



Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG)

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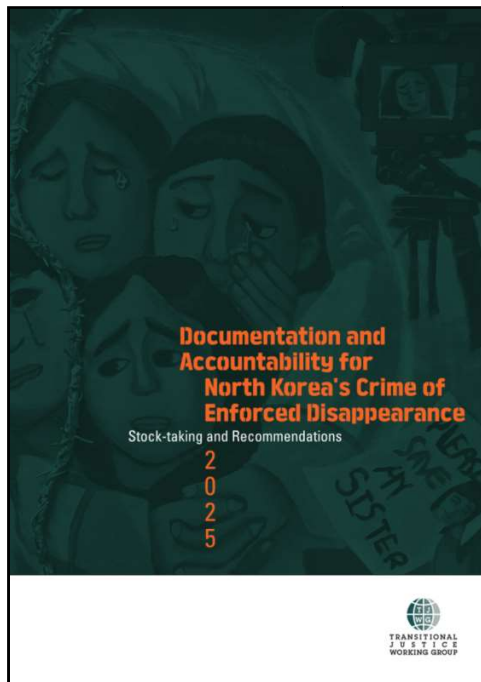
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Report on 80 Years of North Korea's Crime of Enforced Disappearance

Seoul-based TJWG presents cases, victim families' struggle, and proposed actions

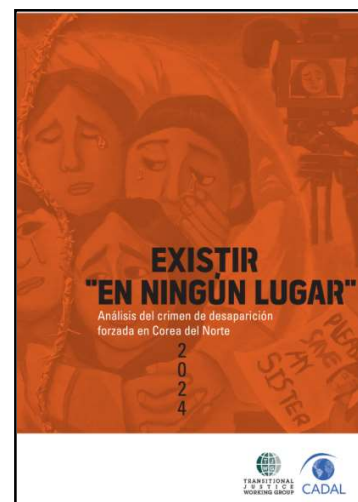
The report will be available at <https://en.tjwg.org/mapping-project-north-korea>



On July 17, 2025 (Seoul time), the Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG) releases a new report titled ***Documentation and Accountability for North Korea's Crime of Enforced Disappearance: Stock-taking and Recommendations***. The report is available in Korean and English.

In 2014, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic Republic of Korea (COI DRPK) in its landmark report concluded that crimes against humanity—including enforced disappearance—have been committed in North Korea. Over a decade after the COI report, these crimes persist, individuals remain unaccounted for, and perpetrators have largely been held unaccountable.

TJWG, a Seoul-based human rights NGO, has undertaken a comprehensive research effort to document these crimes in its 2024 publication, *Existing “Nowhere”: Looking into North Korea’s Crime of Enforced Disappearance*. While the report was previously available in English and Korean, TJWG is releasing the Spanish version along with the new report. The report was translated by TJWG’s Argentine partner human rights organization, Derechos Humanos y Solidaridad Democrática Internacional (CADAL, Human Rights and International Democratic Solidarity). By translating the report into Spanish, we aim to share our findings with Spanish-speaking countries in Central and South America, which have strong historical ties to the crime of enforced disappearance. Reports in all three languages are available at <https://en.tjwg.org/publications/>.



This new report builds on prior findings, presenting recommendations based on the stock-taking of the advocacy efforts and milestones made thus far by victim families and human rights organizations to combat North Korea’s crime of enforced disappearance and presents recommendations for actions key stakeholders should take to overcome the bureaucratic and political inertia and inaction that impedes progress in promoting documentation and accountability.

An ongoing and transnational crime

The report highlights how enforced disappearance in North Korea is not a relic of the past but a continuing crime prolonged by lack of international action. Victims include 1) unrepatriated South Korean prisoners of war (POWs), 2) Korean War-era South Korean civilian abductees, 3) Post-war South Korean civilian abductees, 4) “Returnees” from Japan, 5) Japanese and other foreign abductees, 6) North Korean refugees disappeared in and/or repatriated from China, Russia and other countries, 7) Political prisoners, 8) Religious believers and ‘subversive influencers,’ 9) North Korea’s overseas workers and military personnel and 10) persons with disabilities transferred to a remote island.

Inside North Korea, a systemic legal black hole enables the crime

The report emphasizes the opaque nature of the North Korean legal system is designed to perpetuate crimes of enforced disappearances. North Korean citizens are not able to access laws adopted by the Supreme People’s Assembly and international calls to publish the text of ratified human rights treaties have gone unheeded. The Ministry of State Security employs its own prosecutors and ‘judges’, and perpetuates the crime of enforced disappearance of alleged offenders of ‘anti-state and anti-nation’ crimes that have never been clearly defined. Acting as the judge, jury, and executioner, the MSS operates without oversight or accountability.

Outside North Korea, transnational enforced disappearance persists

The report highlights that the crime of enforced disappearance often begins outside of North Korea's borders. Russia and China maintain close cooperation with the North Korean state to monitor North Korean refugees and forcibly repatriate them back to North Korean soil. The report finds that from 2011-2019, Russian authorities only granted asylum status to a single North Korean. TJWG urges China and Russia to stop the complicity and end the forcible repatriation of North Korean refugees and escapees in violation of the principle of *non-refoulement*. China and Russia should terminate treaties with North Korea which have justified the cycle of enforced repatriation continues all too easily.

Need for a definitive action: Targeted human rights sanctions

TJWG continues to compile profiles of perpetrators, including high-ranking officials in the MSS and other state organs. The report stresses the importance of naming individuals and institutions responsible for disappearances and using this information to support future prosecutions and targeted sanctions.

Without clear public action from the international community, the North Korean regime does not have any incentive to put a stop to the crime of enforced disappearances. Countries with Magnitsky-targeted sanctions framework should implement sanctions against individuals and entities most responsible for North Korea's enforced disappearance and other grave human rights violations. Countries without such targeted sanctions laws should establish them to participate in international cooperation, as well as provide support to human rights organizations that are trying to provide the necessary information.

Need for an Operational Assessment of the UN Human Rights Office in Seoul

"The UN Human Rights Office in Seoul was established and mandated to strengthen accountability efforts for crimes against humanity committed in North Korea identified by the COI report in 2014. The office has been operating on financial contributions from the UN member states; however, the quality and usefulness of the information and evidence collected over the past 10 years for judicial and other accountability work remain questionable. It is time for UN member states to formally assess the OHCHR's operation. Furthermore, it is also concerning that the OHCHR has been hesitant to directly name China and Russia, which are largely responsible for the enforced disappearance of North Korean refugees and escapees that stem from forcible repatriation. If the South Korean government and other member states that contribute to the UN do not bring up the issue at hand, I'm afraid that the international community will end up exhausting more time and resources." — *Hubert Younghwan Lee, Executive Director*

The New South Korean Administration Should Not Turn a Blind Eye

"Under the Lee Jae-myung administration, families of victims of enforced disappearance and/or arbitrary detention – including unrepatriated POWs, Korean War-era and post-war civilian

abductees and missionaries – are raising their concerns. It is disheartening to see the efforts made under the previous administration are being discontinued under the name of seeking dialogues and an improved relationship with Pyongyang. No matter the reason, the President and the administration should not neglect the duty to protect their people. Additionally, we hope to see the administration join the international effort to mitigate the issue of forced repatriation of North Korean refugees and escapees from China and other countries, as well as the crime of enforced disappearance perpetrated within North Korea.” — *Dr. Seungju Lee, Profiler*

Follow-up Investigation: Enforced Disappearances and Transnational Repression in China and Russia

“We are investigating the crime of transnational repression, including but not limited to surveillance, arbitrary detention, forced repatriation, and enforced disappearances, perpetrated against North Korean workers in China and soldiers deployed to Russia. We aim to provide information on specific cases, involved state organs, and individual perpetrators to different state governments. I hope such information will be used to prohibit the import of products from illicit forced labor and impose targeted sanctions.” — *April Song-Ah Park, Project Director*

Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG) is a human rights documentation and advocacy NGO established in Seoul in 2014 that aims to develop the best practice to address mass human rights violations and to realize reparation and judicial accountability through a victim-centered approach in societies that are making a transition from or have yet to make a transition from armed conflict or dictatorship. TJWG also cooperates and shares experience with organizations and individuals who take the lead in human rights documentation and accountability for mass atrocities.