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ASIA/NORTH KOREA-Christians and NGOs to the UN: Stop to the gulag in North Korea

Seoul (Agenzia Fides) - The United Nations are asked to help North Korea to close forever the vast gulag system in the country: is what is asked, in a petition today to the UN Council for Human Rights, on behalf of over 40 NGOs, some of Christian inspiration, gathered in the "International Coalition to stop the crimes against humanity in North Korea." As reported to Fides by the NGO "Christian Solidarity Worldwide," which is part of the Coalition, North Korea holds "over 200,000 prisoners in " reeducation camps, considered "dissidents or opponents." Among them elderly and children, and over 40 thousand Christians, detained only because of their faith.

"Life in the North Korean gulag is one of the worst human rights disasters in the world today," Jared Genser, of the Coalition explains to Fides. The prisoners, including children, are subjected to grueling work, seven days a week, for twelve or more hours a day. 25% of inmates die each year because of the terrible working conditions. It is estimated that in recent decades, more than 400,000 prisoners have died.

Ha Tae-keung, an activist of the "Open North Korea," one of the NGOs of the Coalition, remarks: "The prisoners are dying of hunger: they only have 20 grains of wheat for each portion of food. Diseases such as pneumonia and tuberculosis are rampant, but there is no medical treatment for prisoners. They are forced to work even when they are sick and, if they are no longer able to work, are sent to sanatoriums to wait for their death. There are also frequent torture, rapes and extrajudicial killings".

"Kim Jong-un has a choice," warns Kanae Doi, director of "Human Rights Watch" in Japan: "He can leave everything as it is, thus becoming responsible for crimes against humanity, or he can close the gulag and put an end to this terrible chapter in the history of his country".

The petition filed today asks the UN to investigate and report on the gulag system in North Korea, with the same procedure used to investigate the situation of detainees in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The Coalition invites the UN to take note of crimes against humanity and to initiate, in collaboration with the North Korean government, a process for providing adequate compensation to victims and their families. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 03/04/2012)

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