

ISSUES BRIEF

No.2
2026.9

ISSN 3092-0620



TRANSITIONAL
JUSTICE
WORKING GROUP



Global
Rights
Compliance

North Korea's "Operation Fox Hunt" in China

China uses a highly advanced digital surveillance system within its borders, and carries out "Operation Fox Hunt" (猎狐专项行动) to apprehend dissidents overseas. However, even China faces a persistent dilemma: North Korean operatives carrying out abductions and assassinations on Chinese soil in their version of "Operation Fox Hunt" that outdoes China.

Primary targets of North Korean operatives that roam freely in China are those in possession of sensitive information that, if leaked after their defection, would undermine Kim Jong-un's authority or North Korea's reputation. These targets include high-ranking officials, Kim's bodyguards, weapons and scientific experts, hackers, diplomats, students studying abroad, and overseas workers and managers that are knowledgeable about the Kim family's private life, secret organizations, and sanctioned businesses. South Koreans and other foreign nationals, as well as Chinese citizens, including ethnic Korean Chinese, who facilitate defection or introduce external information and religion into North Korea, are also targeted.

This issue brief sheds light on North Korea's transnational repression (TNR)¹⁾ operations in China, as well as China's role and responsibility in them.

North Korea's Black Site in Beijing: Secret Prison Beneath the Consular Section Building

¹
See TJWG and GRC's Issue Brief No. 1 (2025) for more on TNR.

"Black Sites" refer to secret detention facilities where prisoners are held captive without due

process in foreign jurisdictions. In 2021, the Associated Press (AP) reported a Chinese-run secret detention facility in a converted three-story villa in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE).²⁾ In 2022, Spain-based human rights NGO Safeguard Defenders revealed 102 “overseas police service stations(海外服务站)” across 53 countries operated by the Public Security Bureaus of Nantong City, Wenzhou City, Fuzhou City, and Qingtian County.³⁾ This resulted in investigations of these secret police stations and their closures in various countries.

Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG) has been investigating North Korea’s possible black sites in China, in particular at the North Korean embassy in Beijing and the consulate-general in Shenyang. Multiple interviewees indicated the basement of the consular building in the North Korean embassy (under Ambassador Ri Ryong-nam) in Chaoyang District of Beijing as the location of a secret detention facility.

2

“Detainee says China has secret jail in Dubai, holds Uyghurs,” The Associated Press, August 17, 2021.

3

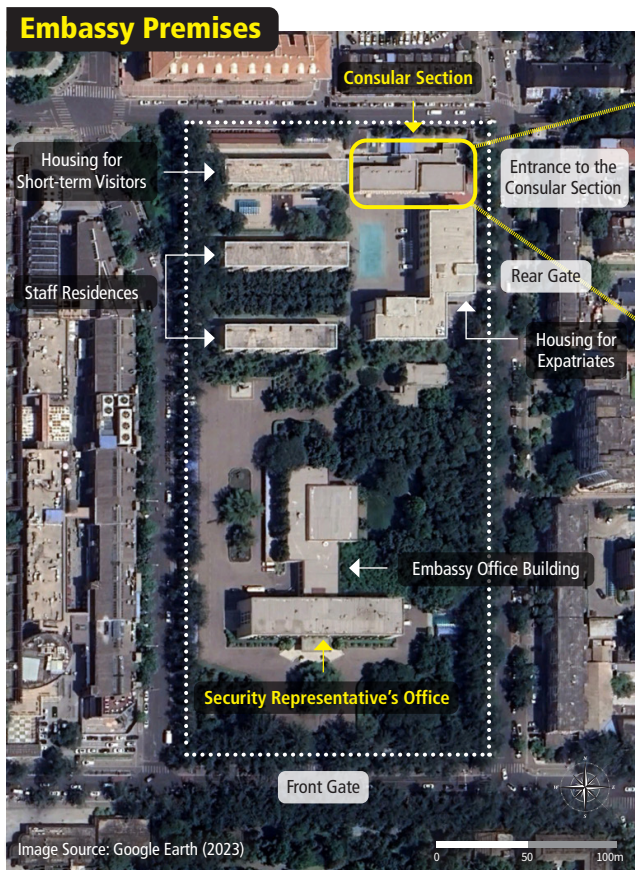
Safeguard Defenders, “110 Overseas - Chinese Transnational Policing Gone Wild,” September 12, 2022; “Patrol and Persuade,” December 4, 2022.

“There is a prison in the basement of the Beijing embassy. It’s an awfully big prison. That is probably why they locked ‘A’ in there to be beaten half dead in a really excruciating manner.” — A North Korea-related businessperson

“(The prison facility) is in the consular section. The consular section building’s basement serves as a prison.” — A former North Korean diplomat

The main function of each building within the North Korean embassy in Beijing, including the site identified as the basement prison, is indicated in the image below.

Although it is unclear when the basement prison was built, several media sources provide clues as to when North Korea could have covertly carried out the construction. In 2017, NK News, a news outlet



specializing in North Korean affairs, reported that North Korea was constructing a residential building for visiting citizens within the embassy compound.⁴⁾ In 2024, South Korean cable TV network MBN, citing an anonymous source on North Korea, reported that North Korea had constructed “a basement prison” in its embassy in Beijing for the purpose of detaining diplomats awaiting repatriation.⁵⁾ The façade of the North Korean embassy was also renovated prior to Kim Jong-un’s visit to China in 2025.⁶⁾

Immediately upon arrival in China, most overseas North Korean workers have their passports confiscated. However, some managers, diplomats, and those sent with special missions are permitted to keep their passports. When the latter are targeted and apprehended, their passports and mobile phones are confiscated before their confinement. If taken to the Beijing embassy, the captives are confined in the secret prison in the consular section building basement, where they are subjected to repeated interrogations.

“They are first detained at the embassy for a minimum of one week and a maximum of one month for the preliminary investigation. After, they are subjected to punishment upon returning to North Korea.” — A manager of North Korean workers in China

When North Korea detects that diplomats, students studying abroad, Party cadres, individuals sent with special missions, and operatives in China and elsewhere attempt to defect, it lures them to Beijing under false pretenses. Upon their arrival in Beijing, they are immediately confined within the embassy.

Under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, Chinese authorities may not enter the premises of diplomatic mission without the consent of its head, but North Korean diplomats have the duty to respect Chinese laws and regulations.⁷⁾ Therefore, the Chinese government can hold North Korea accountable for violations of Chinese law occurring in its Beijing embassy, which is part of China’s sovereign territory. If necessary, China can expel North Korean diplomats implicated in operating the secret prison by declaring them persona non grata, or demand its closure by leveraging measures such as trade restrictions, deportation of North Korean workers, and severance of diplomatic relations.⁸⁾

“Security Representative”: the Head of North Korea’s Version of Operation Fox Hunt

North Korea’s diplomatic missions prioritize surveillance and control of its people abroad, rather than the protection of their rights and interests. According to TJWG’s closed-source investigation, the head of North Korea’s Operation Fox Hunt is the “Security Representative” assigned to each diplomatic mission. Though officially holding a consular title, the Security Representative is not a career diplomat from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but a senior cadre seconded from the National Intelligence Agency (NIA; formerly known as the Ministry of State Security). The Security Representative in particular directs illegal operations to track and repatriate North Koreans who have gone off the designated course or gone incommunicado.

When dispatched personnel go absent without permission, an NIA officer assigned to each overseas deployment unit reports to their superiors. The Security Representative makes a compilation to report on the situation to Pyongyang within 12 to 24 hours. The headquarters of each organization in Pyongyang promptly assesses situations overseas through this elaborate reporting system.

The Security Representative has the authority to convert NIA officers assigned to overseas deployment

⁴ Chad O’Carroll, “North Korean embassy in Beijing building ‘hotel’ for visiting citizens,” *NK News*, July 11, 2017.

⁵ Kwon Yong-beom, “[단독] ‘북, 중국 주재 대사관 지하 감옥 설치... 탈북 사전 차단?’ [North Korea Has Installed an Underground Prison at Its Embassy in China...Aiming to Prevent Defections], *MBN*, July 18, 2024.

⁶ Kim Cheol-joong, “김정은 방중 앞둔 北대사관, 전면금색 國章 새로 설치... 베이징 역 경계도 대폭 강화” [North Korean Embassy in Beijing installs new gold emblem ahead of Kim Jong-un’s visit to China... Security at Beijing station also tightened], *Donga Ilbo*, September 1, 2025.

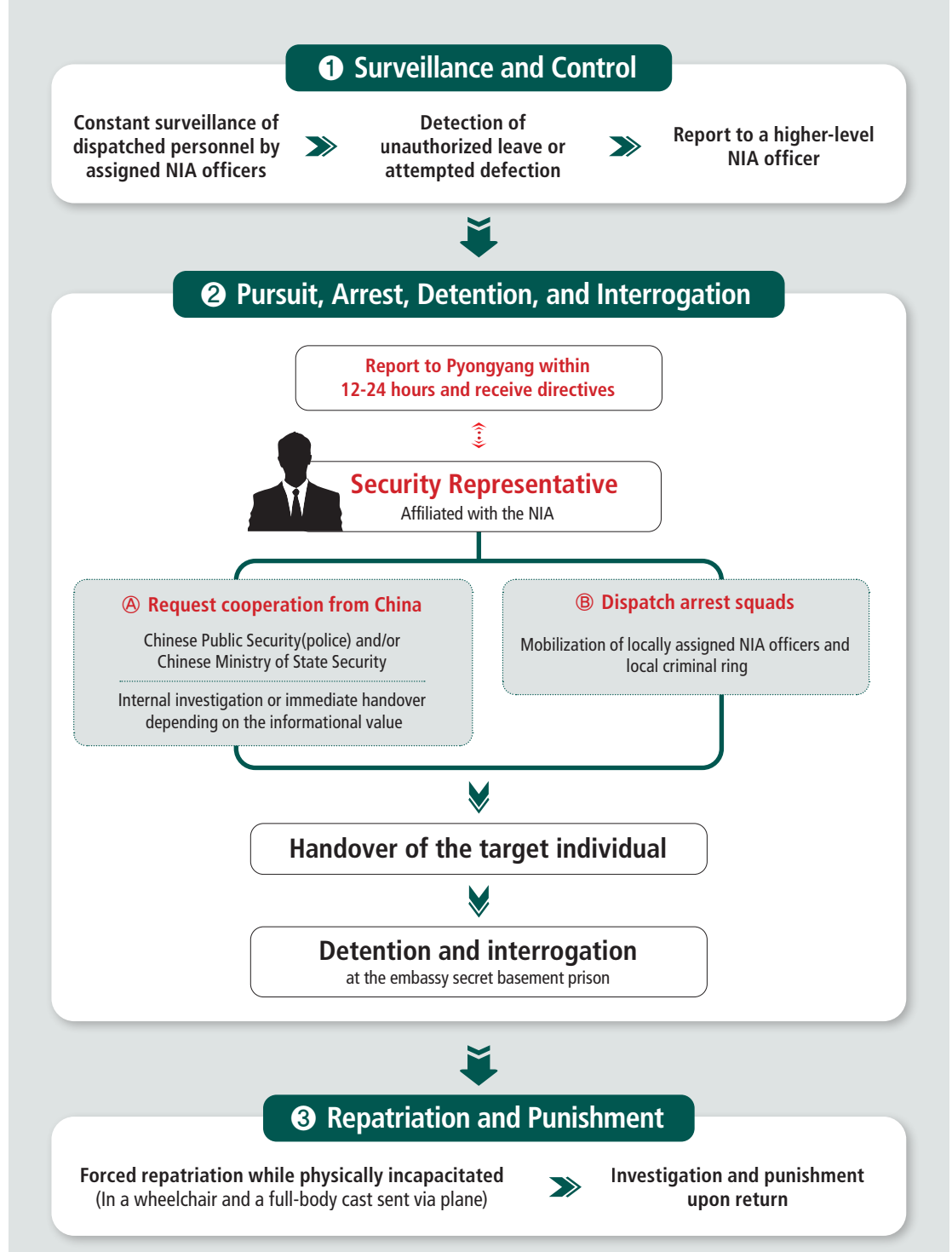
⁷ Articles 22(1) and 41(1) and (3) of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, Article 238 of the Criminal Law of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) (Unlawful Detention); Articles 3 and 17 of the Criminal Procedure Law of the PRC; Article 62 of the Exit and Entry Administration Law of the PRC; and Article 25 of the Regulations of the PRC Concerning Diplomatic Privileges and Immunities.

⁸ On April 17, 1984, a Libyan diplomat opened fire on anti-Gaddafi protesters outside the Libyan embassy, killing a police officer at the scene and causing multiple casualties. In response, the British government severed diplomatic ties with Libya and expelled its diplomats. “1984: Libyan Embassy Siege Ends,” *BBC*, April 17, 1984.

units in China into arrest squads. The Security Representative commands them in accordance with directives from Pyongyang based on comprehensive analysis of factors such as the target's identity and intelligence value. In some cases, local criminal rings in China are also mobilized. When North Korea's own intelligence network has difficulty locating the fugitives' escape route or hideout, it may request assistance from Chinese police in apprehending the individual, including by fabricating criminal charges such as drugs or firearms possessions.

North Korea's System of Oppression and Cooperation within China

** The Ministry of State Security has been renamed the National Intelligence Agency (NIA)*



Once the targeted individuals are arrested, they are subjected to interrogations that are akin to pre-trial examinations in North Korea's criminal procedure at the basement prison at the North Korean embassy.

"Before crossing the border, cadres dispatched to the consular section of the embassy must approve and complete preliminary investigation to clearly determine the severity of punishment upon repatriation." — A serving legal official in North Korea

The Security Representative reports the findings from the interrogations to Pyongyang and executes forced repatriation in accordance with directives from his superiors. The reporting by the Security Representative can determine not only the punishment for the repatriated persons but also for their families and close associates based on guilt by association.

9

Repatriated North Korean hacker Pae Yong Ju: In a Wheelchair and a Full-Body Cast on Air Koryo Flight

Madonghui Military College, located in Pyongyang's Sadong District, is a training facility affiliated with the Reconnaissance General Bureau under the Ministry of National Defense (formerly known as the Ministry of People's Armed Forces), responsible for cultivating operatives for covert operations against South Korea.

The transfer of the apprehended targets to Pyongyang is executed meticulously. Mostly, direct flights from Beijing to Pyongyang are used to shorten the transfer route and minimize exposure. Harsh methods are employed to prevent escape or resistance during the transfer.

"They are sent by plane. Plaster casts are used to immobilize them. These [joints] are tied up and encased in plaster. These [feet], too. Also, bound in plaster to prevent screaming or moving along the way." — A North Korea-related businessperson



China provoked an international outrage by repatriating about 500 North Korean escapees on the night of October 9, 2023, immediately following the end of the Hangzhou Asian Games. Prior to this mass deportation, on August 29, North Korea forcibly repatriated Pae Yong Ju, a North Korean hacker in his early thirties who had been covertly operating in China.

"[The hacker] was caught attempting to escape to South Korea. (Who caught him?) He was apprehended by the Chinese police in Inner Mongolia before he could cross the border to Mongolia. After six months of interrogation by Chinese authorities, the North Korean consulate-general in Shenyang took custody of him and transferred him to the embassy in Beijing two days later." — A North Korea-related businessperson

According to his passport, Pae was born in Pyongyang on November 11, 1988.

He was born into a family of ethnic Korean "returnees" from Japan and graduated from Madonghui Military College (formerly known as Amnokgang College), which is known to train operatives against South Korea.⁹⁾ Like other hackers,

he studied English at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST), posing as a student from Kim Il Sung University. Later, he was sent to China to steal cryptocurrency and hack into South Korean government organs and Chinese military organs before being arrested by Chinese authorities while attempting to defect to South Korea.

Despite North Korea's demand for Pae's immediate transfer, China's Ministry of State Security (MSS) handed him over to the North Korean consulate-general in Shenyang only after severely interrogating him for six months in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia to extract information about North Korea's hacker network in China.

Two days later, Pae was taken to the North Korean embassy in Beijing. Held in the basement prison of the consular section building, he was again brutally interrogated about what he had told China's MSS. He was confined there for about a year to await his repatriation.

In August 2023, flights between Beijing and Pyongyang resumed after three years and seven months following the COVID-19 lockdown.¹⁰ Pae was put in a full-body cast and placed in a wheelchair to be transported by a flight from Beijing to Pyongyang. He was disguised as a patient to avoid drawing attention from airport staff and passengers.

TJWG refrained from releasing information about Pae's case for while there remained a possibility of his escape from North Korea. However, TJWG now goes public with his identity because, three years after his repatriation, an informant confirmed his death.

Erosion of China's Judicial Sovereignty

10

In January 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korea closed all land, sea, and air routes to China and other countries. On August 22, 2023, Air Koryo flight JS151 was observed taking off from Pyongyang Sunan International Airport and landing at Beijing Capital International Airport by the media.

11

“北조평통, 南 인권거론에 ‘징벌할 것’” [North Korea's Committee for the Peaceful Reunification Vows to 'Punish' South Korea over Human Rights Criticism], KCNA, May 5, 2011.

12

Moon Seong-hwi, “한총련 목사 살해사건을 둘러싼 의혹들” [Controversies around the Murder of Pastor Han Chung-ryeol], Radio Free Asia, June 27, 2016.

In February 2004, Kang Gun, a former North Korean military officer who became a South Korean citizen, released a video footage from inside the Yodok political prison camp. In March 2005, he was abducted by North Korean operatives in Longjing City, Jilin Province, China and taken to Pyongyang, with his fate and whereabouts unknown afterwards.

In August 2011, Kim Chang-hwan (Patrick Kim), a 46-year-old South Korean pastor doing missionary work for North Koreans from Dandong City, Liaoning Province, China, was killed by neostigmine bromide, a toxin used by North Korean operatives. He had smuggled documents critical of Kim Jong-il into North Korea. A few months before Pastor Kim's murder, the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland (CPRF), a North Korean agency handling South Korean affairs, had warned that “Our people will resolutely punish those who provoke our dignity and system.”¹¹

In April 2016, Han Chung-ryeol, the senior pastor of the Changbai Church in Changbai Korean Autonomous County, Jilin Province, China, was found murdered by North Korean agents in a remote hillside. Chinese authorities investigated the murder of Han, a Chinese citizen of Korean ethnicity, but did not release their findings.¹² Afterwards, the missionary work for North Koreans declined sharply.

On May 29, 2017, Ham Jin-woo, a North Korean defector who worked as a reporter for North Korea-focused news outlet DailyNK under the pen name Choi Song-min, was abducted by two unidentified men near the North Korean border in China and taken to North Korea. It appears that North Korean authorities were waiting for an opportune moment to eliminate him. He remains disappeared for over nine years.

To locate and covertly approach their targets, North Korea employed Chinese citizens for their operations or infiltrated its agents disguised as smugglers, students, and other false identities. North Korean operatives familiarize themselves with the Chinese language and geography and build local networks, ready to carry out intelligence collection, surveillance, enticement, and abduction when given orders.

The criminal activities of North Korean operatives in China directly contravene the 1998 revised and renewed agreement between China and North Korea.¹³⁾ Article 5(1) of the agreement provides that neither party may carry out investigations or arrests on the other's territory and, if necessary, must ask the other to conduct investigations or arrests. The prohibition on carrying out investigation, arrest, and detention in the territory of another state without authorization is a principle of judicial sovereignty and a basis for diplomatic relations.

In February 2014, the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK (COI DPRK) recommended that China prevent North Korean agents from carrying out abductions on Chinese territory, prosecute and adequately punish apprehended perpetrators, and demand the extradition of those giving such orders.¹⁴⁾

Chinese authorities are aware of the activities by North Korean operatives, but refrain from actively raising the issue with North Korea unless cases are publicized. Chinese courts sentenced North Korean agent Lee Kyong-chun, who was the main culprit among the four men who abducted South Korean pastor An Seung-un in July 1995, to a mere two years in prison. China expelled Lee to North Korea after he served time without insisting upon Pastor An's return. Deacon Jang Moon-seok, a Chinese citizen of Korean ethnicity who had been imprisoned in North Korea for over 11 years since 2014, was returned only in November 2025.

TJWG classifies North Korea's TNR operations in China into three types based on the degree of involvement by Chinese authorities: 1) those executed unilaterally by North Korean operatives without informing China; 2) those carried out by North Korea's arrest squads with Chinese connivance; and 3) those executed with active collaboration by Chinese authorities in the tracking, arrest, investigation, and handover of targeted persons. North Korea's TNR is not only a serious international crime and human rights violation but also detrimental to China's judicial sovereignty and due process. The international community must closely monitor whether China continues to condone and ignore North Korea's TNR and demand the resolution of the issue.

13

Agreement Between the State Security Department of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China on Mutual Cooperation in Maintaining State Security and Social Order in Border Areas (Concluded on July 8, 1998).

14

"Report of the detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the DPRK," A/HRC/25/CRP.1, para. 1221(f).

The Upcoming Issue Brief and the 2027 Comprehensive Report

TJWG and GRC's next issue brief will examine North Korea's TNR in Russia. In the comprehensive report to be published in 2027, TJWG and GRC will disclose North Korea's TNR operations, various methods, as well as individual and organizational perpetrators. The report will also recommend specific measures to be taken by the international community and relevant governments to address North Korea's TNR.

TJWG prepared this Issue Brief, with input from GRC.

Final editorial responsibility for the content of this Issue Brief rests with TJWG.



TJWG | 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.



GRC | Global Rights Compliance (GRC) is an international law foundation established in 2013, dedicated to promoting accountability and strengthening justice systems through the innovative application of international law. Since 2019, GRC has been engaged in seeking accountability for victims and survivors of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) regime and providing mentorship to Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) working to achieve such justice.

Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG)

Seoul, South Korea

Website www.tjwg.org (Korean) / en.tjwg.org (English)

E-mail info@tjwg.org

Phone 02-722-1162

Fax 02-722-1163