



North Korea

Foreign Nationals and the Death Penalty

Death Penalty Overview

Due to North Korea's closed and secretive status, data on the death penalty in the country is not publicly available. However, both Amnesty International and academic sources estimate that there are a high number of people on death row in North Korea and the death penalty is 'likely to be used at sustained rate' (Amnesty International, 2021).

Death penalty offences in North Korea include murder, robbery, treason, terrorism, drug trafficking, corruption. However, the country's authoritarian governance means that other crimes may also be eligible for the death penalty, without necessarily being prescribed in law. A study by Lee Deok-in (2010) indicates that the death penalty in North Korea not only functions to chastise citizens' reprobative behaviour, but also serves to stabilise the faltering authoritarian rule of the Kim regime.

In December 2020, North Korea voted against the United Nations resolution for a Moratorium on Executions (A/RES/75/183).

Based on the prevalent use of arbitrary arrests and detentions and pervasive practices of forced labour and other ill-treatments as punishments in North Korea, it is likely that death penalty prisoners are housed under extremely harsh prison conditions. Amnesty International also believes that death penalty prisoners are actively denied their rights to access consular services, legal representation, or to receive visits from their families.

North Korea is one of four countries which regularly carry out executions in public, (the others are Iran, Saudi Arabia and Somalia). In 2019, a South Korean NGO, the Transitional Justice Working Group, estimated there are at least 318 sites used for these public executions and states that family members, including children, are forced to watch the executions.

Amnesty International warns that torture and executions are widespread in prisons in North Korea; executions take place by firing squad, decapitation or hanging.

Foreign Nationals

Unfortunately, due to a lack of available data, it is not known how many foreign national prisoners are in North Korea and how many of these may be under death sentences.

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<https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/death-penalty-research-unit>