



Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG)

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“Summary or arbitrary executions and extra-judicial killings in state custody have continued under the leadership of Kim Jong Un”

Read the report: <https://en.tjwg.org/mapping-project-north-korea/>

Brief “trials” almost always occur on the spot immediately before a public execution. Charges are stated and a sentence given without legal counsel for the accused, who very often appear “half dead” when brought to the site by police. North Korean escapees reported a recent incident where police used hand-held metal detectors to find and confiscate mobile phones from witnesses at a public execution to prevent them from recording the events. This suggests the Kim Jong Un regime is concerned about information on public executions getting out of the country.

The Transitional Justice Working Group’s report “[Mapping the Fate of the Dead: Killings and Burials in North Korea](#)” is based on four years of research and 610 escapee interviews documenting and mapping three types of locations connected to human rights violations in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea):

1. State-sanctioned killing sites;
2. Sites where the dead are disposed of by the state;
3. Official locations which may contain documents or other evidence related to these events.

Geographical mapping of sites connected to human rights abuses provides important information about patterns of killing and burial that are often not visible in individual interviewee testimonies. The project uses satellite imagery during interviews with North Korean escapees to geolocate sites and applies Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology throughout the research process.

Key findings:

- 323 reports of sites of state-sanctioned killings (reports from a direct witness or heard from a direct witness). All of these reports are accompanied by geographical coordinates of the location.

- 318 reports of public execution sites. Public executions of more than 10 people at once were reported 19 times. Almost all of the public executions were carried out by firing squad.
- Public executions tend to occur in places such as river beds and river banks, open spaces and fields, market places, hills/mountains, sports grounds and school grounds. The size of the assembled crowd can vary, often in the hundreds of people, but a number of interviewees described seeing crowds of 1,000 or more people.
- 25 reports were recorded of sites where dead bodies have been disposed of by the state, including burial sites and cremation sites. Seven of these sites are reported to contain more than two bodies together.
- 20 reports of deaths in detention that were not executions, and a small number of secret killings for particularly sensitive crimes.
- Of a sample of the research participants, 83 percent had witnessed a public execution in their lifetime and 53 percent of those were forced by the authorities to watch an execution on one or more occasions. The youngest age an interviewee reported witnessing a public execution was seven years old.
- 16 percent of our research participants reported having had a family member murdered or executed by the North Korean regime.
- 27 percent of our research participants claim to have immediate family members who have been victims of enforced disappearance by the North Korean regime; 83 percent of those disappeared are still missing.
- 92 percent of research participants thought exhumations of burial sites of individuals killed by the regime would be necessary after a transition in North Korea, to identify victims, return remains to families and to find out the truth of human rights abuses committed by the state.
- North Korean escapee interviewees told us that investigating sites of killings and disposal of dead bodies by the regime may “help to prosecute the North Korean regime” in the future. They also told us that “the dead bodies should be returned to their families as the dead are human beings.”

The report’s lead author, Dr. Sarah A. Son, said:

“Most North Korean citizens continue to follow traditional burial practices where scarce resources allow. However, interviewees told us the bodies of individuals killed by the regime are not usually returned to family members, nor are the burial locations revealed to families.”

“The inability to access information on the whereabouts of a family member killed by the state, and the impossibility of giving them a proper burial violates both cultural norms and the ‘right to know’.”

Technology Director Dan Bielefeld said:

“Geospatial mapping also provides information about on-the-ground limitations to investigations ahead of time, such as access and cost. We intend to use the data to assist ongoing efforts internationally to pursue accountability for human rights abuses, and to support future activities focussed on redress for the abuses carried out in the DPRK.”

Transitional Justice Working Group is a Seoul-based, non-governmental organisation founded by human rights advocates and researchers from five countries in 2014. TJWG aims to pursue advanced methods for addressing grave human rights violations and advocating justice for victims in pre- and post-transition societies. Since July 2017, its first report titled “Mapping Crimes Against Humanity in North Korea: Mass Graves, Killing Sites and Documentary Evidence” has been highlighted globally by numerous international media outlets.