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# Death, terror in North Korea gulag NBC News investigation uncovers horrific, extensive atrocities A satellite image of the barracks and other facilities of Camp 22 at Haengyong in northeastern North Korea.

By Robert Windrem  
NBC News Investigative Producer

NBC (15.01.2003) - In the far north of North Korea, in remote locations not far from the borders with China and Russia, a gulag not unlike the worst labor camps built by Mao and Stalin in the last century holds some 200,000 men, women and children accused of political crimes. A month-long investigation by NBC News, including interviews with former prisoners, guards and U.S. and South Korean officials, revealed the horrifying conditions these people must endure —conditions that shock even those North Koreans accustomed to the near-famine conditions of Kim Jong Il' s realm.

“ It's one of the worst, if not the worst situation —human rights abuse situation —in the world today,” said Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., who held hearings on the camps last year. “ There are very few places that could compete with the level of depravity, the harshness of this regime in North Korea toward its own people.”

Satellite photos provided by DigitalGlobe, which first appeared in the Far Eastern Economic Review, confirm the existence of the camps, and interviews with those who have been there and with U.S. officials who study the North suggest Brownback' s assessment may be conservative.

Among NBC News' findings:

At one camp, Camp 22 in Haengyong, some 50,000 prisoners toil each day in conditions that U.S. officials and former inmates say results in the death of 20 percent to 25 percent of the prison population every year.

Products made by prison laborers may wind up on U.S. store shelves, having been “ washed” first through Chinese companies that serve as intermediaries.

Entire families, including grandchildren, are incarcerated for even the most bland political statements.

Forced abortions are carried out on pregnant women so that another generation of political dissidents will be “ eradicated.”

Inmates are used as human guinea pigs for testing biological and chemical agents, according to both former inmates and U.S. officials.

Efforts by MSNBC.com to reach North Korean officials were unsuccessful. Messages left at the office of North Korea's permanent representative to the United Nations went unanswered.

Eung Soo Han, a press officer at South Korea's U.N. consulate, said: "It is a very unfortunate situation, and our hearts go out to those who suffer. We hope North Korea will open up its country, and become more actively involved with the international community in order for the North Korean people to be lifted out of their difficult situation."

### Labor, death, abuse

NBC's investigation revealed that North Korea's State Security Agency maintains a dozen political prisons and about 30 forced labor and labor education camps, mainly in remote areas. The worst are in the country's far Northeast. Some of them are gargantuan: At least two of the camps, Haengyong and Huaong, are larger in area than the District of Columbia, with Huaong being three times the size of the U.S. capital district.

Satellite photos provided by DigitalGlobe show several of the camps, including the notorious Haengyong, for the first time outside official circles. Plainly visible are acres upon acres of barracks, laid out in regimented military style. Surrounding each of them is 10-foot-high barbed-wire fencing along with land mines and man traps. There is even a battery of anti-aircraft guns to prevent a liberation by airborne troops.

Ahn Myong Chol, a guard at the camp (which is sometimes known as Hoeryong) from 1987 through 1994, examined the satellite photos of Camp 22 for NBC News. They were taken in April, eight years after he left. But he says little has changed. He was able to pick out the family quarters for prisoners, the work areas, the propaganda buildings.

Looking at the imagery, Ahn noted what happened in each building:

"This is the detention center," he said. "If someone goes inside this building, in three months he will be dead or disabled for life. In this corner they decided about the executions, who to execute and whether to make it public.

"This is the Kim Il Sung institute, a movie house for officers. Here is watchdog training. And guard training ground."

Pointing to another spot, he said: "This is the garbage pond where the two kids were killed when guard kicked them in pond."

Another satellite photo shows a coal mine at the Chungbong camp where prisoners are worked to exhaustion in a giant pit.

"All of North Korea is a gulag," said one senior U.S. official, noting that as many as 2 million people have died of starvation while Kim has amassed the world's largest collection of Daffy Duck cartoons. "It's just that these people [in the camps] are treated the worst. No one knows for sure how many people are in the camps, but 200,000 is consistent with our best guess.

"We don't have a breakdown, but there are large numbers of both women and children."

### Beyond the pale

It is the widespread jailing of political prisoners' families that makes North Korea unique, according to human rights advocates.

Under a directive issued by Kim's father, North Korea's founder, Kim Il Sung, three generations of a dissident's family can be jailed simply on the basis of a denunciation.

NBC News interviewed two former prisoners and a former guard about conditions in the camps. The three spent their time at different camps. Their litany of camp brutalities is unmatched anywhere in the world, say human rights activists.

"Listening to their stories, it's horrific," said David Hawk, a veteran human rights campaigner and a consultant for the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea. Hawk has interviewed many former prisoners in Seoul.

"It's hard to do more than one or two a day because they're just so painful to hear: horrific mistreatment - all sorts of suffering, beatings to death, executions."

Kang Chol-Hwan is now a journalist with Chosun Ilbo, South Korea's most important newspaper. His recent book, "The Aquariums of Pyongyang," is the first memoir of a North Korean political prisoner. For nearly a decade, he was imprisoned because his grandfather had made complimentary statements about Japanese capitalism. He was a 9-year-old when he arrived at the Yodok camp. His grandfather was never seen again, and prison conditions killed his father.

"When I was 10 years old," Kang recalled, "We were put to work digging clay and constructing a building. And there were dozens of kids, and while digging the ground, it collapsed. And they died. And the bodies were crushed flat. And they buried the kids secretly, without showing their parents, even though the parents came."

The system appears to draw no distinction between those accused of the crime and their family members.

Soon Ok Lee, imprisoned for seven years at a camp near Kaechon in Pyungbuk province, described how the female relatives of male prisoners were treated.

"I was in prison from 1987 till January 1993," she told NBC News in Seoul, where she now lives. "[The women] were forced to abort their children. They put salty water into the pregnant women's womb with a large syringe, in order to kill the baby even when the woman was 8 months or 9 months pregnant.

"And then, from time to time there a living infant is delivered. And then if someone delivers a live infant, then the guards kick the bloody baby and kill it. And I saw an infant who was crying with pain. I have to express this in words, that I witnessed such an inhumane hell."

### Testing on humans

Soon also spoke about the use of prisoners as guinea pigs, which a senior U.S. official describes as "very plausible. We have heard similar reports."

"I saw so many poor victims," she said. "Hundreds of people became victims of biochemical testing. I was imprisoned in 1987 and during the years of 1988 through '93, when I was released, I saw the research supervisors—they were enjoying the effect of biochemical weapons, effective beyond their expectations—they were saying they were successful."

She tearfully described how in one instance about 50 inmates were taken to an auditorium and given a piece of boiled cabbage to eat. Within a half hour, they began vomiting blood and quickly died.

" I saw that in 20 or 30 minutes they died like this in that place. Looking at that scene, I lost my mind. Was this reality or a nightmare? And then I screamed and was sent out of the auditorium."

Prison guard Ahn' s memories are, like the others' , nothing short of gruesome. Every day, he said there were beatings and deaths.

" I heard many times that eyeballs were taken out by beating," he recalled. " And I saw that by beating the person the muscle was damaged and the bone was exposed, outside, and they put salt on the wounded part. At the beginning I was frightened when I witnessed it, but it was repeated again and again, so my feelings were paralyzed."

Moreover, said Ahn, beating and killing prisoners was not only tolerated, it was encouraged and even rewarded.

" They trained me not to treat the prisoners as human beings. If someone is against socialism, if someone tries to escape from prison, then kill him," Ahn said. " If there' s a record of killing any escapee then the guard will be entitled to study in the college. Because of that some guards kill innocent people."

President Bush told author and Washington Post Assistant Managing Editor Bob Woodward last year that he was well aware of the camps and the atrocities. That, officials say, partly explains why Bush insisted on North Korea' s inclusion in the " axis of evil" in his 2002 State of the Union address.

" I loathe Kim Jong Il," Bush told Woodward during an interview for the author' s book " Bush at War." " I' ve got a visceral reaction to this guy because he is starving his people. And I have seen intelligence of these prison camps —they' re huge —that he uses to break up families and to torture people."

Brownback, a senator with a reputation as a human rights advocate, thinks that the prison camps and abuses have for too long taken a back seat to nuclear arms and other Korean issues.

" It seems that what happened is that there got to be a complex set of issues, and people said, ' Well OK, it' s about our relationship with China, it' s about the Korean Peninsula, it' s about this militaristic regime in North Korea that we don' t want to press too much because they may march across the border into South Korea."

Brownback says the North' s nuclear program, its missile tests and generally unpredictable behavior has blurred a critical issue:

" I think people just got paralyzed to really put a focus on the human face of this suffering," he said.

*Lisa Myers, Rich Gardella and Judy Augsberger of NBC News and Michael Moran of MSNBC.com contributed to this report.*

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## Within prison walls

By Olenka Frenkiel  
Reporter, This World

BBC World (01.02.2004) Kwon Hyok is one of about 4,000 North Korean defectors living in Seoul, South Korea.

Most escaped because of hunger, fear, torture, imprisonment or a simple hatred of the regime.

But Kwon Hyok is not one of those. In 1999 he was a North Korean intelligence agent stationed in Beijing when he was persuaded by the South Koreans to defect.

Six years before, in 1993, Kwon Hyok says he was Head of Security at prison camp 22 in Haengyong, an isolated area near the border with Russia.

Camp 22 is one of a network of prisons in North Korea modelled on the Soviet Gulag where hundreds of thousands of prisoners are held.

Most of them have been charged with no crime. They are there because of the "Heredity Rule".

"In North Korea, " Kwon Hyok explains, "political prisoners are those who say or do something against the dead President Kim Il-sung, or his son Kim Jong-il. But it also includes a wide network of next of kin. It's designed to root out the seeds of those classed as disloyal to North Korea."

In prison, says Kwon Hyok, "there is a watchdog system in place between members of five different families. So if I were caught trying to escape, then my family and the four neighbouring families are shot to death out of collective responsibility."

Torture, he says, was routine. "Prisoners were like pigs or dogs. You could kill them without caring whether they lived or died.."

"For the first three years" he explained " you enjoy torturing people but then it wears off and someone else takes over. But most of the time you do it because you enjoy it."

### Human experimentation

But Kwon Hyok had something else he wanted to tell.

He says he witnessed chemical experiments being carried out on political prisoners in specially constructed gas chambers.

"How did you feel when you saw the children die?", I asked.  
His answer shocked me.

"I had no sympathy at all because I was taught to think that they were all enemies of our country and that all our country's problems were their fault. So I felt they deserved to die."

### Verification

There have been many rumours of human experimentation on political prisoners in North Korea. But never has anyone offered documentary proof. Until now.

In Seoul I met Kim Sang-hun, a distinguished human rights activist.

He showed me documents given to him by someone else completely unrelated to Kwon Hyok. He told me the man had recently snatched them illicitly from Camp 22 before escaping.

They are headed Letter Of Transfer, marked Top Secret and dated February 2002 . They each bear the name of a male victim, his date and place of birth. The text reads: "The above person is transferred from Camp 22 for the purpose of human experimentation with liquid gas for chemical weapons."

I took one of the documents to a Korean expert in London who examined it and confirmed that there was nothing to suggest it was not genuine.

But I wanted to run a check of my own with Kwon Hyok. Without showing him the Letter of Transfer, I asked him very specifically, without prompting him in any way.

"How were the victims selected when they went for human experimentation? Was there some bureaucracy, some paperwork?"

"When we escorted them to the site we would receive a Letter of Transfer," he said.

Sadly, as long as these reports continue from defectors, and as long as the North Korean government continues to deny all allegations of human rights abuse, while refusing to allow access to its prisons, such allegations cannot be dismissed or ignored.

Access to Evil was broadcast in the UK on Sunday, 1 February, 2004 at 2100 on BBC Two.

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## Revealed: the gas chamber horror of North Korea's gulag

*A series of shocking personal testimonies is now shedding light on Camp 22 - one of the country's most horrific secrets*

Antony Barnett

The Observer (01.02.2004) - In the remote north-eastern corner of North Korea, close to the border of Russia and China, is Haengyong. Hidden away in the mountains, this remote town is home to Camp 22 - North Korea's largest concentration camp, where thousands of men, women and children accused of political crimes are held.

Now, it is claimed, it is also where thousands die each year and where prison guards stamp on the necks of babies born to prisoners to kill them.

Over the past year harrowing first-hand testimonies from North Korean defectors have detailed execution and torture, and now chilling evidence has emerged that the walls of Camp 22 hide an even more evil secret: gas chambers where horrific chemical experiments are conducted on human beings.

Witnesses have described watching entire families being put in glass chambers and gassed. They are left to an agonising death while scientists take notes. The allegations offer the most shocking glimpse so far of Kim Jong-il's North Korean regime.

Kwon Hyuk, who has changed his name, was the former military attaché at the North Korean Embassy in Beijing. He was also the chief of management at Camp 22. In the BBC's This World documentary, to be broadcast tonight, Hyuk claims he now wants the world to know what is happening.

'I witnessed a whole family being tested on suffocating gas and dying in the gas chamber,' he said. 'The parents, son and and a daughter. The parents were vomiting and dying, but till the very last moment they tried to save kids by doing mouth-to-mouth breathing.'

Hyuk has drawn detailed diagrams of the gas chamber he saw. He said: 'The glass chamber is sealed airtight. It is 3.5 metres wide, 3m long and 2.2m high\_ [There] is the injection tube going through the unit. Normally, a family sticks together and individual prisoners stand separately around the corners. Scientists observe the entire process from above, through the glass.'

He explains how he had believed this treatment was justified. 'At the time I felt that they thoroughly deserved such a death. Because all of us were led to believe that all the bad things that were happening to North Korea were their fault; that we were poor, divided and not making progress as a country.'

'It would be a total lie for me to say I feel sympathetic about the children dying such a painful death. Under the society and the regime I was in at the time, I only felt that they were the enemies. So I felt no sympathy or pity for them at all.'

His testimony is backed up by Soon Ok-lee, who was imprisoned for seven years. 'An officer ordered me to select 50 healthy female prisoners,' she said. 'One of the guards handed me a basket full of soaked cabbage, told me not to eat it but to give it to the 50 women. I gave them out and heard a scream from those who had eaten them. They were all screaming and vomiting blood. All who ate the cabbage leaves started violently vomiting blood and screaming with pain. It was hell. In less than 20 minutes they were quite dead.'

Defectors have smuggled out documents that appear to reveal how methodical the chemical experiments were. One stamped 'top secret' and 'transfer letter' is dated February 2002. The name of the victim was Lin Hun-hwa. He was 39. The text reads: 'The above person is transferred from ... camp number 22 for the purpose of human experimentation of liquid gas for chemical weapons.'

Kim Sang-hun, a North Korean human rights worker, says the document is genuine. He said: 'It carries a North Korean format, the quality of paper is North Korean and it has an official stamp of agencies involved with this human experimentation. A stamp they cannot deny. And it carries names of the victim and where and why and how these people were experimented [on].'

The number of prisoners held in the North Korean gulag is not known: one estimate is 200,000, held in 12 or more centres. Camp 22 is thought to hold 50,000.

Most are imprisoned because their relatives are believed to be critical of the regime. Many are Christians, a religion believed by Kim Jong-il to be one of the greatest threats to his power. According to the dictator, not only is a suspected dissident arrested but also three generations of his family are imprisoned, to root out the bad blood and seed of dissent.

With North Korea trying to win concessions in return for axing its nuclear programme, campaigners want human rights to be a part of any deal. Richard Spring, Tory foreign affairs spokesman, is pushing for a House of Commons debate on human rights in North Korea.

'The situation is absolutely horrific,' Spring said. 'It is totally unacceptable by any norms of civilised society. It makes it even more urgent to convince the North Koreans that procuring weapons of mass destruction must end, not only for the security of the region but for the good of their own population.'

Mervyn Thomas, chief executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said: 'For too long the horrendous suffering of the people of North Korea, especially those imprisoned in unspeakably barbaric prison camps, has been met with silence ... It is imperative that the international community does not continue to turn a blind eye to these atrocities which should weigh heavily on the world's conscience.'

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## Poison Gas Experiments have gone on for 25 Years: Sankei Shimbun

Chosun Ilbo (22.03.2004) -- Citing testimony from a North Korean chemist who defected to the South, Japan's Sankei Shimbun reported in a dispatch from Seoul on Monday that North Korea has been conducting poison gas experiments on political prisoners for 25 years.

The chemist, who goes by the name of Jeong Dae-seong, said poison gas experiments were conducted in military-run political prisons in order to learn the lethal doses of poison gases.

Jeong, who changed his name after defecting to the South in 2001 through a third country, is from North Hamgyeong Province and his family still lives in the North. He has a PhD in science.

As the head of a chemistry research center in 1979, Jeong came to witness a poison gas experiment in the summer of that year, since he was involved in the production of the deadly compounds used in those experiments.

The experiment was conducted in two hermetically sealed chambers -- each one 2m long, 3m wide and 2.5m high -- located in one of the buildings at the camp. The front of each chamber was made of glass.

Two male prisoners were brought in and placed in the chambers, after which cyanide gas and ortho nitro chlorobenzene were pumped in.

The test was to see at what concentration certain gases could kill someone. One of the test subjects couldn't walk as he was brought in; he didn't look like a person. Before the experiment, he was given sweets made from corn, which he ate voraciously.

As soon as the cyanide gas was pumped in, the man screamed; three and half hours later, he couldn't move, but he screamed again. The other person was exposed to a mixture of nitro chlorobenzene and cyanide; within two and half hours, he was dead. It was decided that the mixed gas was effective.

The prison camp was located in the mountains, about 40 minutes by car from Pyeongseong, South Pyeongan Province. Jeong was blindfolded as he was brought to the camp, however, so he does not know its exact location. The experiment was attended by an official from the Korean Workers Party's military industries division, a high ranking military official and two camp officials.

The Sankei added that Jeong will be visiting the United States next month, at the invitation of a NGO, to give testimony.

Source: <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200403/200403220013.html>

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