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United Nations Stands Ready to Help Democratic People's Republic of Korea Address Dire Humanitarian Situation, Deputy Secretary-General Tells Security Council

Following are UN Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson's remarks to the Security Council on the situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, in New York, today:

I welcome this Security Council meeting on the human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. This is a matter of great concern that demands our attention. The magnitude and scale of abuses suffered by the people of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea had been documented by the Commission of Inquiry in 2014.

The Commission noted that the violations "reveal a State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world". The Commission's recommendations were instrumental in reframing the United Nations' efforts to improve the country's human rights situation. The Commission of Inquiry concluded that crimes against humanity have been committed and rightly called for accountability.

The Security Council carried this process further last week by adopting resolution 2321 (2016). This was the first time the Council specifically requested the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to respect and ensure the "welfare and inherent dignity" of people in its territory. The General Assembly, in its resolutions on this issue have repeatedly encouraged the Security Council to ensure accountability, including by considering to refer the situation in the country to the International Criminal Court.

The patterns of grave violations of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea have repeatedly been established. The authorities have given no effective commitment to remedy the situation. People inside the Democratic People's Republic of Korea are unable to make their voices heard because of the restrictions and the risks they face if they exercise their rights. The most vulnerable continue to suffer from a cruel network of political prison camps, an exploitative economic system and widespread discrimination based on social status.

Two days ago, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights issued a report that assessed the different ways families have been separated since the 1950-53 Korean War. The report found that involuntary separation is not just the consequence of a war, but also the result of structural forms of exclusion, impunity and disempowerment.

In addition, the country experiences a humanitarian emergency. Approximately 70 per cent of the population of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea — 18 million people — are considered food insecure. A quarter of the population has inadequate access to health services. A fifth of the population lacks access to clean water and proper sanitation. The impact on children, whose developing bodies are vulnerable to lasting damage, is simply ruinous. Stunting is a rampant phenomenon.

These persistent humanitarian needs are exacerbated by recurring natural disasters, such as the floods that devastated the north of the country in September, affecting 600,000 people. In line with the “no one left behind” principle of the Sustainable Development Goals, it is imperative to decouple geopolitical considerations from United Nations humanitarian and development support to people in need.

Security Council resolution 2321 (2016) underlined that the measures imposed were not intended to have adverse humanitarian consequences for the civilian population. I urge members of the Council to ensure that the already critical humanitarian situation does not deteriorate further due to such measures.

Funding for relief activities in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is essential, in particular to ensure that vulnerabilities do not increase in the face of stricter sanctions. Assistance has steadily declined over the past decade, preventing humanitarian agencies from responding effectively to the needs of the most affected. About 145 million dollars are required to address the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's critical humanitarian needs. I count on Member States to support these life-saving activities.

History teaches us that serious human rights violations are warning signs of instability and conflict. Abduction of foreign nationals, enforced disappearances and people fleeing desperate situations all demonstrate the links between human rights, humanitarian crisis and international peace and security. Any attempt to achieve lasting peace and stability demands justice and redress for victims inside and outside the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

It is very difficult to obtain up-to-date and comprehensive information about human rights developments in Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The information we have, however, reveals a continuing pattern of serious human rights violations. And we see very few, if any, signs of improvement.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has obligations under international law. We call on its Government to abide by them. But the international community also has collective responsibilities: first, to protect the country's population from the most serious violations of international humanitarian law and human rights; second, to live up to the principle and norm of the Responsibility to Protect; and third, to consider the wider implications of the human rights situation for regional stability.

The United Nations has taken a number of steps recently to address the human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The new Special Rapporteur presented his report to the General Assembly in October. Also in October, the Secretary-General issued his report to the General Assembly. The Third Committee has agreed on a resolution which will be adopted by the General Assembly next month.

In response, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has maintained its strong objections to country-specific resolutions and mandates. While expressing hope for dialogue and cooperation on human rights, that country's Permanent Mission said it will "take all appropriate measures vis-à-vis the hostile acts against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea that become increasingly aggressive under the pretext of 'human rights'".

During his ten years in office, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has made extensive efforts to promote peace and reconciliation, as well as development and respect of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. We must remain committed to pursuing peaceful, diplomatic and political paths forward to deal with this complex and dangerous situation.

The United Nations will continue to work towards ensuring a genuine and lasting improvement of the human rights and humanitarian situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. We stand ready to help in all possible ways. This could include human rights dialogues, visits to the country with sufficient access to assess conditions on the ground as well as cooperation initiatives and people-to-people contacts.

Let us use all the tools at our disposal — the Human Rights Council, the General Assembly, the Security Council and United Nations and other international entities — to take action to build a better future for the people of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Thank you.