

April 20, 2023

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Re: Discussion of leading joint international efforts to resolve the issue of South Korean POWs, abductees and detainees in North Korea at the summit on April 26, 2023

Dear President Yoon Suk-yeol,

For the past 70 years, North Korea has refused to repatriate an estimated 50,000 South Korean POWs (prisoners of war) and 100,000 civilian abductees in clear violation of the 1953 Armistice Agreement as well as the 1949 Geneva Conventions relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War and relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. Even after 1953, North Korea has denied the repatriation of at least 516 South Korean POWs and civilian abductees including from the Vietnam War and the 1970 seizure of the ROK Navy broadcast ship I-2, over 60 seizures of fishing vessels in 1955-1987 and the 1969 Korean Air Lines YS-11 hijacking. Recently, North Korea continues to detain at least 6 South Korean citizens (Kim Kuk-gi, Choi Chun-gil; Kim Jeong-wook; Kim Won-ho, Ko Hyon-chol and another individual whose name is not known).

We urge you to demonstrate the shared values of advancing human rights, democracy, the rule of law and accountability in the Indo-Pacific by addressing the issue of South Korean POWs, abductees and detainees in North Korea at the summit and in the joint statement with President Biden on April 26, 2023.

We note that in the Phnom Penh Statement of November 13, 2022, you “reaffirm[ed] a shared commitment to the immediate resolution of the abductions issue” with US President Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Kishida while the latter two “also express[ed] their support for the immediate release of the ROK citizens detained in the DPRK”.¹

This was followed by a joint statement by 31 states at the United Nations on December 9, 2022 which expressed “concern with the human rights situation of citizens of the Republic of Korea detained in the DPRK, abductions and enforced disappearances of Japanese and Republic of Korea citizens, and other nationals who are kept against their will in the DPRK, and unrepatriated prisoners of war” and strongly urged “the DPRK to resolve all outstanding issues with detainees, abductees, and disappeared and immediately return them to their homes”.²

While we do not know if the issue was discussed during the previous summit on May 21, 2022, it was not specifically mentioned in the post-summit joint statement.³ During the summit this time, we urge you to continue to include the issue in the summit agenda and joint statement and to jointly lead the international diplomatic efforts afterwards to resolve immediately all issues related to all POWs, abductees and detainees, in particular the realization of their immediate return and accountability, including the repatriation of the remains of the deceased persons.

In this regard, we note that past diplomatic efforts have resulted in the release of the last three US citizens (Kim Dong Chul, Tony Kim and Kim Hak Song) detained in North Korea on May 9, 2018 and North Korea’s commitment to recovering US POW/MIA remains including the immediate repatriation of those already identified in the joint statement following the Singapore US-North Korean summit on June 12, 2018.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Signature organizations and individuals (as of April 20, 2023)

Kim Jeong-sam (elder brother of missionary Kim Jeong-wook who has been held in detention in North Korea since 2013)

Citizens’ Alliance for North Korean Human Rights

HanVoice

Justice For North Korea

Korean War POW Family Association

Mulmangcho

Transitional Justice Working Group

¹ Phnom Penh Statement on US – Japan – Republic of Korea Trilateral Partnership for the Indo-Pacific (November 13, 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/11/13/phnom-penh-statement-on-trilateral-partnership-for-the-indo-pacific>

² Joint Statement Delivered by Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield on the Human Rights Situation in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (December 9, 2022), <https://usun.usmission.gov/joint-statement-delivered-by-ambassador-linda-thomas-greenfield-on-the-human-rights-situation-in-the-democratic-peoples-republic-of-korea>

³ United States-Republic of Korea Leaders’ Joint Statement (May 21, 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/21/united-states-republic-of-korea-leaders-joint-statement>