

NORTH KOREA

NEW SATELLITE IMAGES
SHOW CONTINUED
INVESTMENT IN THE
INFRASTRUCTURE OF
REPRESSION

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



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INTRODUCTION

In October 2013, Amnesty International commissioned analysis of satellite images of political prison camp (*kwanliso*) 15 at Yodok in South Hamgyong province and *kwanliso* 16 at Hwaseong in North Hamgyong province. The images show that instead of heeding the growing calls for closing its political prison camps, repression by the North Korean authorities has continued and the prisoner population in *kwanliso* 16 appears to have slightly increased. The North Korean authorities' on-going investment in the country's political prison camps is part of the continuing systematic, widespread and grave violations of human rights throughout the country.

In order to circumvent the unwillingness of the North Korean authorities to allow human rights investigators access, Amnesty International and others have used remote sensing tools, such as satellite imagery, to provide more information about the human rights situation in North Korea. Previous satellite image analysis released by Amnesty International suggests the use and expansion of North Korea's notorious political prison camps,¹ and the blurring of the boundary between *kwanliso* 14 and surrounding villages.²

This new document provides comprehensive assessments of *kwanliso* 15 and 16 at Yodok and Hwaseong respectively. *Kwanliso* 16 is the largest political prison camp in North Korea. The analysis is complemented by testimony from a former prison guard of *kwanliso* 16 and survivors from *kwanliso* 15, describing the system of repression from first-hand experience.

The North Korean government continues to engage in the systematic violation of almost the entire range of human rights and denies access to independent human rights investigators, including the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (Col-DPRK), Marzuki Darusman, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), and international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International.

Amnesty International renews its call to authorities in North Korea to:

- Acknowledge the existence of its political prison camps and to close them immediately;
- Immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience held in political prison camps, including relatives held on the basis of "guilt-by-association". All other inmates should be released unless they are charged with an internationally recognizable offence, remanded by an independent court and are given a fair trial;
- Grant access to North Korea, including all political prison camps, to independent international human rights monitors including Amnesty International, the Col-DPRK and the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK.

Additionally, Amnesty International calls upon all countries in the region, especially China and Laos:

- To respect their international law obligations and not forcibly return North Koreans who have fled the country, as any such return could put them at serious risk of grave human rights violations including being sent to the *kwanliso*.

BACKGROUND

Hundreds of thousands of people—including children—are held in political prison camps and other detention facilities in North Korea, where they are subject to systematic, widespread and grave human rights violations. Many of those held in political prison camps have not committed any crime, but are relatives of those deemed unfriendly to the North Korean administration, and are detained as a form of collective punishment.

Over the years, Amnesty International has collected testimonies of former detainees and prison guards at political prison camps in North Korea to obtain information about conditions and treatment within these detention facilities. Former prisoners from the political prison camp at *kwanliso* 15 (Yodok) told Amnesty International that inmates are forced to work in slave-like conditions and are frequently subjected to torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.³ All those interviewed had witnessed public executions of inmates – generally by hanging or by shooting. Kim Young-soon, who was an inmate of *kwanliso* 15 between 1980 and 1989, described a public execution of two inmates who were caught attempting to escape; they were brought to a stage after they were badly beaten. They were tied to wooden stakes and shot three times in their head, chest and feet.⁴

In an interview conducted in November 2013, Mr. Lee (full name withheld), who was a security official in *kwanliso* 16 in the 1980s until the mid-1990s, told Amnesty International of other forms of executions he had witnessed where inmates were forced to dig their own graves and then killed by hammer blows to their necks by prison authorities. In another instance, he had seen prison authorities strangling and then beating inmates to their death with wooden sticks. He also recounted that several women inmates disappeared after they had been raped by officials and he concluded that they had been executed secretly.⁵

The North Korean government continues to deny the existence of political prison camps, including those repeatedly documented through satellite-based observation.

While it is estimated that over a hundred thousand people face appalling human rights violations within the system of political prison camps in North Korea, life for the ordinary population also remains dominated by extreme forms of repression, food shortages, and the persistent threat of arbitrary detention and incarceration in dire conditions in the vast system of detention facilities including the political prison camps. The rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association have been virtually non-existent in North Korea since its inception. Even more severe restrictions are believed to have been imposed more recently to prevent challenges to the new government under the present leader Kim Jong-un who

came to power in December 2011.

There is no independent domestic media, no known independent opposition political parties and no independent civil society. Criticism of the government is punished by detention in a political prison camp or in one of the many other detention facilities in North Korea. Only a select few people in the country have internet access, mostly through a closely monitored intranet network. Use of mobile phones is heavily restricted.

North Korean citizens face heavy restrictions on travel, both abroad and within the country. Those who violate travel restrictions face severe punishment. These restrictions on movement are enforced in the context of a severe and persistent food crisis in North Korea, which has led to widespread malnutrition and food deprivation. Statements and actions by North Korean authorities from 2013 indicate that the government is escalating its efforts to prevent people from fleeing the country. North Koreans are prohibited from travelling abroad without state permission and recent crackdowns and increased border controls have made it exceedingly difficult to cross the border into China. According to South Korean government figures, the number of North Koreans reaching South Korea last year was 1,509 compared to 2,706 in 2011.⁶

METHODOLOGY

Assessments regarding the state of affairs in the political prison camps under examination are based on testimony provided by former detainees and prison officials, and the use of satellite-based remote sensing tools and analysis. Imagery and analytics were secured by Amnesty International's Science for Human Rights program from DigitalGlobe, Inc. Imagery from *kwaniso* 15 and 16 were examined to assess features and changes in features over time, including:

1. Perimeter fencing, guard posts and stations
2. Access controls and checkpoints
3. Administrative, residential, and prison-specific buildings
4. Economic activity
5. Road, rail, and other infrastructure
6. Food and other storage facilities

The period under examination for satellite imagery analysis for *kwaniso* 15 spans the period from 2011 to 2013, and includes imagery dated March 2011, February 2012, and two in 2013 (April and September).

The period under examination for satellite imagery analysis for *kwaniso* 16 spans the period

between 2008 and 2013. Dates of imagery used in the analysis for this political prison camp include two in 2009 (August and October), June 2010, two in 2011 (May and September), November 2012, and two in 2013 (April and May).

FINDINGS OF NEW SATELLITE IMAGE ANALYSIS

Amnesty International's Science for Human Rights program commissioned satellite image analysis of *kwanliso* 15 (2011-2013) and *kwanliso* 16 (2008-2013) in order to assess the current state of these two political prison camps. *Kwanliso* 15 is located in Yodok, South Hamgyong province around 120km from the capital Pyongyang and *kwanliso* 16 in Hwaseong, North Hamgyong province is approximately 400 km from Pyongyang.



Map of North Korea and neighbouring countries with Camps 15 and 16 highlighted in red (Source: DigitalGlobe). Names and boundary representation do not necessarily constitute endorsement by Amnesty International.

The findings of the new analysis are of grave concern: Far from dismantling the political prison camps – places of systematic, widespread and grave human rights violations, such as forced hard labour, denial of detainee's food quota as punishment, torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment – they appear active and authorities appear to be investing in maintenance of the prisons' infrastructure. Specific features visible through remote sensing that allow for an assessment of the political prison camps include:

- **Population Housing:** In the case of *kwanliso* 16, analysis shows an increased number of housing blocks suggesting a possible increase in the population. In a few instances, satellite images showed actual housing under construction, revealing a rare insight into the structure

of houses within the political prison camp, including the exact layout and sizes of rooms - information that might prove relevant for current or future investigations and provide indications regarding population size of the camps.

- Security and Control: The political prison camps remain under tight control and are clearly marked through perimeter and fences. The camps are surrounded by security fencing and movement appears to be restricted and controlled through secured entrance gates, guard towers and internal check points.
- Labour activity: There appears to be significant economic activity, such as mining, logging or agriculture. For example, imagery of *kwanliso* 16 from 2010 and 2012 tracks the expansion of an industrial area within the political prison camp.

With a size of 560km², *kwanliso* 16 is more than three times the size of Washington, DC, the capital of the United States and is the largest political prison camp in North Korea. However, it is also one of the least investigated areas in the vast political prison camp system in North Korea. *Kwanliso* 16 shows the typical features of other political prison camps in North Korea, with controlled access points, guard towers and checkpoints. The construction of additional housing between 2008 and 2013 suggests that the population has slightly increased.⁷

Kwanliso 15, also known as Yodok *kwanliso*, encompasses an area of 370 km². The main economic activities, agriculture and mining and its population are concentrated in river valleys. Amnesty International commissioned satellite image analysis of *kwanliso* 15 in 2011. Since then, small changes were made in the periphery of the political prison camp; notably, over the period under examination, 35 non-housing structures were erected, indicating on-going investment in, and maintenance of, the prison camp's infrastructure. Over the observation period, 39 housing structures were removed, while six new housing structures were erected. This decrease in housing could indicate a decrease in the political prison camp's population.

Activities in both political prison camps, as observed through remote sensing, show how authorities appear to be investing in the very infrastructure that allows for systematic violations of human rights. What follows are examples of these activities.

CONSTRUCTION OF HOUSING AND ADMINISTRATIVE BUILDINGS

The central (administrative) area of *kwanliso* 16 appears to have undergone the most change in the observation timeframe, including the razing and reconstruction of housing structures. In total, eight new housing structures were added in 2011 and 2012 (see bottom image), and a new administrative building was added in 2010 (see top image).



DigitalGlobe Natural Color Imagery, [May 18, 2011](#), 41.310814°, 129.346097°



DigitalGlobe Natural Color Imagery, [May 26, 2013](#), 41.310814°, 129.346097°

The images below, from 2011 and 2013, respectively, show a close up of a village in the northern part of *kwanliso* 16, with new housing being recently added or being under construction. The guard post in immediate vicinity of the village allows for constant supervision of the prisoners and is indicative of the tight security within the political prison camp.



DigitalGlobe Natural Color Imagery, [September 23, 2011](#), 41.385843°, 129.101535°



DigitalGlobe Panchromatic Imagery, [April 4, 2013](#), 41.385843°, 129.101535°

A recent image from *kwaniso* 16 close to the main entrance shows two more housing units under construction, showing ten 4 by 3.5 meter units in each building.



DigitalGlobe Natural Color Imagery, [May 26, 2013](#), 41.254500°, 129.367523°

The images that are featured below from *kwaniso* 15 (Yodok *kwaniso*) show an administrative compound (located in *Area 6* of the overview image on the following page) that was constructed (or reconstructed) between March 2011 and February 2012. Exact functionality of the complex is unclear, but it is likely to be either a guard station or an administrative area to support logging activities.



DigitalGlobe Natural Color Imagery, [March 26, 2011](#), 39.839914°, 126.802832°



DigitalGlobe Natural Color Imagery, [February 22, 2012](#), 39.839914°, 126.802832°

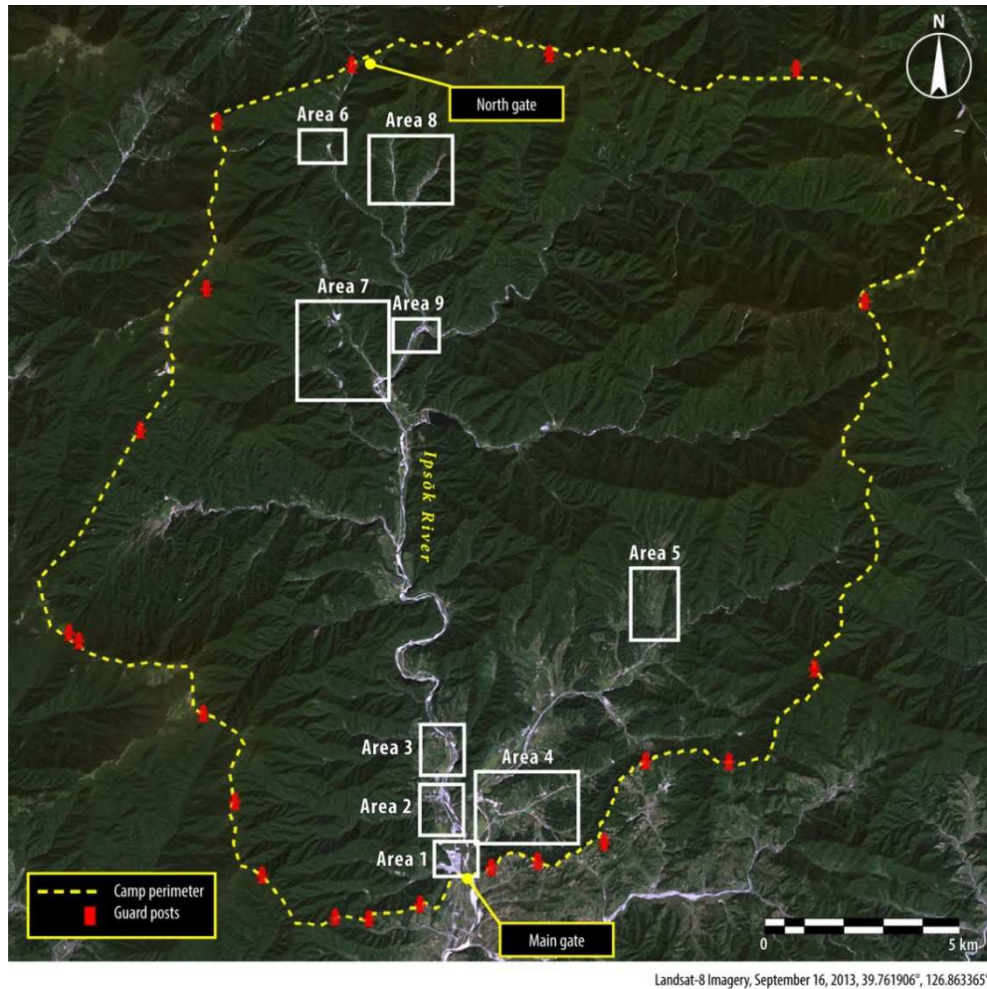


DigitalGlobe Natural Color Imagery, [September 27, 2013](#), 39.839914°, 126.802832°

TIGHT SECURITY AND CONTROL

Both camps showed unmistakable signs of how authorities restrict freedom of movement of the population within their perimeters.

Kwanliso 15 is surrounded by a double fence along its perimeter and numerous guard posts. Access is highly restricted through two gates on opposite sides of the political prison camp.



Movement also appears to be restricted within the camps. The image below, from June 2010, shows a checkpoint on the main road within *kwanliso* 16.



DigitalGlobe Natural Color Imagery, [June 11, 2010](#), 41.301995°, 129.363418°

LABOUR ACTIVITY

Satellite images further show investment in and maintenance of production facilities, focused on mining, agriculture and logging. A 2010 satellite image captures the construction of a new facility within *kwanliso* 16. In the image further below from November 2012, the industrial facility appears to be operational and new support buildings are visible.



DigitalGlobe Natural Color Imagery, [June 11, 2010](#), 41.261302°, 129.375145°



DigitalGlobe Panchromatic Imagery, [November 18, 2012](#), 41.261302°, 129.375145°

Logging is widely visible in both camps. The following images show the on-going logging activities over a two year period (2011 – 2013) within *kwanliso* 15 (Area 8 of overview image on page 14).



DigitalGlobe Natural Color Imagery, [March 26, 2011](#), 39.836244°, 126.831452°



DigitalGlobe Natural Color Imagery, [September 27, 2013](#), 39.836244°, 126.831452°

This satellite image time series from 2011 to 2013 shows a probable furniture factory within *kwanliso* 15 (Area 4 of overview image on page 14). The change in lumber piles is indicative of production activity.



DigitalGlobe Natural Color Imagery, [March 26, 2011](#), 39.689814°, 126.857436°



DigitalGlobe Natural Color Imagery, [February 22, 2012](#), 39.689814°, 126.857436°



DigitalGlobe Natural Color Imagery, [April 7, 2013](#), 39.689814°, 126.857436°



DigitalGlobe Natural Color Imagery, [September 27, 2013](#), 39.689814°, 126.857436°

According to testimonies from former inmates in *kwanliso* 15, all inmates were subject to forced labour for between 10 to 12 hours daily in dangerous conditions in the production facilities, mines, logging and farming. Failure to meet the work quotas could lead to reduction or discontinuation of food rations. According to a couple, Kim and Lee (full names withheld), who were detained in *kwanliso* 15 between 1999 and 2001,

*"We worked in the farms (at kwanliso 15) from 7am to 8pm. We cultivated corn. We were divided to work in units comprising 10-15 people each. We were given a daily production target that we had to meet. If the unit did not meet the daily target, the unit-members were punished collectively. During the course of our three-year detention, often we did not meet our targets because we were always hungry and weak. We were punished with beatings and also reductions in our food quota. In addition to that, in the Ideology Struggle Sessions that were held after work, those who did not meet the target were severely criticized and beaten by other inmates."*⁸

According to prison official Mr. Lee who worked in *kwanliso* 16, inmates used to spend most of their time working in dangerous conditions, were overworked and had very little time to rest. In most cases, they had to work until they fulfilled their work quotas. After their work, they had to attend self-criticism meetings. Only after these meetings were they allowed to rest; mostly between 12 midnight and 4am. He had witnessed accidents in the work place, many of which were fatal.

CONCLUSION

Based on the satellite imagery analysis of *kwanliso* 15 and 16, the political prison camps seem to be active and infrastructure maintenance on-going. The analysis demonstrates a possible increase in the population in *kwanliso* 16, a population that is subjected to grave human rights violations including torture, executions, forced labour and horrific living conditions as is revealed by the past testimonies of survivors and prison officials who have been in political prison camps in North Korea. The satellite images reveal significant economic activity such as mining, logging and agriculture which, according to testimony, use a prison labour force who work long hours in dangerous conditions, are subjected to denial of food quota as punishment and with limited hours of rest. Of further concern, both political prison camps remain under tight control with movement restricted by secured entrance gates, guard towers and internal check points.

In light of the information presented in this analysis, Amnesty International urges the government of North Korea to:

- Acknowledge the existence of its political prison camps and to close them immediately;
- Immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners of conscience held in political prison camps, including relatives held on the basis of “guilt-by-association”. All other inmates should be released unless they are charged with an internationally recognizable offence, remanded by an independent court and are given a fair trial;
- Grant access to North Korea, including all political prison camps, to independent international human rights monitors including Amnesty International, the UN Commission of Inquiry on human rights in the DPRK, and the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK

ENDNOTES

¹ Amnesty International, "North Korea: Images reveal scale of political prison camps," 3 May, 2011.
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/images-reveal-scale-north-korean-political-prison-camps-2011-05-03>, (accessed 5 November, 2013).

² Amnesty International, "North Korea: New images show blurring of prison camps and villages," 7 March 2013

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/north-korea-new-images-show-blurring-prison-camps-and-villages-2013-03-07>, (accessed 5 November, 2013).

³ Watch testimony from former detainees in Yodok here: <http://youtu.be/1y0yhV6IT7o?t=2m5s>, (accessed November 8, 2013).

⁴ Amnesty International interview with Kim Young-soon in October 2013.

⁵ Amnesty International interview with Mr. Lee in November 2013.

⁶ Amnesty International, "North Korea escalates border crackdown," 21 June, 2013.

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/for-media/press-releases/north-korea-escalates-border-crackdown-2013-06-21>, (accessed 5 November, 2013).

⁷ However, the increase appears not to be significant enough to suggest that several thousand prisoners from *kwanliso* 22 in Hoeryong in North Hamgyong province, which was closed according to reports in October 2012, were relocated to *kwanliso* 16. See, for example, Bermudez, Joseph, and Amy Opperman, DigitalGlobe and The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, "North Korea's Camp 22."
[http://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK%20CAMP%2022%20REPORT%20FINAL%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK%20CAMP%2022%20REPORT%20FINAL%20(1).pdf), (accessed 7 November, 2013).

⁸ Amnesty International interview with couple Kim and Lee (full names withheld) in July 2010 cited in "Amnesty International: Media Briefing" (AI Index: ASA 24/001/2011)
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA24/001/2011/en/2671e54f-1cd1-46c1-96f1-6a463efa6f65/asa240012011en.pdf>, (accessed 26 November 2013).

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