands.

Yodok is a camp of 50,000 inmates and it is known that one of the areas (that comprises the Revolutionary Zone) is designated for families, many of whom are “guilt-by-association” prisoners. It is understood that other “guilt-by-association” prisoners are held in the Total Control Zone at Yodok.

## **Example cases and quotes**

### **Executions**

- Shin Dong-hyuk, who was born in, and spent, 23 years in Kwanliso 14, was forced to witness the public executions of his mother Chang Hye-kyong and brother Shin Hee-keun. They were caught while attempting to escape and publicly executed. Shin recalls: “Shortly after my father and I were reunited after being tortured at a torture chamber in Kwanliso 14 for over seven months, we were blindfolded again and taken outside to a public square where a crowd of people had gathered. I recognised the place as a public execution site that was used two to three times every year. The hand cuffs were removed, and we were told to sit in the front row of the crowd. We saw two convicts, a man and a woman, being dragged to the site from some distance. As the convicts were dragged closer, to my horror, I recognised them; they were my mother and brother! My brother was obviously very weak, his bones clearly visible beneath his skin, my mother seemed swollen from head to foot. An indictment was read aloud, the final words of which stated that Chang Hye-kyong and Shin Ha-kun, enemies of the people, were sentenced to death. And then, in front of my father and me, my mother was first executed by hanging and, then, my brother was shot dead by a firing squad.”
- Choi Kwang-ho, who had been sent to Kwanliso 15 for saying he could not live in North Korea any longer, was publicly executed after, overcome with hunger, he broke away from his work group to pick berries on 28 August 2001.

- Another inmate, Kim, said: “Everyone in Kwanliso witnessed executions. When I was an inmate in Kwanliso 15, I saw three executions. Those executed included inmates who were caught escaping. However, there were no successful escapees, to my knowledge, from Kwanliso 15 at Yodok. All those who tried to escape were caught. They were interrogated for two to three months and then executed.” One of the people Kim witnessed being executed was 24 year-old Dong Chul-mee, who was executed in 1999 for her religious beliefs.

### **Hunger**

- A prison guard told Amnesty International that inmates would catch and eat snakes or rats, he even discovered prisoners eating pig feed.
- Another inmate, Shin Dong-hyuk, said: “One lucky day, I discovered some kernels of corn in a small pile of cow dung. I picked them up, cleaned them with my sleeve before eating.”
- Park In-shik, an inmate at Kwanliso 15, was caught taking and eating honey from a beehive in February 2003. He was sent to solitary confinement with reduced food allocations. He died from malnutrition. He was 38 years old when he was initially sent to Kwanliso 15 in September 2001 for criticising the country’s infrastructure when he was in a drunken state.

### **Sanitation**

- “We never could take a shower during the years as prisoners in Yodok. Our bodies stank and it was very itchy as we were covered with lice. Over time, our skin had a thick layer of dirt and we did not notice the stink as we were all stinking. In summer, occasionally, when we worked by the stream, the prison guards would allow us to splash water from the river as the prison guards could not bear the smell. Even then, few prisoners took a bath as we were not sure if we would live for another day. After our release, it took months for us to remove the thick layer of dirt and lice.” Kim (former Yodok inmate)

### **Torture**

- A former Yodok inmate, Lee, gave two accounts of being tortured: “I saw a big kettle on a small table and a low wooden table with straps, about 20 centimetres high. I was strapped to the table and the kettle was forced into my mouth. I had no choice but to drink the water. After a short while, my mouth was full of water and it started to flow through my nose. Facing sharp pain and suffocation, I fainted. When I woke up after some time (I do not know how long I had lost consciousness), I felt the interrogators were jumping on a board which was laid on my swollen stomach to force the water out of my body. I started vomiting painfully and uncontrollably. I could not get up and so I was taken back to my cell; I suffered from high fever and fainted often. I was only able to walk after a fortnight.”
- “My arms were tied and hung for half hour, then brought down and then taken back as many as five times a day. At other times, a black plastic bag was put on my head and then I was submerged in water for long periods at a time. For five months, I was tortured; not every day but off and on. When I was tortured, it was for the whole day. At the end, I confessed to what they wanted me to confess.” (Lee (former Yodok inmate))
- Kang Gun, a South Korean national of North Korean origin, was beaten and tortured in a detention facility in Pyongyang and at the provincial NSA detention facility in Chongjin, North Hamkyung province where he was initially detained after being abducted by North Korean agents from Jilin province in China on 4 March 2005. Amnesty International has learnt that his legs were amputated and that he was transferred to an unidentified kwanliso in 2008 or 2009
- Shin Dong-hyuk, who was born in Kwanliso 14, was tortured by prison authorities at an underground torture chamber within the political prison camp. The prison authorities also tortured his father as they investigated if the two knew of, or had participated in, the

unsuccessful escape plans of Shin Dong-hyuk's mother and elder brother. He was 13 years of age at that time. He described the experience: "In the morning, I was ordered to report to school immediately. I was handcuffed, blindfolded and taken by a car to an unknown location. I was then told that my mother and brother were arrested that morning while attempting to escape from the camp, and then I was asked to confess to a family conspiracy. I had been taken to an underground torture chamber in Kwanliso 14. I was detained in cell No. 7, a dark and small room with no light except a small electric light on the ceiling. The next day I was taken to a chamber, full of all kinds of torture instruments. I was stripped, my legs were cuffed and my hands were tied with rope. I was then hung by my legs and hands from the ceiling. One of the interrogators told me to confess on who started the escape plan. I pleaded ignorance. Someone started a charcoal fire and brought it just under my back. I felt the heat at my waist and shrieked. My torturers pierced me with a steel hook near the groin to stop me writhing; the pain was so much that I fainted. I did not know how long I was unconscious but on regaining consciousness, found myself in a cell that was stinking of my faeces and urine. I found blood and wounds in my lower abdomen. As days passed, the pain grew and my flesh began to decay, stinking so terribly that the guards avoided entering my prison cell."

### **Child labour**

- One inmate recalls that as a 10-year-old he was told to lift a 30kg sack of earth (more than his own body weight) 30 times a day. If he slipped he was beaten with sticks by his teachers. Kang Cheol-hwan (former Yodok inmate. He was detained with family as a young boy). He recalled: The work was too much for me or for any child of my age. But I did not dare to complain. After the first ten rounds, my legs started shaking, my body was hurting and my shoulder skin was peeling off. I was near collapse but the teachers were watching us and beating us with sticks if we stopped."
- The family groups are given no access to the individual convicted of the crime. However, the remaining parent and their children are kept together until the child reaches a "workable" age.
- Shin Dong-hyuk, who was born in Kwanliso 14 in 1982, recalled: "I was sent to the 5-year primary school in the Kwanliso where I was taught how to read, write, add and subtract, and nothing more. When I was 12 years old, I was sent to middle school and then to work. I was separated from my mother to stay with other children. There was no actual class in the middle school. We were given all kinds of physical work including weeding, harvesting, carrying dung."
- Between the ages of 13 and 16, Shin recalled: "I was forced to undertake dangerous work and saw many children killed in work. Sometimes, four to five children were killed in a day. On one occasion, I saw eight people killed by an accident. Three men were working high up on a tall cement wall, three 15-year-old girls and two boys were helping them with mortar below. I was carrying mortar to the children when I saw the cement wall falling. Eight were buried under many tons of mortar; there was no rescue. Instead, the security officers told us not to stop work."
- Kang Cheol-hwan also recalls deaths of children who were working at a work site. "The children in my class were ordered to dig and move earth to a work site 200 metres away. Twelve children dug holes with shovels and the other children carried the dirt in sacks or buckets. The dig site was a clay hill and the clay was quite soft. But we were afraid that as we dug deeper, it could collapse at any time. The teachers who were supervising us told the children to keep digging. After three days, the hill suddenly collapsed. There were six children who were on top of the hill when it collapsed. Three children were killed and the other three were badly injured. However, the teachers blamed the children for the carelessness."

### **Forced labour**

- Shin Dong-hyuk explained: “At Kwanliso 14, I lived with my mother for the first 12 years of my life between 1982 and 1994. My mother was given farming duties, starting work at 5 o'clock in the morning and returning home at 11 o'clock in the evening. She finished work at around 9:30 in the evening but like other inmates, she was forced to attend a daily Ideology Struggle Session for one and a half hours daily. There was a curfew from 11 pm and no prisoners were allowed to be outside their shelter. I remember that my mother was so busy that she did not have any time and was too tired to show any love and so while I still recollect mother, I have no special feelings for her. Once in 1992, when I was ten years old, I followed mother to work in the rice fields, as the children had been ordered to help their mothers plant the rice. We were under strict orders to accomplish the work quota. On that particular day, mother was quite pale and weak and complained of headache. No one was excused from the work as this was the rule in the camp. Despite my best efforts, work was very slow and the work quota looked difficult to achieve. The officer was furious with our slow work; mother was ordered to kneel on the paddy road with her hands raised straight up in the sun when all other prisoners were having lunch. An hour and a half later, the officer came to her and ordered her to start work. She did her best until she fainted at around 3 o'clock in the afternoon. That night, at the punishment (ideology struggle or self-criticism) session, she knelt for two hours while 40 prisoners accused her of being lazy.
- Kim and Lee (detained between 1999 to 2001), added: “We worked in the farms (at Kwanliso 15) from 7am to 8pm and cultivated corn. We were divided to work in units comprising 10-15 people each and were given a daily production target that we had to meet. If the unit did not meet the daily target, the unit-members were punished collectively. During the course of my three-year detention, we did not meet our targets often as we were always hungry and weak and were punished by receiving beatings and also reductions in our food quota. Besides in the Ideology Struggle Sessions that were held after work, those who did not meet the target were severely criticised and beaten by other inmates.  
“If you fell sick, there were no meals as you did not produce any output.”
- Cha Kwang-ho had badly hurt his back when he was dragging trees as part of his forced labour. His injury was so bad that he could not work and so his food supply was suspended. He died of malnutrition in December 2001. Cha was 65 years old when he was sent to Kwanliso 15 in January 1999. He had previously worked as a journalist

#### **North Korea justice culture**

- North Korea operates a “self-criticism” justice culture. At all levels of society, a meeting is held regularly among the community where people are encouraged to name their own flaws and accuse others.
- In Kwanliso camps, these happen at the end of every day in large groups. Prison guards instruct other prisoners to beat those who have failed the group.
- In regular society, these meetings are held on a roughly weekly basis; and are often chaired by a middle-aged woman who then reports her findings to the authorities. Those reported for crimes that are perceived to be political by authorities can end up in the camps.
- Those who are charged often do not face trial. And where a trial does occur most are convicted in their absence.
- Those sent to camps through “guilt by association” are never given a trial and often do not know that they are going to be taken. They also do not know when they will be released.

#### **Succession precedence**

In 1980 after Kim Jong-il's succession was consolidated at a Workers' Party Conference there was a purge of officials from the Workers Party of Korea – over 100,000 people were sentenced to hard labour in eight camps.

At the next conference, 30 years later on Tuesday 28 September 2010, the ruling Worker's Party in North Korea announced that Kim Jong-un, the youngest son of leader Kim Jong-il was appointed as a four-star general. It was a move widely seen as confirming his path to eventually succeeding his father as the country's leader.

Since then the number of executions in the country has risen and it is widely believed that the numbers being sent to political prisoner camps is once more on the rise.

### **The camps**

**Kwanliso 14** at Kaechun, South Pyongan province (spread over five valleys)

PICTURE AVAILABLE

Total control zone

**Estimated population:** Over 50,000 offenders and families

**Products produced:** Corn, pigs, soy bean paste, military uniforms, tyres, cement, paper, glass, pottery

**Bedding:** None

**Clothing:** Once every six months

**Food:** 700g per person per day

**Kwanliso 15** at Yodok, South Hamkyung province (spread over five valleys)

PICTURE AVAILABLE

Total control zone and revolutionary zone

**Estimated population:** Over 50,000 offenders and families

**Products produced:** Soy bean paste, sweets, liquor, lime stone mining, corn, sheep, filtered cigarettes, ducks, chop sticks, coal mining, noodles

**Bedding:** Only in family sector

**Clothing:** Only in family sector (one uniform per year)

**Food:** 600g corn per day (porridge once and rice twice a year) / 300g for children

**Extra stats:**

Two in every five people held die there because of malnutrition

Around 3 to 4% die there through accidents

**Kwanliso 16** at Hwaseong, North Hamkyung province

Total control zone

**Estimated population:** Over 20,000 offenders and families

**Products produced:** Unknown

**Bedding:** Unknown

**Clothing:** Unknown

**Food:** Unknown

**Kwanliso 18** at Bukchang-ri, South Pyongan province

PICTURE AVAILABLE

Total control zone and revolutionary zone

**Estimated population:** Over 10,000 offenders and families

**Products produced:** Coal, cement, pottery, roof tiles, alcohol

**Bedding:** None

**Clothing:** Working uniform once a year

**Food:** 300-900g per person per day

**Kwanliso 22** at Hoeryong, North Hamkyung province

PICTURE AVAILABLE

Total control zone

**Estimated population:** Over 50,000 offenders and families  
**Products produced:** Corn, water melon, potatoes, cooking oil, soy bean paste, sweets, cigarettes  
**Bedding:** Unknown  
**Clothing:** Unknown  
**Food:** Unknown  
**Extra stat:** 1,500 to 2,000 people die of malnutrition there every year, mostly children

**Kwanliso 25** at Susong in Chongjin, North Hamkyung province

Total control zone

**Estimated population:** Over 5,000 offenders and families

**Products produced:** Unknown

**Bedding:** Unknown

**Clothing:** Unknown

**Food:** Unknown

Public Document

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