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Written statement* submitted by People for Successful Corean Reunification, 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.

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

The education system, child labor and child abuse within the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Human rights in North Korea are nearly non-existent as citizens receive constant pressure to abide by the North Korean system. From a young age on they are expected to contribute and dedicate their lives to the nation's wellbeing while the government continues to completely disregard their human rights. This statement covers concerns and flaws present in their current education system and the existence of child labor and child abuse in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The dehumanization of North Koreans is very visible in the way the students are treated during their school life and continue to suffer from results from it even after their school life ends. People for Successful COrean REunification (PSCORE), has come up with several recommendations to combat these issues.

Politicized Education System

The most prominent aspect is the idolization of the Kim government serving as a curriculum from kindergarten to university. All textbooks in the country include a 2-page preface about the Kim family, describing them as them as godlike geniuses. Students take several hours of intense political drilling to suppress their freedom of thought and to create a biased perception of the world. This hinders the proper mental and physical development of a child. Since foreign information is suppressed, children are influenced by heavily distorted views of world history as well as fabrications of Modern Korean history. North Korea glorifies their own actions in history and fools their citizens into thinking Japan and the United States are the true perpetrators. The education features strong anti-Japanese and anti-American sentiments to support nationalism and to idolize Kim Il-Sung as an absolute ruler. Hatred education is taught to convince the students that North Korea is a superior country and there is no reason to explore other countries even if they had the chance to.

In addition, schools are required to conduct sessions of self and group criticism. These kinds of practices cause distrust and hatred between students and have direct influence the child's mental integrity as well as their human dignity. Practices described by defector Kim Yeon-Ri include: "Every one of us had to criticize someone, so students made deals to criticize each other. But even though everything had already been discussed, if someone criticized me, I made what I originally prepared three times longer." This shows that revenge culture is very apparent in schools. Students are being pressured by this existing criticizing culture to invoke hatred amongst fellow classmates. Furthermore, the North Korean government also promotes military activities within the school education system. The minimum age of enlistment is 16 but children are already heavily exposed to military activities from their high school education. Defector Lee Seon-ri reports: "You first begin military training in the summer after you turn 16. They made us do the kind of things that they do in the military boot camp when we were only 16 years old in the Young Red Guards."

North Korea's media control is one of the most tightly monitored than any other country in the world. As the government of the DPRK controls the flow of information, television and radio is based on state-run channels and independent newspaper and internet access are restricted. This means that the indoctrination process does not just occur through school curriculums but also through mass media. Even the elite few in the capital Pyongyang have restricted access to the internet but believe they have full access.

Child labor

The DPRK facilitates child labor on a nation-wide level and can be seen directly through programs such as the 'Children's initiative'. This program gives students tasks to collect raw materials such as scraps, rabbit hides and pickled food line to reduce the countries' financial decline and to preserve the current school systems. The annual quotas that the schools must fulfil are set by the government through the Youth League secretary. Participation is obligatory and is enforced through physical and mental penalties. Defector Kim Eun hee reports: "If I didn't bring the items, the teacher would constantly send other children until I couldn't bear it anymore. You had to bring the items and that was the only way." This shows that even if the students do not show up at school other students would be sent to pressure them into bringing the items needed.

The Agricultural Labor Support is another channel of child labor that exists to sustain the economy of the DPRK. Schools incorporate labor into their curriculum and exploit the children as a means of free labor. The students are obliged to perform backbreaking physical work because schools incorporate agricultural labor as part of the educational process. Children as young as 4 years old are required to work on the field outside of their regular school hours. In return, these schools are compensated with money or food by the local collective farms. Schools use profits earned from these practices to maintain the regular school services because of a lack of financial support from the government.

Furthermore, the government forces the students to work in remote areas to contribute towards construction projects and month-long agricultural assignments. Most of the students cover the cost of transportation and food themselves. The types of child labor in North Korea are uncountable but the most common ones are: collecting raw material, assistance at building-sites and railway construction. These projects are a physical and a psychological burden on the students and their families. However, the labor provided is not communicated as work but instead is considered a way that children can contribute towards the wellbeing of the nation. Defector Kim Sae-joon states: “I think physical labor takes up about 40% of school life, and physical labor of students is explained to the public as a rightful activity. It most definitely interfered with our education.” The educational system exploits its power by minimizing labor costs at the expense of its students. The student’s time and ability to study should not be compromised by physical labor or the consequences that follow by resisting these kinds of practices.

Child Abuse

Teachers abuse their position of power to physically discipline their students which shows that physical violence remains a constant element of the North Korean education system. Another method to maintain order within the class environment is peer pressure, creating an atmosphere filled with distrust and lack of empathy among students. Defector Kim Jin-joo recounts: “As the mutual criticism sessions continue, it was really offensive when I got criticized. It was always like this, so the members of the organizations couldn’t get along well.”

However, active and passive physical violence are not only observable in schools but also in domiciles, orphanages and relief shelters. Constant sleep and food deprivation put children under constant physical strain with the potential risk of trauma.

Gender based violence in physical and verbal forms are a definite threat for adolescent females that are of lower status according to the North Korean socio-economic system. The main perpetrators are members of the military and school staff active in positions of power. The exploitation of power is a result of a flawed and un-transparent government structure. Existing support channels for the victim are maintained by the local school system itself, which minimizes any negative attention to it. The victim understands that in the process of reporting the crime, they will receive additional suffering. This is caused because a reliable institution for justice and due process fails to function.

Recommendations

Based on the previously outlined cases, PSCORE articulates the following recommendations:

The immediate de-politicization of the curriculum, which features improper representations of other nationalities and phenotypes, historical distortions and the idolization of totalitarian political orders based on education and media used to spread these ideas. These changes should be oriented towards the education objectives outlined by the UNESCO ‘Recommendations concerning Education for International Understanding’, which advocates for co-operation, peace and education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

PSCORE suggests launching a “truthful education” campaign that promotes education incorporating diverse perspectives and condemning any historical distortion or fabrication in textbooks. Moving on, encouraging all member states, international bodies such as UNICEF and non-governmental organizations (NGO’S) to correctly update their information about education in North Korea by deleting false claims of free education and admitting to forced labor as an alternative form of tuition. In addition, citizens of the DPRK should be provided access to global media such as: the internet, newspapers, radio and television without facing punishment.

The government of the DPRK must act strongly to prevent humiliation and the bullying of students. An independent third-party institution could be founded to combat child abuse with the help of organizations and countries that are part of the UN. Furthermore, all school activities that promote the use of child labor (defined by international law) must come to an immediate halt. The DPRK government should set a plan in motion that prevents the exploitation of students through labor requests made by teachers and the administrative structure of schools altogether.