



Fact Sheet: Human Rights in North Korea

Human rights in North Korea have long been a concern among the global community. While many of these concerns are legitimate, they are often framed in a one-sided, simplistic narrative that obscures the root cause of the problem and the potential solutions. This also absolves the global community from accountability for their impact on the humanitarian conditions inside North Korea.

This fact sheet aims to provide much-needed context — particularly as it pertains to U.S. policies and the role of the unended Korean War — for the human rights situation in North Korea, and offer realistic, practical, and peaceful solutions to help improve conditions for the North Korean people.

What is the human rights situation in North Korea?

North Korea's extreme isolation as a result of the unended Korean War, and, in recent years, the COVID pandemic, have made it nearly impossible to gain an accurate assessment about the human rights situation in North Korea.

Defector testimonies are often relied upon for information about conditions inside North Korea. However, these testimonies are not always reliable. For example, in 2014, the United Nations Human Rights Council [released](#) a report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, which concluded that North Korea was committing systematic, widespread, and grave human rights violations, constituting in many instances crimes against humanity. Because of the lack of access to North Korea, the Commission relied heavily on witness accounts of North Korean defectors, but later, some of these were [exposed](#) as being fabricated. Since then, there continues to be [questions](#) and [concerns](#) about the reliability of defector testimonies, especially in light of financial incentives for highly sensationalized stories.

How do U.S. policies impact human rights in North Korea?

While the North Korean government is ultimately responsible for the well-being of its people, the United States also plays a role in affecting the day-to-day conditions of North Koreans. In particular, the U.S.-led campaign of military threats, crippling sanctions, and diplomatic isolation against North Korea has failed to improve human rights. In fact, these tactics appear to be exacerbating the problem.



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North Korea is one of the most sanctioned countries in the world, and evidence suggests that sanctions have worsened the humanitarian situation. A 2019 [report](#) by Korea Peace Now! found that sanctions have adverse humanitarian consequences on North Koreans, with disproportionate impacts on women. Another 2019 [report](#) by the World Food Programme noted that UN Security Council sanctions have negatively impacted agricultural production.

Mounting concerns about the impact of sanctions led Tomás Ojea Quintana, former UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the DPRK, to [call](#) for a comprehensive assessment of sanctions, citing concerns that they have “negatively impacted ... the enjoyment of human rights,” including [food insecurity and malnutrition among children](#). Dr. Kee Park of the Harvard University Department of Global Health and Social Medicine and a neurosurgeon who has performed surgeries in North Korea [called](#) sanctions “warfare without bullets.”

Sanctions and the U.S. travel ban on North Korea have also [significantly hindered the delivery of humanitarian aid](#), according to Joy Yoon, co-founder of IGNIS Community, a nonprofit organization working in North Korea. And continuing to stoke military tensions — for example, by the U.S. regularly staging joint war drills with South Korea that are a rehearsal for potential invasion — [are not conducive](#) to humanitarian aid work.

How does the unended war impact human rights in North Korea?

The ongoing state of war on the Korean Peninsula does not improve human rights in North Korea but actively undermines them.

For example, the ongoing war provides the North Korean government justification to invest its limited resources on defense and maintaining a national security state instead of on the well-being of its people. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the DPRK, Elizabeth Salmón, has [noted](#) that North Korea’s militarization severely impacts human rights because the government under-invests in socio-economic development, which disproportionately affects children and women.

Endless war threatens human rights. In 1984, the United Nations General Assembly declared a right to peace. Life without war, it said, is “the primary international prerequisite for the material well-being, development and progress of countries, and for the full implementation of the rights and freedoms of the United Nations.”

Continuing to prolong the unresolved status of the war places lives in danger, as the risk of renewed conflict and the potential for governments to claim expansive wartime rights to use force could place millions of lives in harm’s way.



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How can the U.S. help improve human rights in North Korea?

While some advocate for the United States to exert [more pressure in the form of sanctions](#) and [an information offensive](#), history has shown that these actions do not improve human rights but rather [increase tensions](#) and prompt [North Korea to double down on its weapons program](#). As [human rights experts](#) have noted, “the status quo has been an unmitigated failure in terms of improving both rights and security.”

Instead of increasing pressure and sanctions, the U.S. is more likely to improve the daily lives of North Koreans by working to reduce tensions and build trust. First and foremost, the U.S. should officially end the Korean War by [replacing the 1953 armistice with a formal peace agreement](#). Economic engagement and integration of North Korea into the global economy would also help improve human rights. Lifting sanctions that impede humanitarian aid and agricultural production could have an immediate positive impact on human rights. Additionally, ending the U.S. travel ban and allowing people-to-people engagement, including family reunions, would also improve the conditions of North Koreans.

U.S. policies need not be stuck in a punitive isolationist approach, where both the U.S. and North Korea stand to lose. Instead, a positive relationship of peace and engagement would be more conducive to improving human rights in North Korea, and also benefit the U.S., as it would take the risk of nuclear war off the table, allow families to reunite, and provide a better foundation upon which to engage on human rights.

How can peace improve North Korean human rights?

Instead of continuing the status quo of more pressure and sanctions, [ending the state of war with a peace agreement](#) would be more conducive to improving human rights and security: by building trust, sapping the militarism that undergirds the human rights abuses, and creating the conditions to engage more effectively on human rights. As Tomás Ojea Quintana, former UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the DPRK, said in his 2020 [report](#), “A declaration on peace and development in the Korean Peninsula, and a swift resolution of the armistice status, would create the atmosphere and space needed for further discussions on denuclearization, less isolation, more access, and respect for human rights.”

In fact, in 2019, following the historic peace summits [between the two Koreas](#) and [the United States](#), North Korea engaged in the first ever [Universal Periodic Review](#) at the Human Rights Council in Geneva, and then participated in a two-week-long human rights workshop. Peace summits also led North Korea to [self-impose a moratorium on nuclear and missile tests](#), to



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[cooperate with South Korea on removing landmines in the DMZ](#), and to [repatriate the remains of U.S. servicemen](#).

To truly create genuine human security and the conditions for improved human rights, we need to end the unresolved Korean War — which is only justifying the endless arms race, keeping families separated, and continuing the risk of nuclear conflict. “What will improve the ordinary North Korean people’s situation is more engagement with people from the outside world, not less,” said Cassie Kim, a North Korean defector now living in the United States.

How can the U.S. make peace with North Korea considering its poor human rights record?

There are those who oppose engagement with North Korea because it would somehow act as an endorsement of the regime or weaken the U.S.’ ability to negotiate. Yet prolonging the state of war only heightens the risk of renewed conflict, which would further endanger the most vulnerable in North Korea, especially women, children, and the elderly.

Furthermore, the United States is in a state of peace with many countries with poor human rights records. Being in a state of peace with another country is not a gift or stamp of approval. Retired three-star general and former deputy commander of the U.S. Pacific Command, Dan Leaf, [stated](#) we are “one bad decision” away from nuclear war with North Korea, and has urged U.S. officials to seriously pursue a peace agreement.

If Americans are truly concerned about the human rights of the North Korean people, we should urge the U.S. government to end the failed policy of pressure and sanctions and urgently pursue a peace agreement, which would serve as a foundation upon which to engage more deeply and effectively on human rights.

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