



Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG)

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“100,000s of North Koreans as well as people in China, South Korea and Japan at risk from radioactive materials from the Punggye-ri nuclear test site”

The report will be available from February 21 at <https://en.tjwg.org/mapping-project-north-korea>

In the new report “**Mapping the Risk and Effect of Radioactive Contamination of Groundwater Sources from the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site in North Korea**”, TJWG presents the first comprehensive overview of risk from the leakage and dissemination by water of the radioactive materials from the nuclear test site. TJWG mapped the possible dissemination of radioactive materials to the hundreds of thousands of North Koreans living in the vicinity of Punggye-ri and explored the ways in which smuggling and distribution of the agricultural and marine products as well as local specialties like pine mushrooms from the area may leave not only the North Korean people but also the population in neighboring China, South Korea and Japan at risk.

The report also highlights the failure of the key stakeholders, in particular the South Korean government, to address this risk properly and urges internationally the resumption of radiation exposure tests for all North Korean escapees from the areas near Punggye-ri in South Korea who desire them and the disclosure of the test results; the strengthening of inspection of agricultural and marine products from North Korea and international coordination; a prompt, effective, thorough, independent and impartial investigation into the risk of groundwater contamination from the radioactive materials, the prevention of harm and remedies.

According to the report:

- The affected population in the 8 nearby cities and counties (Kilju County, Hwadae County, Kimchaek City, Myonggan County, Myongchon County, Orang County, Tanchon City and Paegam County) would be approximately 540,000 or 270,000 under the assumption that 50 or 25 percent respectively of the 1.08 million people in the area have been affected; this may not include the 28,700 prisoners estimated to be in Kwanliso (political prison camp) no. 16.

- The Chinese government has been apprehensive about the leakage and dissemination of radioactive materials from North Korea but has failed to stop the smuggle or distribution of North Korea's agricultural and marine products; the South Korean authorities detected 9 times the standard level of radioactive cesium isotopes in hedgehog mushrooms imported from North Korea disguised as Chinese products; the Japanese government obtained documents showing the involvement of the pro-Pyongyang General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryon) and Office No. 39 of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK).
- The test results for 9 out of the 40 North Korean escapees (22.5 percent) tested for radiation exposure by South Korea's Ministry of Unification (MOU) in 2017 and 2018 displayed abnormalities, but the testing ceased since 2019; testing all 160 escapees who had lived in Kilju County or all 881 escapees who had lived in the 9 cities and counties since 2006 will cost about 250 million won (211,000 USD) or 1.4 billion won (1,164,000 USD) respectively.

Hubert Younghwan Lee, TJWG's Executive Director, said "While there has been a tendency to discuss North Korea's nuclear program solely as a security issue, this report is significant for confirming that North Korea's nuclear tests threaten the right to life and the right to health of not only the North Korean people also of those in South Korea and other neighboring countries. As resolution 77/226 adopted by the UN General Assembly last December condemned North Korea for diverting its resources into pursuing nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles over the welfare of its people, this is another important case shows the link between the North Korean security issue and the North Korean human rights issue."

Ethan Hee-Seok Shin, TJWG's legal analyst, said "The South Korean government must conduct radiation exposure tests on all of the 881 North Korean escapees who had lived in the 8 cities and counties near Punggye-ri after 2006 that wish to be tested and disclose the test results. Also, the North Korean escapees who display symptoms of radiation exposure must given accurate information and appropriate medical treatment. The South Korean government must urge North Korea to conduct a prompt, effective, thorough, independent and impartial investigation based on the results from the testing of the North Korean escapees in the international community."

About TJWG The Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG) is a human rights documentation NGO established in Seoul in 2014 by human rights activists and researchers from five countries (South Korea, North Korea, the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada). We aim to develop the best practice to address mass human rights violations and to realize victim-centered approach and justice in societies that are making a transition from or have yet to make a transition from armed conflict or dictatorship. We cooperate and share experience with organizations and individuals who take lead in human rights documentation and accountability for mass atrocities.