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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[03 June 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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The human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea remains dire, as Kim Jong-un reemerges on the political stage

Despite the comeback of Kim Jong-un on the political stage last year, the human rights record in the country has not improved in the last years. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea was and still is one of the worst human rights violators in modern history. The human rights violations of the North Korean Government are abundant and include murder, enslavement, torture and the starvation of its own people. An estimated 80,000 to 120,000 people are imprisoned in political prison camps and are practically treated as slaves. The Government furthermore restricts, despite having ratified the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, all civil and political liberties, including freedom of expression, assembly, association, and religion. It also prohibits all organized political opposition, independent media, civil society, and trade unions. Altogether, North Korea is considered to be the most restrictive of all totalitarian systems in existence today.

Crimes against humanity

There are numerous reports on crimes against humanity, committed by the North Korean Government. Amongst others, a report by the United Nations in February 2014 accused North Korea of crimes against humanity. A number of these crimes were committed against a starving population, and a year-long investigation had provided evidence of this. It is important to note here, that violations against human rights in North Korea are not exceptional but rather happen in systematic ways. These crimes against humanity include extermination, murder, enslavement, torture, imprisonment, rape, forced abortions and other sexual violence, persecution on political, religious, racial and gender grounds, the forcible transfer of populations, the enforced disappearance of persons and the inhumane act of knowingly causing prolonged starvation. People detained in political and other prison camps, those who try to flee the state, Christians and others considered to introduce subversive influences are the primary targets of a systematic and widespread attack against all populations that are considered to pose a threat to the political system and leadership of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Freedom of the press

According to the World Press Freedom Index for 2020, published by Reporters without Borders, North Korea holds the last spot and is thus arguably the most tightly controlled country in the world. State propaganda is all-encompassing. The authorities strictly control people's information exchanges with the rest of the world. Citizens can be sent to prison for viewing, reading or listening to content provided by international media outlets. Possession and distribution of foreign publications, videos and other media materials are considered to be serious crimes and are punishable by "reform through labor". The Republic of Korea media materials were particularly targeted, and offenders are at risk of detention in political prison camps or of being sentenced to death. State-controlled media are the only permitted source of information in North Korea.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the approach of the Government has not changed. The authorities in North Korea have maintained the total control of the media, and keep the population in ignorance while ensuring the official number of cases of COVID-19 remains zero. At the same time, the Government has appealed to the international community for help in the prevention of the pandemic.

Religious freedom

Theoretically, the constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea provides a "right to faith" and officially there are numerous beliefs allowed and practiced: There are Buddhists, Shamanists and followers of Chondoism – a native Korean religion.

State-controlled churches also exist. However, as pointed out by a North Korean Refugee, this theoretical right is not actually granted by the Government: *"In reality, there is no freedom of religion. Everyone is indoctrinated to treat the Kim family almost as something to worship."* According to human rights organizations, North Korea is one of the countries where Christians are most persecuted. The State considers the spread of Christianity a particularly serious threat, since it challenges ideologically the official personality cult and provides a platform for social and political organization and interaction outside the realm of the State. Apart from the few organized State-controlled churches, Christians are prohibited from practicing their religion and are persecuted. People caught practicing Christianity are subject to severe punishments. There are numerous reports of people being interned, tortured or executed in camps because of their Christian faith.

COVID-19 in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korean authorities continue to carry out weapons testing and to declare that not a single COVID-19 patient has emerged in the country. Analysts and medical experts, however, are highly skeptical of these claims. A COVID-19 outbreak would overwhelm the country's weak healthcare system and would be devastating to its people, who suffer from relatively high levels of malnutrition and have no access to information about the pandemic.

Society for Threatened Peoples therefore calls upon the United Nations Human Rights Council to urge the Government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to:

- unconditionally release all detainees held on account of their religious activities and all other political prisoners, or journalists who remain arbitrarily detained to this date,
- end persecution of religious communities and let them practice their belief in the manner deemed fitting, including allowing Christians and other religious believers to exercise their religion independently and publicly, without fear of punishment, reprisal or surveillance,
- allow the establishment of independent newspapers and other media as well as to allow citizens to freely access the internet, social media, international communications, foreign broadcasts and publications, including the popular culture of other countries; and abolish compulsory participation in mass organizations and indoctrination sessions,
- ensure that people remaining in jail are granted fair trials, and ensure that people currently in jail are held in accordance with the Nelson Mandela Rules on the treatment of prisoners,
- abolish forced labor and accept and follow the rules of the International Labour Organization.