

"Unspeakable atrocities" reported by the UN Inquiry into the Human Rights Situation in North Korea

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The head of a UN-appointed inquiry into human rights in North Korea reported Tuesday that testimony heard so far by his panel pointed to widespread and serious violations in every area it had been asked to investigate.



"What we have seen and heard so far – the specificity, detail and shocking character of the personal testimony – appears without doubt to demand follow-up action by the world community, and accountability on the part of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," Michael Kirby, chair of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK, said in an oral update to the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council.

While the inquiry's final conclusions and recommendations must await the end of the investigation and a final report in March, Kirby told the council that testimonies received in a series of just-completed public hearings in South Korea and Japan indicated a large-scale pattern of abuse that may constitute systematic and gross human rights violations in the DPRK. He cited a host of alleged abuses, ranging from abductions, torture and a policy of inter-generational punishment to arbitrary detention in prison camps marked by deliberate starvation and "unspeakable atrocities."

"We heard from ordinary people who faced torture and imprisonment for doing nothing more than watching foreign soap operas or holding a religious belief," said Kirby, a retired Australian judge with broad international experience.

"Women and men who exercised their human right to leave the DPRK and were forcibly repatriated spoke about their experiences of torture, sexual violence, inhumane treatment and arbitrary detention. Family members of persons abducted from the Republic of Korea and Japan described the agony they endured ever since the enforced disappearance of their loved ones at the hands of agents of the DPRK..."

The commission of inquiry was established by the Human Rights Council in March in Geneva. It was given a one-year mandate to investigate alleged systematic, widespread and grave violations of human rights in the DPRK. In May, the council announced the three members of the commission, with Kirby as chair and joined by Sonja Biserko, a Serbian human rights campaigner, and Marzuki Darusman of Indonesia. In addition to his appointment to the inquiry, Darusman is also the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK, a post he has held since 2010.

Under its mandate, the commission was asked to investigate several alleged violations, including those concerning the right to food and those associated with prison camps; torture and inhuman treatment; arbitrary detention; discrimination; freedom of expression, movement and religion; the right to life; and enforced disappearances, including abductions of nationals to other countries.

The commission has also stressed that it will investigate to what extent any violations may amount to crimes against humanity.

"As the Human Rights Council requested us to do, we will focus our inquiry on ensuring accountability, including with regard to potential crimes against humanity," Kirby told the council. "We will seek to determine which state institutions and officials carry responsibility for gross human rights violations proved to have been committed."

Kirby also noted that the commission had invited DPRK authorities to take part in the public hearings in Seoul, but received no reply. Nor has Pyongyang allowed the commission entry to North Korea to carry out its work.

"Instead," Kirby said, "its official news agency attacked the testimony we heard as 'slander' against the DPRK, put forward by 'human scum.' Truth is always a defence against accusations of slander. If any of the testimony on political prison

camps, international abductions, torture, starvation, inter-generational punishment and so forth can be shown to be untrue, the commission invites the DPRK to produce evidence to that effect. An ounce of evidence is worth far more than many pounds of insults and baseless attacks. So far, however, the evidence we have heard has largely pointed in one direction – and evidence to the contrary is lacking.”

Before making its final report to the Human Rights Council in March, the commission will continue its investigation, give an oral briefing to the UN General Assembly in New York in October, and meet with a number of experts, victims and officials with knowledge of the situation in North Korea.

Video and other information on the Seoul and Tokyo public hearings is now available on the [commission's website](#).

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