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North Korea: People 'executed for watching South Korean TV', bribery to escape punishment widespread

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- *Escapees tell of brutal system of arbitrary punishments for watching South Korean TV*
- *Wealthy can escape harshest penalties by bribing corrupt officials*
- *Children 'forced to watch' public executions as warning not to consume foreign media*

North Koreans caught watching South Korean television shows face public humiliation, years in labour camps or even execution – with the harshest punishments for those too poor to pay bribes, according to testimonies given to Amnesty International.

North Koreans who fled the country have told Amnesty of an arbitrary and corrupt system where secret consumption of South Korean TV is widespread but the penalties for violating vaguely worded “culture” laws banning foreign media are determined largely by wealth and connections.

Many of those interviewed recounted living in constant fear of home raids and arbitrary detention, while some said they were forced to watch public executions as schoolchildren as part of their “ideological education”.

“These testimonies show how North Korea is enforcing dystopian laws that mean watching a South Korean TV show can cost you your life – unless you can afford to pay,” said Sarah Brooks, Amnesty International’s Deputy Regional Director.

“The authorities criminalize access to information in violation of international law, then allow officials to profit off those fearing punishment. This is repression layered with corruption, and it most devastates those without wealth or connections.”

Laws criminalizing freedom of expression

Amnesty International conducted 25 in-depth individual interviews with North Korean escapees in 2025. The group included 11 individuals who fled North Korea between 2019 and 2020, with the most recent departure in June 2020. Most were aged between 15 and 25 at the time of their escape. Covid-19 border closures have made escapes extremely rare since 2020.

North Korea has long maintained one of the world's most restrictive information environments. Testimonies gathered by Amnesty International describe how accessing foreign culture or information was being actively punished, including by execution, at least before 2020.

The introduction of the 2020 Anti-Reactionary Thought and Culture Act, which defines South Korean content as "rotten ideology that paralyzes the people's revolutionary sense", enables these severe punishments to persist. The new law mandates between five and 15 years of forced labour for watching or possessing South Korean dramas, films or music and prescribes heavy sentences including the death penalty for the distribution of "large amounts" of content or for organizing group viewings.

Despite the severe risks, interviewees described a society in which consumption of South Korean and other foreign media are widespread. Dramas and films are commonly smuggled in on USB drives from China, which young North Koreans watch on "notetels" – notebook computers with built-in televisions.

'People sell their houses to get out of camps'

North Koreans who fled the country between 2012 and 2020 told Amnesty International that people commonly watched South Korean TV knowing that they risked extreme punishment, but also that it was possible to escape the worst penalties if you were able to pay.

"People are caught for the same act, but punishment depends entirely on money," said Choi Suvin, 39, who left North Korea in 2019. "People without money sell their houses to gather 5,000 or 10,000 USD to pay to get out of the re-education camps."

Kim Joonsik, 28, was caught watching South Korean dramas three times before leaving the country in 2019, but avoided punishment because his family had connections to officials.

"Usually when high school students are caught, if their family has money, they just get warnings," he said. "I didn't receive legal punishment because we had connections."

But he said three of his sisters' high school friends received years-long sentences in labour camps in the late 2010s for watching South Korean dramas. Their families could not afford bribes. When Kim's own sister was arrested, the family paid USD 9,000 to secure her release before the case progressed to formal charges.

The bribes described by Choi and Kim – from between USD 5,000 to 10,000 – represent several years' worth of income for most North Korean families, making them unreachable for all but the wealthiest.

'Everyone knows everyone watches'

For decades, North Korea's government has reportedly deployed a specialized law enforcement unit to crack down on foreign media consumption. Referred to as the "109 Group", the unit conducts warrantless home and street searches of bags and mobile phones. Fifteen interviewees from different regions mentioned the 109 Group to Amnesty, indicating a nationwide, systematic approach to enforcement of these restrictive laws.

Interviewees said security officials actively solicit bribes from people arrested for consuming foreign media, and from their families. One escapee who had been caught watching foreign media quoted members of the 109 Group telling them: "We don't want to punish you harshly, but we need to bribe our bosses to save our own lives."

The arbitrary and discriminatory enforcement of laws is systematic. Officials who most likely consume South Korean media themselves arrest and prosecute others for identical conduct. One interviewee described the open secret: "Workers watch it openly, party officials watch it proudly, security agents watch it secretly, and police watch it safely. Everyone knows everyone watches, including those who do the crackdowns."

Nonetheless, it appears that periodic crackdowns have temporarily disrupted the usual operation of this system of bribery. Kim Gayoung, 32, who left North Korea in June 2020, described how North Korean leader Kim Jong Un began ordering 'intensive crackdown' campaigns in the late 2010s. During these periods, officials faced pressure to demonstrate enforcement results, making bribes less effective even for wealthy or well-connected families.

"My cousin worked at the People's Committee [the local government administrative body]. He said when someone was caught, no one would help them out. Even with bribes or connections, there was no guarantee of help because the crackdowns had become so severe," she said.

'Tens of thousands gathered to watch executions'

Interviewees described how North Korea uses public executions to terrorize entire communities into compliance. Choi Suvin witnessed a public execution in Sinuiju, North Pyongan Province "in 2017 or 2018" of someone accused of distributing foreign media.

"Authorities told everyone to go, and tens of thousands of people from Sinuiju city gathered to watch," she said. "They execute people to brainwash and educate us."

Some interviewees described schools systematically forcing students to attend public executions as part of "ideological education". Executions were carried out by firing squad – in one case witnessed, a squad of 10 people fired approximately 30 rounds at the condemned person. Authorities in some cases placed a substance in victims' mouths to prevent them from speaking before execution.

"When we were 16, 17, in middle school, they took us to executions and showed us everything," said Kim Eunju, 40, who fled in 2019. "People were executed for watching or distributing South Korean media. It's ideological education: if you watch, this happens to you too."

An interviewee who left in 2017 described how "all" middle and high schools in Chongjin, North Hamgyong Province, were ordered to watch executions. "The message is: this is what happens [when you watch South Korean shows]. I saw two executions, both times in middle school."

Schools also serve as sites for public humiliation. Kim Yerim, 26, who escaped in 2019, witnessed 10 high school seniors subjected to hours-long "public criticism" sessions for having watched foreign TV.

"Authorities gathered elementary, middle and high school students to show what happens when you do wrong," she said. "For several hours, officials from the Youth League and other Party organizations criticized the accused, saying 'your spirit is corrupted,' 'you lack ideological preparedness.'"

Schools conduct regular ideological education sessions on the dangers of foreign media. Kim Gayoung described weekly "ideological education" sessions where "teachers explain the laws and new rules", while other sessions involve witnessing trials.

A system built on corruption and fear

Amnesty International is calling on the North Korean government to respect and protect freedom of expression, including the right to access information, and urgently repeal all laws that unjustly criminalize access to information, including the 2020 Anti-Reactionary Thought and Culture Act. It must abolish the death penalty for all offences, and as a first step urgently establish an official moratorium on all executions, including public executions. Children, in particular, must be protected from the cruel exposure to public executions.

The government must also end the use of arbitrary detention and cease discriminatory treatment based on wealth or social status. Authorities must ensure equal application of the

law and guarantee fair trial rights for all persons accused of crimes in line with international standards.

"This government's fear of information has effectively placed the entire population in an ideological cage, suffocating their access to the views and thoughts of other human beings. People who strive to learn more about the world outside North Korea, or seek simple entertainment from overseas, face the harshest of punishments," Sarah Brooks said.

"This completely arbitrary system, built on fear and corruption, violates fundamental principles of justice and internationally recognized human rights. It must be dismantled so that North Koreans can dare to enjoy the freedoms to which they are entitled."

Background

Covid-19 border closures from 2020 to 2023 largely halted North Koreans leaving the country, with arrivals in South Korea plummeting from 1,047 in 2019 to 224 in 2025. The escape process itself typically takes months to years, during which individuals are at risk of human rights violations and abuses. This traumatic journey means escapees often need time before they can provide testimony. Upon arrival in South Korea, they must complete debriefing by South Korean authorities and resettlement programmes.

While Amnesty International publicly and regularly reports on the resort to public executions in North Korea, along with other alarming practices, due to severe restrictions on access to information the organization has been unable to independently verify the extensive use of the death penalty in North Korea. The adoption of the Reactionary Thought and Culture Law in 2020 signified a codification of some of these harsh penalties.

The experiences shared by escapees who left North Korea before 2020 appear consistent with practices allowed for in North Korean laws and policies of more recent years. They also show internal consistency across different time periods and regions and align with findings from UN agencies, notably the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Testimonies gathered by Amnesty International in 2025 indicate that the consumption of foreign media was criminalized, prosecuted and punished including by death before the 2020 law came into effect. Testimonies collected in separate research, and in media reports, have also indicated that extrajudicial executions have been carried out without any investigation, trial or sentencing.

However, Amnesty International was unable to determine if other laws were used to convict people in these cases, and which ones, or whether the executions witnessed by interviewees were carried out extrajudicially. Amnesty International opposes the death penalty unconditionally, in any cases and under any circumstances.

North Korea's laws and practices violate international human rights law, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which it ratified in 1981. Systematically forcing children to witness public executions constitutes multiple grave violations and also violates children's rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which North Korea ratified in 1990.

Since the 1953 armistice that paused but did not formally end the Korean War, North and South Korea have remained technically at war, with the two countries remaining deeply divided.

Amnesty International wrote to the government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, sharing these research findings and inviting a response to the allegations documented. No response has yet been received.

**All names are pseudonyms to protect interviewees.*

Voor meer informatie:

Amnesty International

Julia van den Muijsenberg

Persvoorlichter

T: + 31 6 11 10 64 96

E: j.vandenmuijsenberg@amnesty.nl

W: www.amnesty.nl



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