

# **MAPPING KILLINGS UNDER KIM JONG-UN:**

**NORTH KOREA'S RESPONSE TO  
INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE**



**Progress Report, December 2021**



**TRANSITIONAL  
J U S T I C E  
WORKING GROUP**

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**PROGRESS REPORT**

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## **ABOUT TJWG**

The Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG) is a Seoul-based NGO founded by human rights advocates and researchers from five countries in 2014. TJWG pursues advanced methods for addressing grave human rights violations and advocating justice for victims in pre- and post-transition societies. TJWG collaborates and shares its practices with other organizations and individuals concerned with the pursuit of accountability for mass atrocities and human rights violations.

## **Authors and Researchers**

Ahyeong Park  
Dan Bielefeld  
Hubert Younghwan Lee  
Scott Stevens  
Yurim Choi  
Ethan Hee-Seok Shin  
Jeonghyun Kang  
April Song-Ah Park  
Stephany Song  
Daye Yoon  
Sippachai Kunnuwong

## **Cover Artwork**

Kang Chun-hyuk, North Korean escapee artist

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## **Transitional Justice Working Group**

Seoul, Republic of Korea  
Website: [en.tjwg.org](http://en.tjwg.org) (English) / [www.tjwg.org](http://www.tjwg.org) (Korean)  
Email: [info@tjwg.org](mailto:info@tjwg.org)  
Tel: +82-2-722-1162  
Fax: +82-2-722-1163  
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Sarah A. Son | University of Sheffield

Lina Yoon | Human Rights Watch

Kongdan Oh | Independent scholar on North Korean affairs

Ralph Hassig | Independent scholar on North Korean affairs

Roger Lu Phillips | Syria Justice and Accountability Centre

Reem El Gantri | International Center for Transitional Justice

### **Report Design**

Eui Hwan Cho

Sook Yi Oh

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

December 2021 marks 10 years of Kim Jong-un's rule in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK/North Korea), and nearly 8 years since the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK (UN COI) released its landmark report urging actions for accountability. The Transitional Justice Working Group's (TJWG) Mapping Project documents human rights violations to support a stronger push for accountability as part of conceptualizing transitional justice for North Korea. This project tests the hypothesis that stronger documentation and international advocacy cannot be ignored by the North Korean leadership, and leads to changes on the ground. This report examines whether these changes can be detected in a decade where both international scrutiny of North Korea's human rights record increased, and Kim Jong-un consolidated power.

The report presents findings from 6 years of research to document and map three types of locations connected to human rights violations in North Korea: 1. state-sanctioned killing sites; 2. sites where the dead are disposed of by the state (i.e., graves); and 3. official locations which may house documents or other evidence related to these events. The project uses satellite imagery and interviews with North Korean escapees to geolocate sites, and applies Geographical Information System (GIS) technology throughout the research process, from data-gathering to analysis. Geographical mapping of sites connected to human rights abuses provides important information about patterns of killings and burials that are often not visible in interviewee testimonies.

This is the third report from the TJWG Mapping Project. With an emphasis on the Kim Jong-un era, it serves as an update to the second mapping report, published in 2019, but presents new data and an in-depth analysis of Hyesan, Ryanggang province in the northeast of the country.

Escapee testimonies indicate that state-sanctioned killings continue under Kim Jong-un. Spatial data analysis of Hyesan points toward a state strategy of selecting locations where it is easier to control assembled crowds, away from the border and residential areas, to carry out state-sanctioned killings. Interviewees reported that assembled audiences at public killing events are strictly monitored and controlled by state officials to prevent information on public executions from leaking outside the country. We also received multiple testimonies regarding the use of pardons to propagandize the benevolence of Kim Jong-un's leadership.

Next steps for the Mapping Project will include collecting data on secret, or indoor killings, and conducting a chain of command study, to understand which individuals and state agencies are responsible for killings. Both directions will support our ongoing research collecting escapee testimonies and locating points of interest to the push for accountability.

# KEY FINDINGS

## **Based on interviews with 683 North Korean escapees, the Mapping Project documented:**

- 442 testimonies of state-sanctioned killings.
- 30 testimonies of body disposal sites, including burial and cremation sites.

## **In the Kim Jong-un era:**

- the Mapping Project documented 27 testimonies of state-sanctioned killing sites, of which 23 were public executions. Of the 23 executions, 21 were by firing squad and 2 were by hanging.
- public executions took place in open spaces and fields, airfields, river banks, and hills/mountains.
- the most commonly cited offenses announced at public executions included (in descending order of frequency): watching or distributing South Korean videos (7 instances), drug-related crimes (5), prostitution (5), human trafficking (4), murder or attempted murder (3), and “obscene acts” (3).
- interviewees reported that inhumane treatment of the accused before execution—used as a warning to the public—has persisted under Kim Jong-un.
- in some cases pardons were issued to propagandize the benevolence of Kim Jong-un.

**In Hyesan, during the Kim Jong-un era:**

- the Mapping Project documented 10 testimonies of state-sanctioned killings.
- public executions occurred in places such as Hyesan Airfield or in the surrounding hills/mountains and open spaces/fields away from the border and central area of the city.
- the research recorded 26 public trials. Of these, there were four documented cases in which the authorities issued a death penalty to the accused, but execution did not take place at the trial.
- interviewees reported students being systematically mobilized to attend public trials.
- interviewees reported that the number of public executions seems to be declining, but secret killings continue to take place.



# METHODOLOGY

This report sourced interviewees by referral<sup>1</sup> (a snowball, or convenience sample) from the North Korean community in South Korea. For this report, the Mapping Project prioritized conducting interviews with North Korean escapees who lived in North Korea during the Kim Jong-un<sup>2</sup> era with a focus on recent arrivals.<sup>3</sup>

In looking into Hyesan, the report provides a comparative analysis of all testimonies reported to have occurred before and during the Kim Jong-un era. Hyesan was chosen for a comparative analysis since it is the region with the most information in our database.

All site figures presented in this report reflect the number of testimonies recorded from research participants and are not de-duplicated or consolidated at this time. De-duplicating reports of events requires site-by-site analysis of both the location data and the recorded narratives.

Each interview begins by showing an interviewee satellite images from Google Earth with only basic information, such as city and county names and railway stations.<sup>4</sup> Once the interviewee orients themselves in an area where they have either resided or with which they are very familiar, the researcher asks a range of

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<sup>1</sup> The non-random nature of the sample means that findings presented in this report are not necessarily representative of the experiences of the North Korean population as a whole.

<sup>2</sup> The third dynastic ruler of North Korea who rose to power in December 2011.

<sup>3</sup> 96% of the participants we have interviewed since the second mapping report lived in North Korea during the Kim Jong-un era.

<sup>4</sup> This information comes from pre-existing, publicly available base maps created by Curtis Melvin: North Korea Uncovered, Version 18, June 25, 2009, <http://www.nkeconwatch.com/north-korea-uncovered-google-earth/>, <https://www.openstreetmap.org/>; The 38 North DPRK Digital Atlas, <http://38northdigitalatlas.org/>; and an online map produced by South Korea's National Geographic Information Institute, <http://map.ngii.go.kr/ms/map/NlipMap.do>.

questions to identify specific types of sites and events. Without guidance, the interviewee is then asked to point out on the satellite imagery the locations of the events they describe. The Mapping Project documents three site types: 1. sites of state-sanctioned killings; 2. sites where the dead are disposed of by the government; and 3. official locations that may house documents or other evidence related to these events. If they cannot pinpoint a location, the researcher only records descriptive details of the location without geographical coordinates for future analysis.

Interviewees receive a small stipend for their participation, intended to compensate the cost of travel and a meal. The commitment required from participants to travel to the office, take part in the interview process, and return home is usually around 4-5 hours. Prior to the interview, the participants are asked to provide informed consent.

The site report figures provided consist of events the interviewee witnessed directly (first-hand), where they heard the information directly from a person who witnessed the event (second-hand), or from another source assessed as being credible by both the interviewee and the researcher. The large majority of reports from the interviews processed so far fall into this category. Testimonies based on rumor or speculation by the interviewee were not included in this report.

The nearly complete closure of North Korea's border with China as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak since January 2020<sup>5</sup> has severely hampered the already limited flow of information in and out of the country and restricted the number of North Koreans reaching South Korea.<sup>6</sup> This has made it difficult to find research participants to provide information on human rights violations that have occurred during the past two years. However, with the continued support and contribution to the Mapping Project from the North Korean escapee community, the number of reported sites related to human rights violations is

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<sup>5</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, "North Korea Bans Foreign Tourists Over Coronavirus, Tour Operator Says", *New York Times*, January 21, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/21/world/asia/coronavirus-china-north-korea-tourism-ban.html> (accessed June 6, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Owing to COVID-19 travel restrictions, only 229 escapees arrived in the Republic of Korea in 2020, a significant drop from 1,047 in 2019. Only 36 escapees arrived in the first half of 2021. "Policy on North Korean Defectors," Ministry of Unification, Republic of Korea, 2020, [https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng\\_unikorea/relation/statistics/defectors/](https://www.unikorea.go.kr/eng_unikorea/relation/statistics/defectors/) (accessed October 5, 2021).

increasing and the method of research is improving. Based on the past six years of research, it will take longer to identify sites related to human rights violations from regions far from the border, where it is harder to escape, compared to regions closer to the border with China.

### Research participant demographics

The participant sample for this research is drawn from the community of North Korean escapees<sup>7</sup> living in South Korea and consists of those who lived in North Korea after Kim Jong-un succeeded his father as leader in December 2011. They account for 29% (200) of our total research participants (683).<sup>8</sup> The majority of the participants come from northeastern provinces of the country; the geographical distribution of the data is mainly in these areas (77% of our participants are from North Hamgyong and Ryanggang provinces).<sup>9</sup>

The total and Kim Jong-un era data of the research participant demographics for TJWG's Mapping Project are as follows.

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<sup>7</sup> The term "escapee" has been chosen for this report on the basis of the evolving preferences of the North Korean community who have left North Korea. The terms "defector" and "refugee" are also commonly used, although there is no single agreed-upon term.

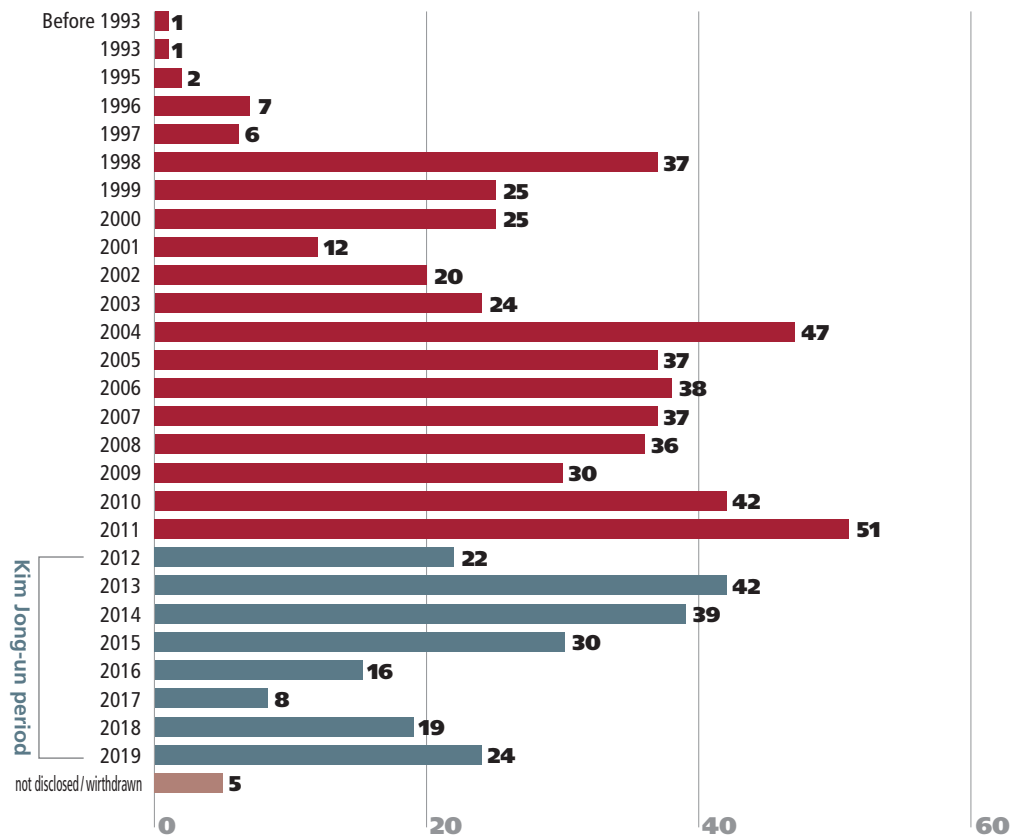
<sup>8</sup> As of December 2020, the total number of North Koreans who arrived in South Korea was 33,752: 31.4% of those are men, and 68.6% are women. This number reflects the total who have entered South Korea; however, some of these individuals have left the South to settle in other countries or may have passed away since first arriving, hence the actual number residing in the South is slightly lower. Several escapees have also returned or are alleged to have been abducted and returned to North Korea. "북한이탈주민정책 [Policy on North Korean Defectors]," Ministry of Unification, <https://www.unikorea.go.kr/unikorea/business/NKDefectorsPolicy/status/lately/> (accessed October 20, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> For comparison, the Korea Institute National Unification's 2020 White Paper stated that 82% of its research participants came from North Hamgyong and Ryanggang provinces. Kyu-chang Lee et al., *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2020), 37.

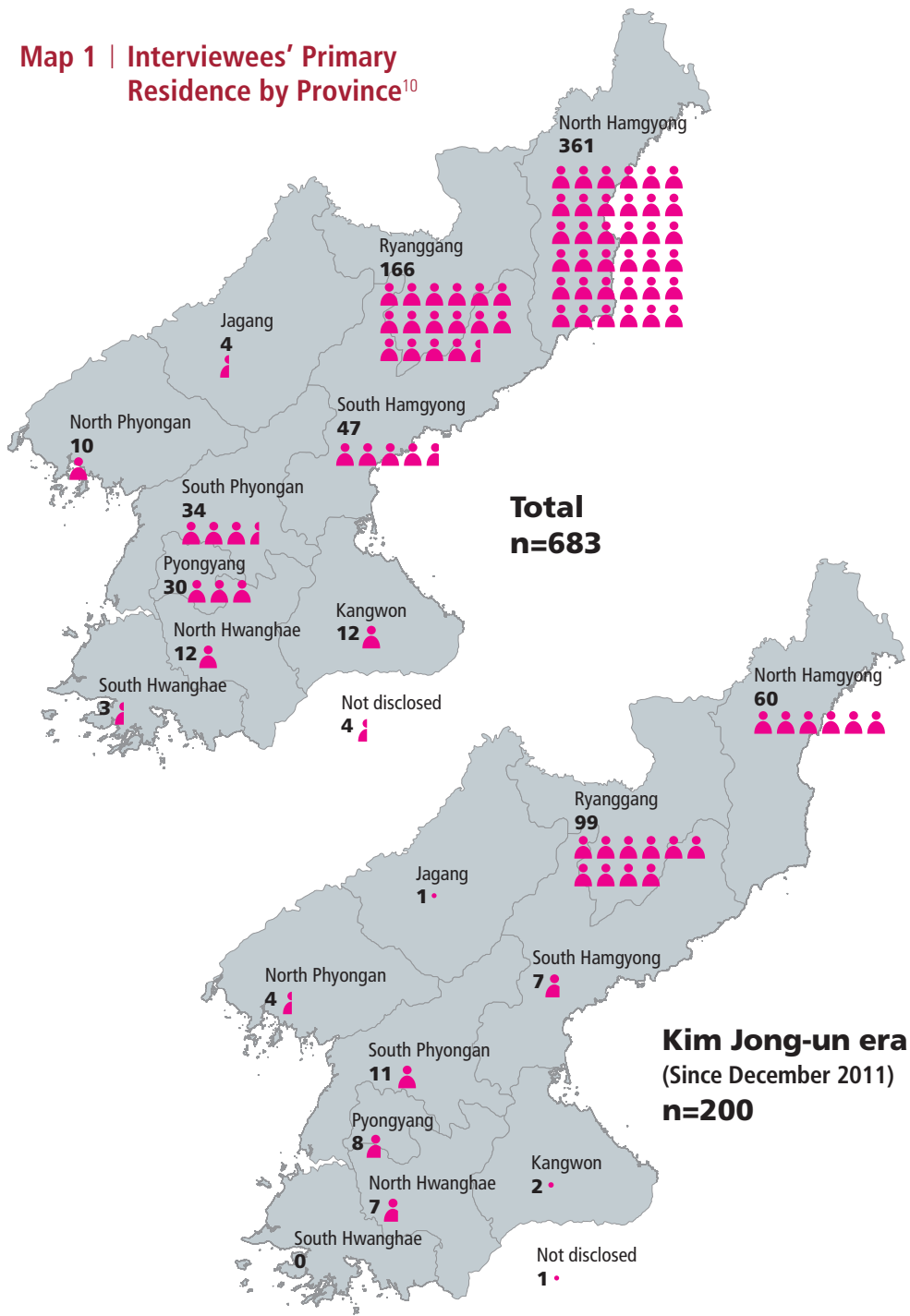
## Chart 1 Interviewees' Gender and Age

		Total	Kim Jong-un Era
Gender	F	537	138
	M	145	62
	Withdrawn	1	0
Age	10s	10	8
	20s	74	53
	30s	61	18
	40s	140	41
	50s	157	39
	60s	120	26
	70s	107	13
	80s	9	1
	Not disclosed/withdrawn	5	1

## Chart 2 | Year of Last Escape



**Map 1 | Interviewees' Primary Residence by Province<sup>10</sup>**



<sup>10</sup> Province borders were generated using GADM 2.8 data from Global Administrative Areas (<https://gadm.org/>) and their spellings used by North Korea (DPR Korea 2008 Population Census: National Report, Central Bureau of Statistics, Pyongyang, DPR Korea, 2009, [https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sources/census/wphc/North\\_Korea/Final%20national%20census%20report.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sources/census/wphc/North_Korea/Final%20national%20census%20report.pdf)).

## Software tools and map data sources

The Mapping Project utilizes Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) including the following projects to record, store, analyze, and visualize testimonies, locations, and other data:

- The FOSS projects, PostgreSQL and PostGIS, combine to give a powerful geospatially-enabled database that permits spatial and other types of analysis directly in the database.
- QGIS enables visualization of geospatial and associated data from the database and other sources.

TJWG also makes use of data sources including the following:

- Google Earth allows access to recent as well as historical satellite imagery.
- OpenStreetMap is sourced by volunteer contributors and contains hundreds of thousands of features including buildings, roads, waterways, and places.<sup>11</sup>

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**11** Most contributors to OpenStreetMap map where they live, work, or visit. For a fascinating study of the contributors to the North Korea map of OpenStreetMap, see <https://wonyoung.so/cartographers-nk>.

# STATE-SANCTIONED KILLINGS UNDER KIM JONG-UN'S RULE

## Killing sites

The Mapping Project recorded 442 testimonies of killing sites from 1956 to 2018 (see Map 2). Of these, we recorded 27 testimonies of killing sites during the Kim Jong-un era from December 2011 to 2018 (see Map 3).

The following sections break down the types and circumstances of the killings and other deaths for which the state is reportedly responsible during the Kim Jong-un era.

## Public executions

The mapping research documented 23 testimonies of public executions during the Kim Jong-un era. Of these cases, 21 described public executions by firing squad. Interviewees often stated that the rules on public execution demand that three shooters fire a total of nine bullets into the body of the condemned person.<sup>12</sup> The two documented public executions by hanging were from 2012 in Musan and 2014 in Chongjin, both in North Hamgyong province. A number of our interviewees stated that secret killings continue to take place in North Korea.

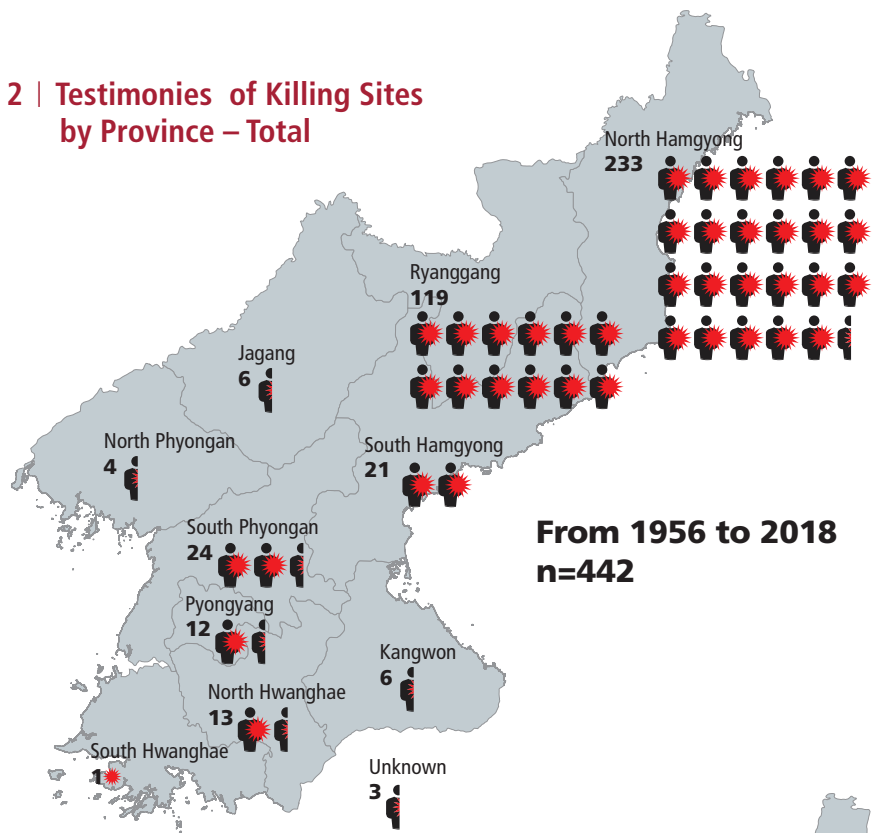
During the Kim Jong-un era, public executions were most commonly described in places such as open spaces and fields, airfields, river banks, and hills/moun-

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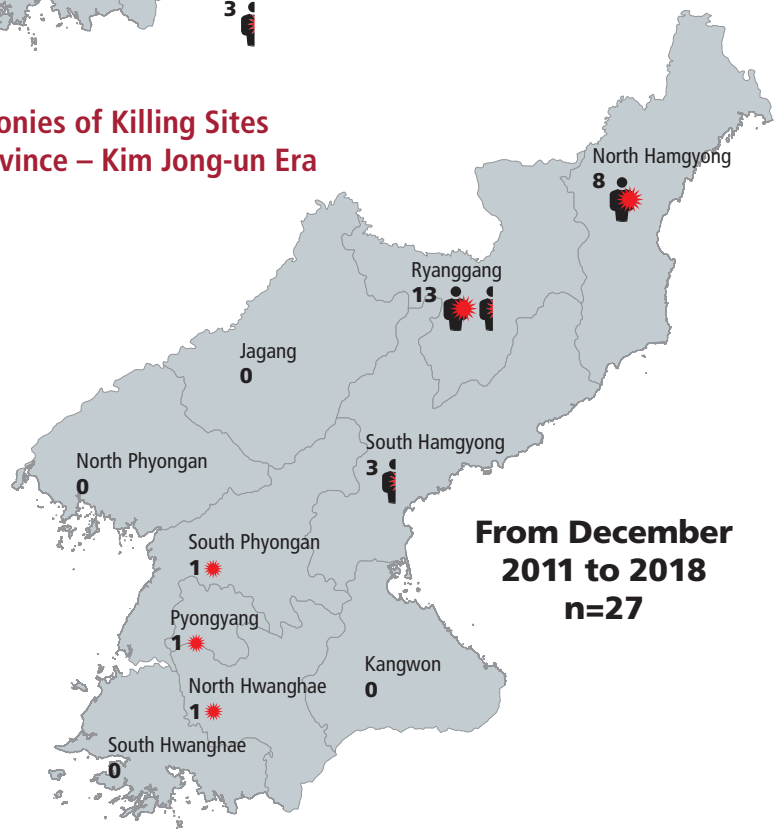
<sup>12</sup> NKDB asserted in its 2018 White Paper that while the method of public execution can vary, it is most often carried out by shooting. (임순희 외, 2018 북한인권백서, (서울: 북한인권정보센터 부설 북한인권기록보존소, 2018) [Sunhee Im et al., White Paper on North Korean Human Rights 2018, (Seoul: NKDB North Korean Human Rights Archives)], 113-116); The North Korean Strategy Center also found nine AK automatic rifle shots as the typical method of execution (Dong-sik Kim, "Executions and Purges of North Korean Elites: An Investigation into Genocide Based on High-Ranking Officials' Testimonies," North Korea Strategy Center, 2019, 76).



**Map 2 | Testimonies of Killing Sites  
by Province – Total**



**Map 3 | Testimonies of Killing Sites  
by Province – Kim Jong-un Era**



tains.<sup>13</sup> This list is in descending order, starting with the most mentions. The size of the assembled crowds varied, often in the hundreds of people. However, some interviewees described seeing crowds of 1,000 or more. One interviewee stated that public killings used to be open to a large crowd, but in recent years, the viewing of the executions seemed to be reserved for groups affiliated with the organization the accused comes from, such as their workplace.

The families of those being executed were often forced to watch the execution. In some cases, neighborhood-level group (*inminban* / 인민반) leaders received announcements about forthcoming executions in the designated area and were responsible for bringing their groups to the events. One interviewee who was the leader of a neighborhood-level women's group (*yeoseongdongmaeng* / 여성동맹) in Hyesan, Ryanggang province explained that she brought 20 women in her group to watch a public execution in 2013.

The mapping research also recorded testimonies of inhumane treatment of the accused immediately before the execution. This form of violence towards the executed denies their dignity and serves as a warning to the public.<sup>14</sup>

One interviewee interpreted the brutal violence he witnessed at a public execution in Hamheung, North Hamgyong province, in 2012 as a warning message from the state:

Even when there was fluid leaking from the condemned person's brain, people were made to stand in line and look at the executed person in the face as a warning message.

Another interviewee described seeing the accused being tied to a wooden post with pebbles stuffed in his mouth in Sariwon, North Hwanghae province in 2014. An interviewee who witnessed a public execution in Hamhung, South Hamgyong province in 2015 said she expressed shock and dismay, asking her-

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<sup>13</sup> In English, the word 산/*san* is usually translated as mountain, but it has broader meaning in Korean than it does in English, and includes smaller features like hills or slopes. The airfield mentioned in the list specifically refers to the Hyesan Airfield.

<sup>14</sup> Sandra Fahy, *Dying for Rights: Putting North Korea's Human Rights Abuses on Record* (Columbia University Press, 2019), 150.

self, ‘do they really have to kill someone like that?’ She also described people in charge of the execution violently cursing the accused and publicly calling the executed the epitome of social evil.

North Korea has normalized theatrical and gratuitous violence to the extent that many interviewees have reported becoming desensitized to public killings. One interviewee from Hyesan, Ryanggang province who left North Korea in 2013 stated that he did not think he was traumatized as a result of witnessing public executions. He said that he and those around him had believed the word of the North Korean authorities and thought that those executed deserved to die that way. Another interviewee from Hyesan who also escaped in 2013 mentioned that for North Koreans, public executions are accepted as commonplace and unremarkable.

### **Offenses punishable by the death penalty**

The most common charges we documented for public executions under Kim Jong-un included **watching or distributing South Korean videos (7 instances)<sup>15</sup>, drug-related crimes (5), prostitution (5), human trafficking (4), and, less commonly, murder or attempted murder (3), and “obscene acts” (3).** Of the seven documented cases of individuals being charged with watching or distributing South Korean media before execution, six took place in Hyesan, Ryanggang province between 2012 and 2014 and one in Chongjin City, North Hamgyong province in 2015. Documented cases of public executions were also made of individuals charged with rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault (1), crimes involving alleged relations to South Korea<sup>16</sup> (1), illegal trade (1), illegal border crossing (1), and abduction or kidnapping (1). We recorded no cases of public executions with charges of stealing and/or selling machines or materials pilfered from factories or from infrastructure such as power lines in the Kim Jong-un era. These charges were common in the 1990s and 2000s according to our data.

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<sup>15</sup> In May 2021, *Daily NK* reported that the North Korean authorities publicly executed a man for illegally selling CDs and USBs filled with South Korean movies, dramas, and music videos. (So-yong Jong, “Wonsan Man Executed for Illegally Selling CDs and USBs with S. Korean Movies, Dramas and Music Videos,” *Daily NK*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/wonsan-man-executed-illegally-selling-cds-usbs-south-korean-movies-dramas-music-videos/> (accessed August 6, 2021).)

<sup>16</sup> The charge was brokering escapees from North Korea.

Given the lack of due process in the North Korean judicial system<sup>17</sup>, it is difficult to know whether the charges announced at an execution actually match acts committed by the accused. For example, charges such as human trafficking may have been applied to individuals helping people escape the country, while other charges may have been entirely fabricated.

Draconian legislation like the Reactionary Thought and Culture Denunciation Law serves to justify government policies, procedures, and actions, including killings. A document describing its content, published by *Daily NK*<sup>18</sup>, reveals that this new law makes it a capital offense to distribute South Korean movies, dramas, and music. The international community has expressed concerns at the law's clear violation of the freedom of expression and the disproportionate punishment it apparently authorizes. The UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions asked North Korea to provide the full text of the law public.<sup>19</sup>

### Public trials without execution

The Mapping Project documented 26 testimonies of public trials during the Kim Jong-un era. There were four documented cases in which the authorities issued a death penalty to the accused, but the execution did not take place at the trial. This may indicate that these killings took place in secret. One documented case described state officials taking the defendant to an unknown location after being sentenced to death at the trial. The interviewee also described the defendant's wife going to the Ministry of State Security (currently *gukabowiseong* / 국가보위성) to ask about the husband's whereabouts a year after the trial, but being told to stop looking for him. Based on the limited information of these trials, it is not clear where or when the killings took place after the trials.

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**17** "'Worth Less than an Animal': Abuses and Due Process Violation in Pretrial Detention in North Korea," Human Rights Watch, October 19, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/19/worth-less-animal/abuses-and-due-process-violations-pretrial-detention-north>.

**18** Jang, Seulkee, "Exclusive: Daily NK obtains materials explaining specifics of new 'anti-reactionary thought' law," *Daily NK*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/exclusive-daily-nk-obtains-materials-explaining-specifics-new-anti-reactionary-thought-law/> (accessed June 9, 2021).

**19** "Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea; the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions and the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression" (Geneva: Human Rights Council, 23 August 2021), <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=26593>.

From 2012 to 2015, a number of testimonies suggested that Kim Jong-un tried to create a public image as a benevolent leader through pardons. One interviewee witnessed 16 individuals on trial at one time in Pyongyang in 2012 or 2013. Only six were sentenced to death while the rest were pardoned by “the great leader’s forgiveness”—not because they were found innocent. A number of interviewees also gave similar accounts of the accused—often female victims of human trafficking—being forgiven by the benevolence of Kim Jong-un at trials. They stated that the state officials would publicly announce at trials that the accused were pardoned due to Kim Jong-un’s benevolence despite the crimes they had committed. In 2013, the Ministry of State Security took 15 pardoned women in a bus after the trial and returned them to their individual homes in Hyesan, Ryanggang province.

In cases where the size of the assembled crowd at public trials was large, the use of pardons to construct an image of a graciously forgiving leader may have been intentional so that the message can spread throughout North Korea and outside the country. The emergence of positive image-making practices at public trials may have been influenced by external pressure. The creation of the UN COI in 2013 increased international attention of the human rights situation in North Korea. Additionally, the release of the 2014 COI report urged the United Nations Security Council to refer the situation in North Korea to the International Criminal Court.<sup>20</sup>

### Deaths under custody

In the Kim Jong-un era, the Mapping Project documented four cases of deaths under custody. Two cases were about individuals caught during or after escape, which in both cases may constitute summary execution. One interviewee who lived near Political Prison Camp (*gwanliso* / 관리소) No. 25 located in Chongjin, North Hamgyong province, saw two prisoners who escaped from *Gwanliso* No. 25 being caught and then summarily executed in her neighborhood. According to the interviewee, prisoners who escape from detentions are killed on the spot as soon as they are caught. In 2012, a prisoner escaped *Gwanliso* No.

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<sup>20</sup> General Assembly Resolution 69/188, Situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, 18 December 2014, [http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a\\_res\\_69\\_188.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a_res_69_188.pdf).

25, and shortly after died by suicide.<sup>21</sup> After finding the dead prisoner, 20 security guards mobilized and fired repeatedly at the dead body. In 2016, she saw correctional officials kill another prisoner from *Gwanliso* No. 25 after being caught trying to escape. She said, “the dead body looked like a dead dog.”

In addition, there were two documented cases of deaths in detention, with the most recent one from Ryanggang province in early 2018. An interviewee reported that her husband died by suicide by taking potassium cyanide while imprisoned in a detention facility (*guryujang* / 구류장) of the Ministry of State Security (state intelligence and secret police) in Hyesan. Another interviewee reported a death caused by malnutrition in Kaechon, South Phyongan province in 2015.

### Body disposal

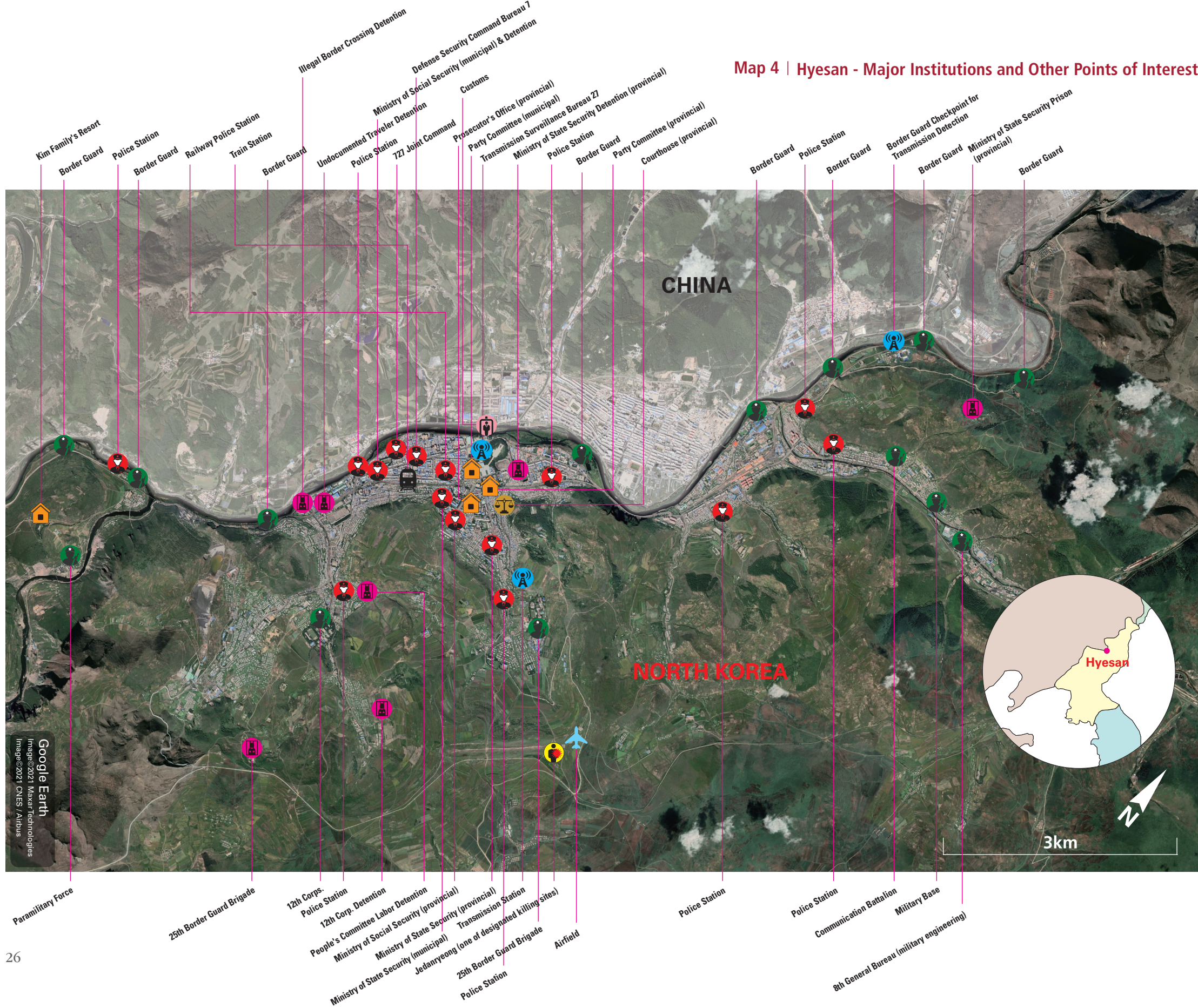
The Mapping Project maps body disposal sites containing the remains of individuals who have been killed by the government in public executions, as a result of death under custody, as well as in secret killings. **In our data, there were no testimonies of body disposal site locations during the Kim Jong-un era.** However, one interviewee described an incident in 2012 or 2013 in Pyongyang where an executed body was burned with a flame-thrower in front of a crowd following execution. The family of the accused was forced to attend the execution and sit in the front row to observe the scene. The father fainted after watching his son burn in front of his eyes.

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<sup>21</sup> The interviewee described the prisoner attempting to die by suicide before being shot. We do not know whether the cause of death is by suicide or shooting.



Map 4 | Hyesan - Major Institutions and Other Points of Interest





# COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF HYESAN: BEFORE AND DURING KIM JONG-UN

## Geographical overview of major regional institutions related to public executions and trials

Hyesan—located in the northern part of Ryanggang province along the border with China—is a transportation hub, serving as a gateway for many North Koreans to trade with China and receive information from in and out of the country. As such, this region—widely and easily exposed to the outside world—is susceptible to changes or shifts of state-sanctioned killings carried out by North Korean officials. For this reason, we decided to examine Hyesan to look for notable differences in the patterns of public killings during the Kim Jong-un era. In addition, a large number of testimonies from Hyesan in TJWG’s database makes Hyesan a suitable area for an in-depth analysis.

The Mapping Project has been collecting data on the locations of possible repositories of documents that may contain information regarding human rights violations since the project launched in 2015. Consequently, we are able to identify the locations of public executions and trials in relation to local institutions and points of interests in Hyesan.

Hyesan has the 13th largest population among the 25 cities and 144 counties in North Korea; roughly 200,000 people reside in this area.<sup>22</sup> Despite the region’s large size, the residential area is heavily concentrated in the northern part of the region along the Amrok/Yalu river border with China.

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<sup>22</sup> By population size, Hyesan ranked at 13th largest (192,680 residents according to the 2008 census which has been the first and latest official census). “행정구역 수”[“Number of Administrative Districts”], Korean Statistical Information Service, December 28, 2020, [https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT\\_1ZGA15](https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT_1ZGA15) (accessed October 1, 2021).

Map 4 indicates 48 points of interests we identified in Hyesan including, but not limited to, party agencies, administrative agencies, national intelligence agencies, military bases, and law enforcement agencies. In addition, most detention centers are run by police, state intelligence, and the military.

Our analysis of Hyesan indicates: 1. national intelligence agencies and police/detention facilities are placed throughout the city; 2. various military units are placed throughout the city and can thus be mobilized for public executions; and 3. the official prosecutor's office and courthouse are located in the city, but public trials are held outside these locations.

We mapped the locations of North Korean censorship bodies and organizations in Hyesan (see Map 4), which correspond with testimonies describing a systemized practice of monitoring assembled audiences at public executions and trials. We also mapped the locations of the Transmission Surveillance Bureau<sup>23</sup> and the 727 Joint Command<sup>24</sup>, which crack down on foreign media, detect communication with the outside world, and arrest those who communicate with people outside of the country. In addition, border security commands and guard posts located along the border with China are placed at regular intervals, suggesting that the North Korean government is paying particular attention to border control in this area, where there is a higher rate of defection, smuggling, and information transfer than other parts of the country.

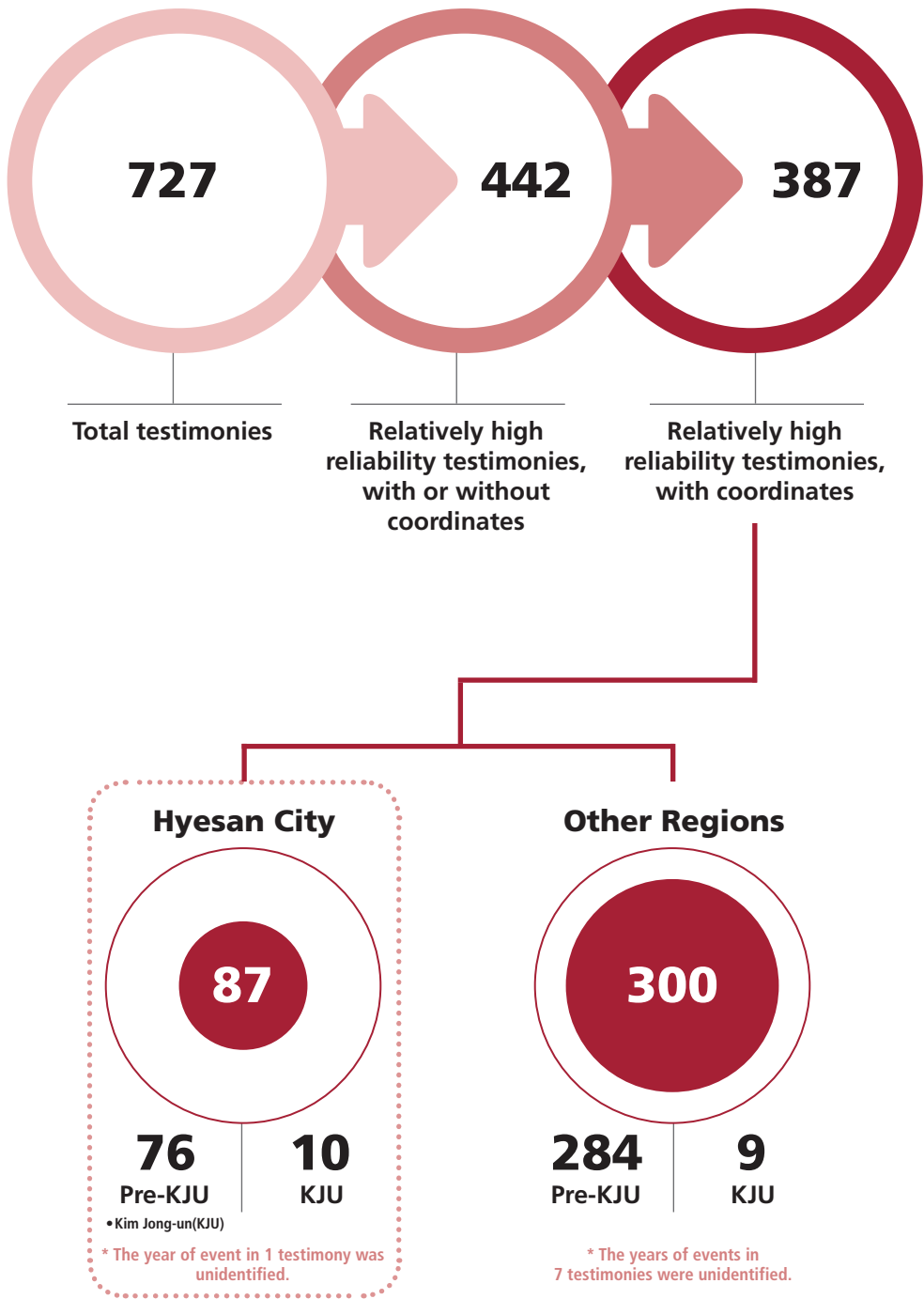
Chart 3 shows the visual explanation of the process of refining reports of all state-sanctioned killing sites. The same process is applied to the breakdowns of Hyesan city and other regions.

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<sup>23</sup> Also referred to as Bureau 27, "[it] is involved with digital and radio wave detection, and plays a key role in controlling North Korea's Internet traffic and phone calls." (Martyn Williams, "Digital Trenches: North Korea's Information Counter-Offensive" (The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2019), 15, [https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Williams\\_Digital\\_Trenches\\_Web\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Williams_Digital_Trenches_Web_FINAL.pdf))

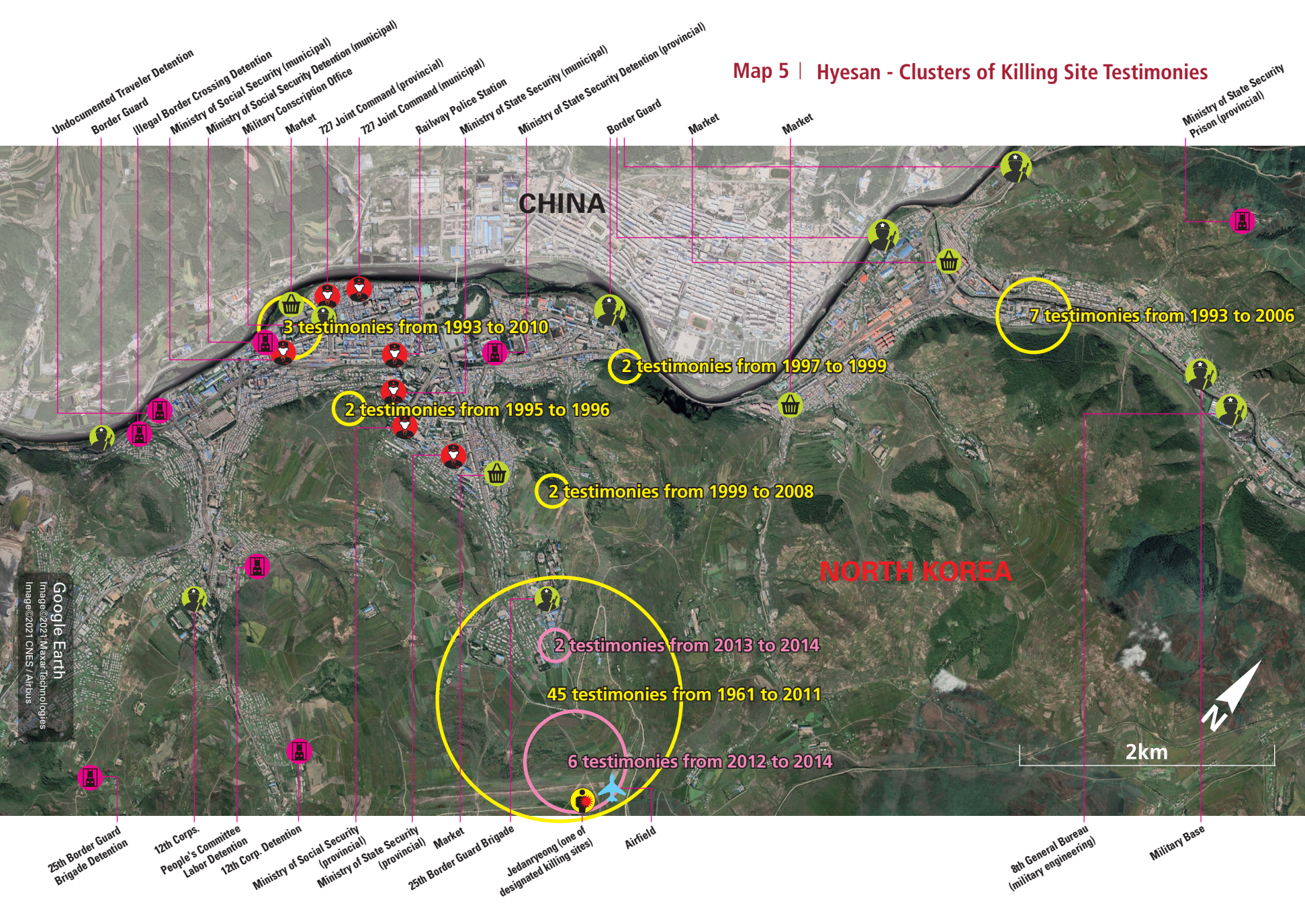
<sup>24</sup> North Korean censorship body organized in 2004 in order to crack down on foreign media, publications, radio and DVDs. Previously referred to as 109 Permanent Committee. Ibid, 16.

Chart 3 | Process of Refining Data of State-Sanctioned Killing Sites





Map 5 | Hyesan - Clusters of Killing Site Testimonies





## Killing locations in Hyesan

The six yellow circles shown in Map 5 indicate six clusters<sup>25</sup> of locations reportedly used for public executions in Hyesan before the Kim Jong-un era. The number of testimonies of locations in each cluster is indicated on the map. Outside these six clusters, there were 15 testimonies of locations. In total, there were 76 testimonies of killings in Hyesan from 1961 under Kim Il-sung's rule to December 2011, when Kim Jong-il died.<sup>26</sup>

The two pink circles shown in Map 5 indicate two clusters of locations reportedly used for public executions during the Kim Jong-un era since December 2011. Outside these two clusters, there were two testimonies of locations. In total, there were 10 reports documented from 2012 to 2014.

The locations of the pink circles suggest that **there may have been a decrease in the diversity of designated locations used for public executions in Hyesan since Kim Jong-un came to power.** A former prosecutor from Hyesan stated during an interview that there were four locations designated for public executions while he was in office from 2011 to 2013. He also stated that public executions are becoming less frequent and that people are not as frequently mobilized to attend public executions as they were in the past.<sup>27</sup>

We received no testimonies of public executions in places near the border of China such as river banks nor do they occur in central part of Hyesan as they did in the past (see yellow circles in Map 5).<sup>28</sup> We do not have any testimonies of market places<sup>29</sup> being used for public executions since 2000. Instead, most of the documented **public killings under Kim Jong-un took place at the Hyesan**

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<sup>25</sup> A cluster is a set of two or more points, with each point no more than a given distance from at least one other point in the cluster. For the clusters in this report we have used a maximum distance of 400 meters between points.

<sup>26</sup> 61 testimonies of locations are included in the clusters on Map 5 while most of the other 15 are nearby but fall too far away (outside the 400m threshold) to be included in a cluster.

<sup>27</sup> Korea Institute for National Unification's 2020 White Paper also mentioned that public executions seem to be happening less frequently in recent years based on the testimonies of North Korea escapees. The report stated, "it is not clear whether the actual number of public executions has decreased or the number of non-public executions or secret summary executions has increased" (Lee et al., 2020, 15).

<sup>28</sup> Son et al., "Mapping the Fate of the Dead" (Seoul: Transitional Justice Working Group, June, 2019), 35, [https://en.tjwg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/2019-Mapping-the-Fate-of-the-Dead\\_English.pdf](https://en.tjwg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/2019-Mapping-the-Fate-of-the-Dead_English.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> Market places were commonly used for state-sanctioned killings in other regions. Ibid, 32.

Airfield or near its surrounding hills/mountains and open spaces/fields away from the border and central area of the city (see pink circles in Map 5). The research documented one case in 2013 describing the execution of 10 or more people. The airfield area is far from the border, and there are several hills and mountains between the killing sites and the main residential area. The distance between the Chinese border and the public killing locations during the Kim Jong-un era, marked with pink circles in Map 5, suggests that the killing locations are moving away from the border.

One explanation could be that North Korea is strategically selecting execution sites where it is easier to prevent potential information leaks, as was the case with a 2005 video<sup>30</sup> from another border city, Hoeryong, North Hamgyong province. This change in location may provide an explanation of how the state's action is being influenced by the scrutiny of the international community.

### **Inhumane treatment at public executions**

Inhumane treatment of the accused was also prevalent in Hyesan. One interviewee described the physical state of an executed minor who was shot with AK rifles in 2012:

Blood was splattered and flesh was tattered. The North Korean authorities folded the body of the executed in half by stepping on it, and put it in a sack. I heard that they threw the sack away somewhere.

Interviewees also described the inhumane treatment a condemned prisoner received before being publicly executed in 2012 in Hyesan:

The condemned person was dragged out of the car like a dog before the public execution. The person who was about to be executed was already in a near death condition and his eardrums seemed to be damaged, preventing him from hearing or saying anything.

Public executions often involve public statements proclaiming that the accused

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<sup>30</sup> James Brook, "North Korean videos shock viewers," *New York Times*, March 21, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/21/world/asia/north-korean-videos-shock-viewers.html> (accessed October 5, 2021).

are a “social problem” and a threat to society as a whole. These claims are then used to justify violence, including torture, executions, and corpse desecration.<sup>31</sup>

In Hyesan, state-sanctioned killings involved the Ministry of State Security (*gukabowiseong* / 국가보위성), the Ministry of Social Security (*sahoianjeonseong* / 사회안전), the police, formerly known as the Ministry of People’s Security), and the Defense Security Command (*bowisaryeongbu* / 보위사령부).

In one public execution case from Hyesan in 2013, an interviewee said that a manager of the local Ministry of State Security office stated his rank and announced the charge directly before the execution took place in front of a forcibly mobilized audience. In another testimony, a member of the police read out loud the charges, saying they were handed down by the Supreme People’s Assembly in Pyongyang.

### Monitoring of assembled crowds at public executions

We documented testimonies on how state officials monitored attendees during public killings in Hyesan. One interviewee described an incident in June 2014 of being instructed by the leader of his People’s Unit (*inminban* / 인민반) the day before an execution not to bring any electronic devices to the execution site. At the event, the interviewee saw **several military vehicles with spinning devices on top of them, which the interviewee suspected to be some sort of communication detection equipment.** The interviewee said that state officials in groups of four or five using metal detectors were spread out among the assembled crowd searching for metal items including phones, keys, and knives. These items were collected before the execution and returned to the owners afterwards. The interviewee explained that the reason for the organized control of the audience at public killing events is because the state security officials are afraid of events being recorded or photographed for subsequent release to the outside world.<sup>32</sup>

A former prosecutor from Hyesan said that monitoring of the assembled crowd

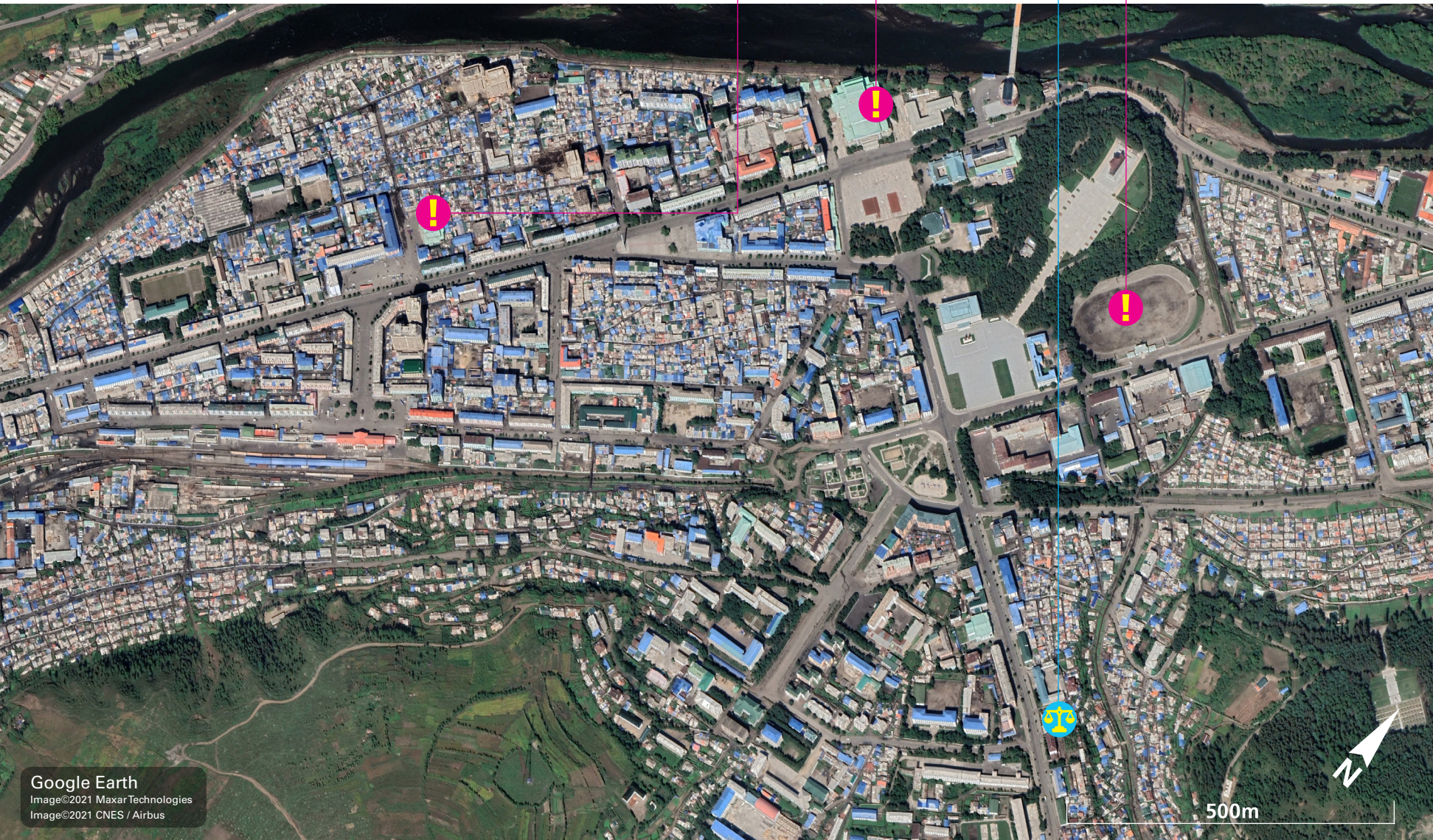
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<sup>31</sup> David Smith, “Learning from Genocide,” in *Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 2011), 132-162.

<sup>32</sup> NKDB reported in 2018 a similar instance in which a public execution in 2011 was relocated from the bank of a stream to a sports stadium, with only one entrance and exit, so that the authorities could confiscate all mobile phones (Im et al., 2018, 115).



Map 6 | Hyesan - Testimonies of public trial site locations





at public killings is not new. Several interviewees explained that the assembled crowd at public killings has always been controlled and monitored in an organized fashion by the state, long before Kim Jong-un came to power. The prosecutor also described the citizens in attendance being only loosely monitored before the Kim Jong-un era due to the limited quantity of detection devices. For example, roughly one out of five attendees would be randomly selected to be screened with a metal detector until 2011. He explained that the state imported roughly 2,000 metal detectors in total during this time.

However, he explained that this **practice of monitoring the assembled crowd became more thorough, with an increased quantity of imported handheld metal detectors in use.** He explained that the use of metal detectors imported from Libya began in 2008, but the state started importing more advanced metal detectors from China in 2012.

### **Site locations of public trials without execution**

We documented public trials in Hyesan that occurred at the Kim Jungsook Art Theater, the Hyesan Movie Theater, and the Hyesan Stadium (Map 6). **These public trials took place several hundred meters or more from the courthouse.**

A number of testimonies from Hyesan described students being systemically mobilized to attend public trials, with teachers taking attendance to ensure a 100% participation rate. One testimony described workers being forced to attend public trials while children and students were exempt. Another report from Hyesan stated that not all schools in the city are forced to attend public trials at the same time, but **two to three schools take turns each time mobilizing students to attend trials.**

## CONCLUSION: WHERE TO NEXT?

Seven years after the report of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK (UN COI), state-sanctioned killings still continue under the rule of Kim Jong-un. In recent years, North Korea appears to be strategically selecting places away from the border area to carry out these killings. In addition, monitoring and control of the assembled audience at these events is tightening to prevent information on public executions from leaking outside the country. Our findings suggest that the Kim Jong-un regime is paying more attention to human rights issues as a response to increased international scrutiny over the gravity of the situation in North Korea. Changing the human rights landscape in North Korea is important as well as strengthening international accountability mechanism. The government's continued practice of systematic and widespread human rights violations alerts us to the deeper challenge of creating rights consciousness within North Korean society.<sup>33</sup>

Human rights documentation organizations continue to face a number of challenges in monitoring and recording human rights violations in North Korea. The government's heightened control over information flows in recent years and strict COVID-19 prevention measures have resulted in a significant decrease in the North Korean escapee population entering South Korea. These are some of the major challenges to accessing information on human rights violations committed by the government. With an understanding of these challenges in mind, we plan to adopt new directions for our research in the following areas.

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<sup>33</sup> Patricia Goedde (2018). "Human Rights Diffusion in North Korea: The Impact of Transnational Legal Mobilization." *Asian Journal of Law and Society*, 5(1), 175-203. doi:10.1017/als.2017.20.

## Documenting secret or indoor killings

We will collect testimonies of “secret executions” or “indoor executions” in our database. Daily NK, Radio Free Asia, and Asia Press are among several news platforms focusing on issues relating to North Korea that have mentioned secret killings or indoor killings taking place in North Korea under Kim Jong-un’s rule. Although this method of killing existed long before Kim Jong-un came to power, it seems that there have been more news reports about this in the last five to six years under his rule. We will track this type of killing mentioned by news sources, in conjunction with our data on killings from the testimonies of North Korean escapees in our research.

From January 2020 to June 2021, only 265 North Korean escapees entered South Korea.<sup>34</sup> Of these North Korean escapees, we do not know how many of them succeeded in escaping from North Korea after the closure of the borders due to the COVID-19 prevention measures.<sup>35</sup> While the border remains closed, it is challenging to find research participants to provide information on recent human rights violations. To overcome this challenge, we will strengthen our cooperation with news platforms that have gained insights into the North Korean human rights situation through illicit cross-border telecommunication. Since signing a Memorandum of Understanding in April 2021, TJWG and Daily NK have been collaborating by sharing information pertaining to human rights violations and by supporting advocacy efforts. We plan to establish partnerships and expand our cooperation with journalist groups as well to support our information-gathering efforts.

## Identifying possible repositories of documentary evidence

We will continue to record the locations of possible repositories of documents that may contain evidence regarding human rights violations. For this report, we reviewed all the report sites of Hyesan accumulated in our database from six years of research. Importantly, the Ryanggang provincial archive and the en-

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**34** During the COVID-19 pandemic (from 2020 to June 2021), the total number of North Koreans who had defected to South Korea was 265. In 2020 alone, 229 North Koreans defected to South Korea. In 2021, as of June, 36 North Koreans defected to South Korea. “북한이탈주민정책 [Policy on North Korean Defectors],” Ministry of Unification, <https://www.unikorea.go.kr/unikorea/business/NKDefectorsPolicy/status/lately/> (accessed October 19, 2021).

**35** Only the South Korean government has information on the accurate count of North Koreans who successfully escaped from North Korea after the closure of the border due to COVID-19 prevention measures. To date, the South Korea government has yet to disclose this information.

trance to the storage unit was identified.<sup>36</sup> Documents archived in this location may prove important for future legal proceedings and for creating a historical account of North Korea's past.

In case of a sudden collapse of the North Korean government, or during a transitional period on the Korean peninsula, external entities or local residents need to intervene to protect and minimize the destruction of these sites. Identifying these sites has proven to be more difficult than identifying sites of state-sanctioned killings in our research. The operations of these offices are described as organized and structured according to well-established procedures. There are a large number of repositories of documents with varying capacities at different levels, such as state, province, city, county, and military units. Some sites possibly containing documentary evidence are known to local citizens and are possible to identify on satellite imagery. We aim to understand the type and volume of documentation that is stored in these facilities with the help of North Korean escapees participating in our research.

### Mapping Chain of Command

We will study the North Korean government's chain of command structure to identify those responsible for authorizing violence against citizens, and to provide context for our accountability efforts. To date, there has not been a civil society project that comprehensively identifies the number of government agencies existing across North Korea, their locations, and the specific roles they play in state killings and disappearances.

In Hyesan alone we identified a total of 13 such government departments and agencies during the first two years of our research from 2015 to 2017.<sup>37</sup> To date, we were able to identify 64 locations including, but not limited to, the party, military, security, and law-enforcement agencies in Hyesan. For the next report of the Mapping Project, we aim to collect information about the functionalities of these agencies and their possible connections to human rights

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<sup>36</sup> Also referred to as *gaengdo* / 갯도; this site was identified by a former prosecutor from Hyesan. This location was also identified by another interviewee.

<sup>37</sup> Sarah Son et al., "Mapping Crimes Against Humanity in North Korea: Mass Graves, Killing Sites and Documentary Evidence" (Seoul: Transitional Justice Working Group, July 2017), 44, [https://en.tjwg.org/TJWG\\_Report-Mapping\\_Crimes\\_Against\\_Humanity\\_in\\_North\\_Korea\(July2017\)-Eng\\_Final.pdf](https://en.tjwg.org/TJWG_Report-Mapping_Crimes_Against_Humanity_in_North_Korea(July2017)-Eng_Final.pdf).

violations. As we gather more information from other sources, we intend to expand this form of investigation to other cities and counties as well.

A chain-of-command study, parallel to the Mapping Project, will include a database of the command structures, their locations, and the areas of operations of police, intelligence, military, and other security force units in North Korea. This database will enable a spatial analysis of areas of responsibility in relation to the alleged human rights violations. This information will strengthen the value of what we collect for future accountability processes and ongoing advocacy efforts at the international level.

