

AUGUST 26, 2021



North Korea's Potential Long-Term Prison-Labor Facility at Sŏnhwa-dong (선화동)

Joseph S. Bermudez, Jr., Greg Scarlatoiu, Amanda Mortwedt Oh, and Rosa Park



THE COMMITTEE FOR
HUMAN RIGHTS IN NORTH KOREA
북한인권위원회

NORTH KOREA'S POTENTIAL LONG-TERM PRISON-LABOR FACILITY AT SŎNHWA-DONG



Location:

Sŏnhwa-dong, P'ihyŏn-gun, P'yŏn-gan-bukto

CenterPoint Coordinates:

40.053775 124.580637

Date of Report:

August 26, 2021

Dates of Imagery Presented in this Report:

Maxar Technologies:

May 5, 2002, April 10, 2006, April 6, 2010, May 5, 2015,

November 13, 2018, and December 12, 2019

CNES:

January 24, 1995

Central Intelligence Agency:

October 19, 1977 (Declassified, KH-9)

Copernicus Sentinel Data:

May 10, 2021

Size of Facility:

Primary Facility:

4,700 square meters (5,620 square yards)

72 meters by 64 meters (79 yards by 70 yards)

Primary Facility, Fish Farm, and Warehouse:

7,140 square meters (8,540 square yards)

139 meters by 80 meters (152 yards by 87 yards)

Background

The report of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (UN COI) determined that "crimes against

humanity have been committed in North Korea, pursuant to policies established at the highest level of the State." Many of these crimes against humanity take place against persons detained in political and other prison camps—persons whom the Commission determined are among the "primary targets of a systematic and widespread attack" by the North Korean regime—including murder, enslavement, torture, imprisonment, rape, forced abortions and other sexual violence, persecution on political grounds, and the enforced disappearance of persons. The Kim regime considers prisoners in political and other prison camps to "pose a threat to the political system and leadership" of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).¹

Based on research conducted by the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK), the following trends have defined the human rights situation in North Korea under Kim Jong-un's control:

- » An intensive crackdown on attempts to escape from North Korea.
- » A restructuring of the prison camp system, with some facilities closer to the border with China being shut down, while inland facilities have been expanded. This restructuring comprises construction of internal high-security compounds within the prisons.
- » The sustained, if not increased, economic importance of the political prison camps.
- » The disproportionate repression of women by North Korean officials; women have assumed primary responsibility for the survival of their families and thus represent the majority of those arrested for perceived wrongdoing at the "jangmadang" markets or for "illegally" crossing the border.
- » An aggressive purge of senior officials aimed to

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consolidate the leader's grip on power.

- » An increased restriction on information flow.
- » Targeting of North Korean escapees.
- » Increased focus on eliminating "reactionary thoughts."

Analysis

Executive Summary

This report is part of a comprehensive long-term project undertaken by HRNK to use satellite imagery and former prisoner interviews to identify and shed light on human suffering in the Democratic Peo-

ple's Republic of Korea (DPRK, more commonly known as North Korea) by monitoring activity at civil and political prison facilities throughout the nation.²

During 2018 to 2019, HRNK conducted a series of interviews with former prisoners of the North Korean political prison system. Around that time, HRNK received preliminary information concerning the location (40.053775 124.580637) of what it believed to be a small previously unknown long-term prison-labor facility (*kyo-hwa-so*) adjacent to the "P'ihyŏn Silica Brick Factory" in P'ihyŏn-gun (피현군, P'ihyŏn

County) and along the Samgyo-ch'ŏn (삼교천, Samgyo River).³ In another more recent interview with a former resident of Sinuiju the individual indicated that while they knew of the P'ihyŏn Silica Brick Factory they were unaware of any *kyo-hwa-so* located there.⁴

In an effort to determine whether this facility at Sŏnhwa-dong was a prison and to establish a preliminary baseline report of the activity here, HRNK analyzed 17 medium- and high-resolution pan-sharpened multispectral and pan-chromatic declassified and commercial satellite images of the facility and its immediate

environs focusing upon identification and examination of the following physical features:⁵

- » Security perimeters (internal and external), entrances, and guard positions
- » Main prison and walled compounds
- » Headquarters, administration, barracks, housing and support facilities
- » Activities in the immediate environs of the facility

POTENTIAL DETENTION FACILITY AT SŎNHWA-DONG

Figure 1



Overview image of the Sinŭiju - P'ihyŏn-gun area, May 10, 2021.

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Based upon analysis of these features there is a roughly even chance that this facility is a small operational prison facility likely established sometime between the late-1980s and mid-1990s.⁶ HRNK anticipates that it will be able to make a more definitive determination, further refine the date of its establishment, and detail the facility's organization and development in future updates when additional satellite imagery from the 1980s and 1990s is declassified and correlated with future interviews with former prisoners.

Until the official purpose and designation of this facility becomes available this study will identify

the reported facility using the provisional designation of the Sönhwa-dong (선화동) facility—taken from the name of the adjacent village.

As with the analytical caution presented in previous HRNK reports, such as *North Korea's Chŭngsan No. 11 Detention Facility*, it is important to reiterate that North Korean officials, especially those within the Korean People's Army and the internal security organizations, clearly understand the importance of implementing camouflage, concealment, and deception (CCD) procedures to mask their operations and intentions.⁷ It would not be unreason-

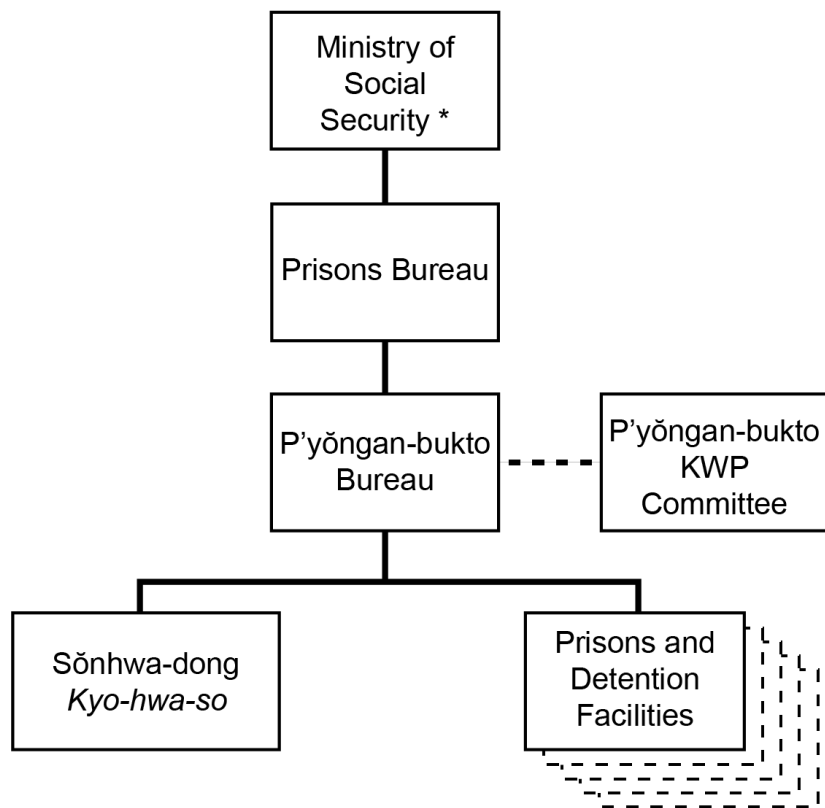
able to assume that they have done so here.

Location and Subordination

The Sönhwa-dong facility is located within P'ihyön-gun (피현군), P'yöngan-bukto (평안북도/North Pyongan Province)—approximately 151 kilometers northwest of the capital city of P'yöngyang and 16.5 km southeast of Sinŭiju (신의주). If it is a long-term prison-labor facility (*kyo-hwa-so*), it is very likely subordinate to the Prisons Bureau of the Ministry of Social Security (사회안전성, *Sa-hoe-an-jeon-seong*).⁸ Specifically, it would be under the control of the ministry's P'yöngan-bukto (North Pyongan

Province) Bureau. The Ministry of Social Security itself reports directly to the State Affairs Commission chaired by Kim Jong-un.

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* Formerly the Ministry of People's Security

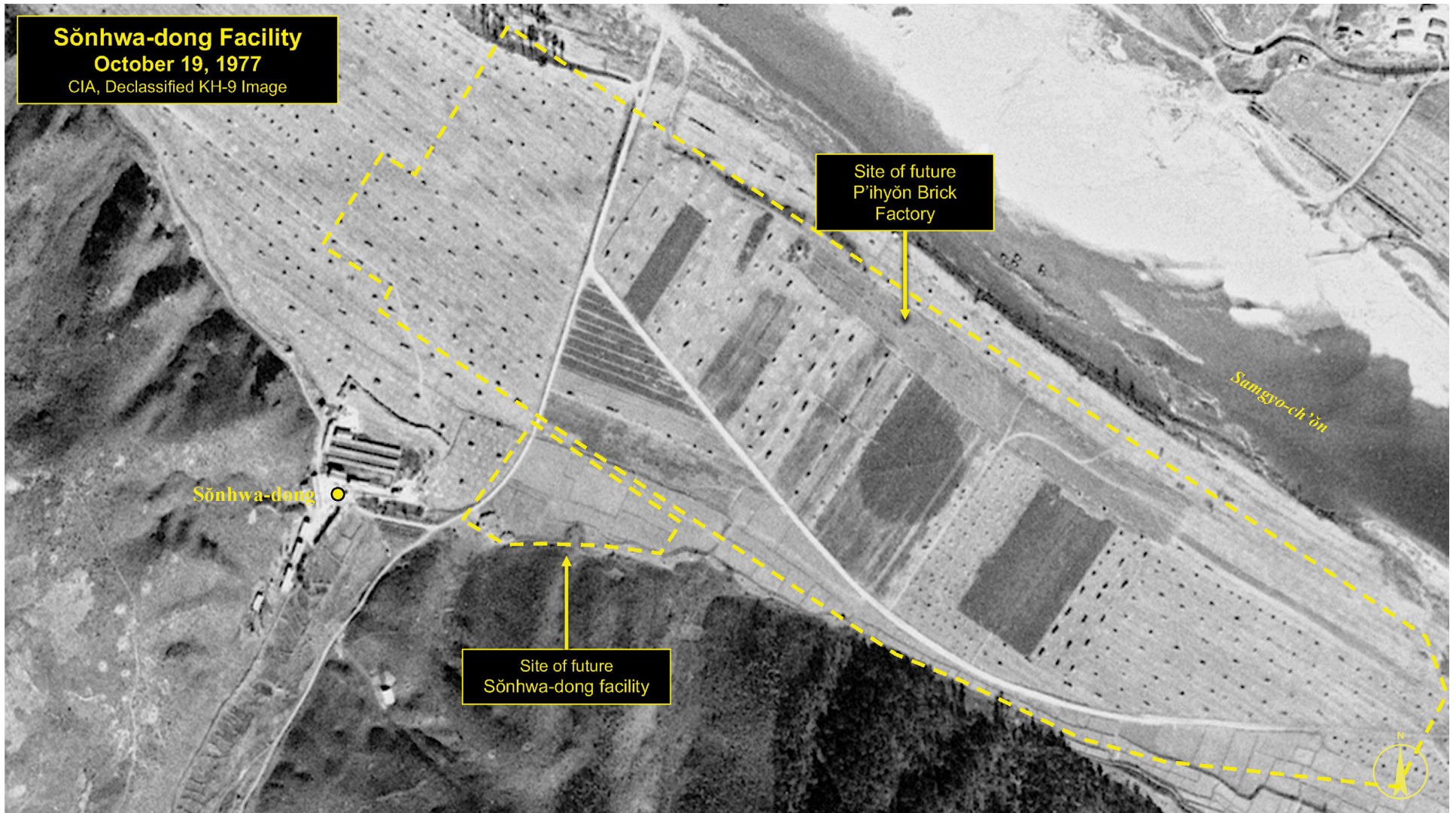
Ministry of Social Security, Prison Bureau, P'yŏngan-bukto (simplified), assuming that the Sŏnhwa-dong facility is a kyo-hwa-so.

Development

The precise date of establishment of the Sŏnhwa-dong (선화동) facility is unknown. A declassified Central Intelligence Agency high-resolution KH-9 satellite image acquired on October 19, 1977 shows no evidence of the facility. Medium-resolution Landsat 5 imagery, however, suggests that the facility was likely established sometime after the completion of the P'ihyŏn Silica Brick Factory in 1986 and by April 24, 1990.

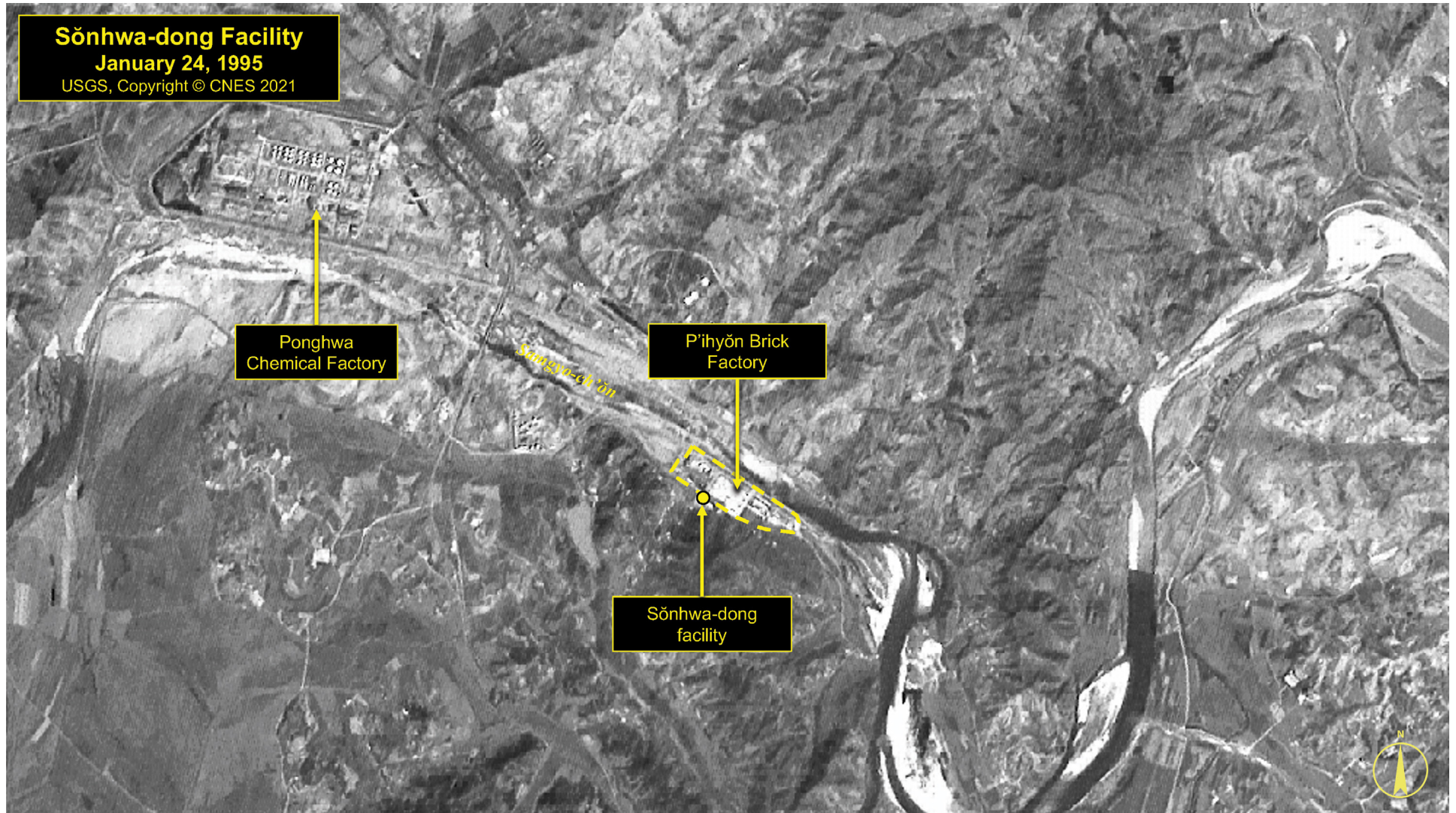
A medium-resolution Satellite Pour l'Observation de la Terre (SPOT) image collected on January 24, 1995 shows both the P'ihyŏn Silica Brick Factory and the Sŏnhwa-dong facility.⁹

Figure 2



Overview of the Sŏnhwa-dong facility and P'ihyŏn Silica Brick Factory prior to their construction during the late 1980s, October 19, 1977.

Figure 3



Overview image of the Sinŭiju - P'ihyŏn-gun area, January 24, 1995.

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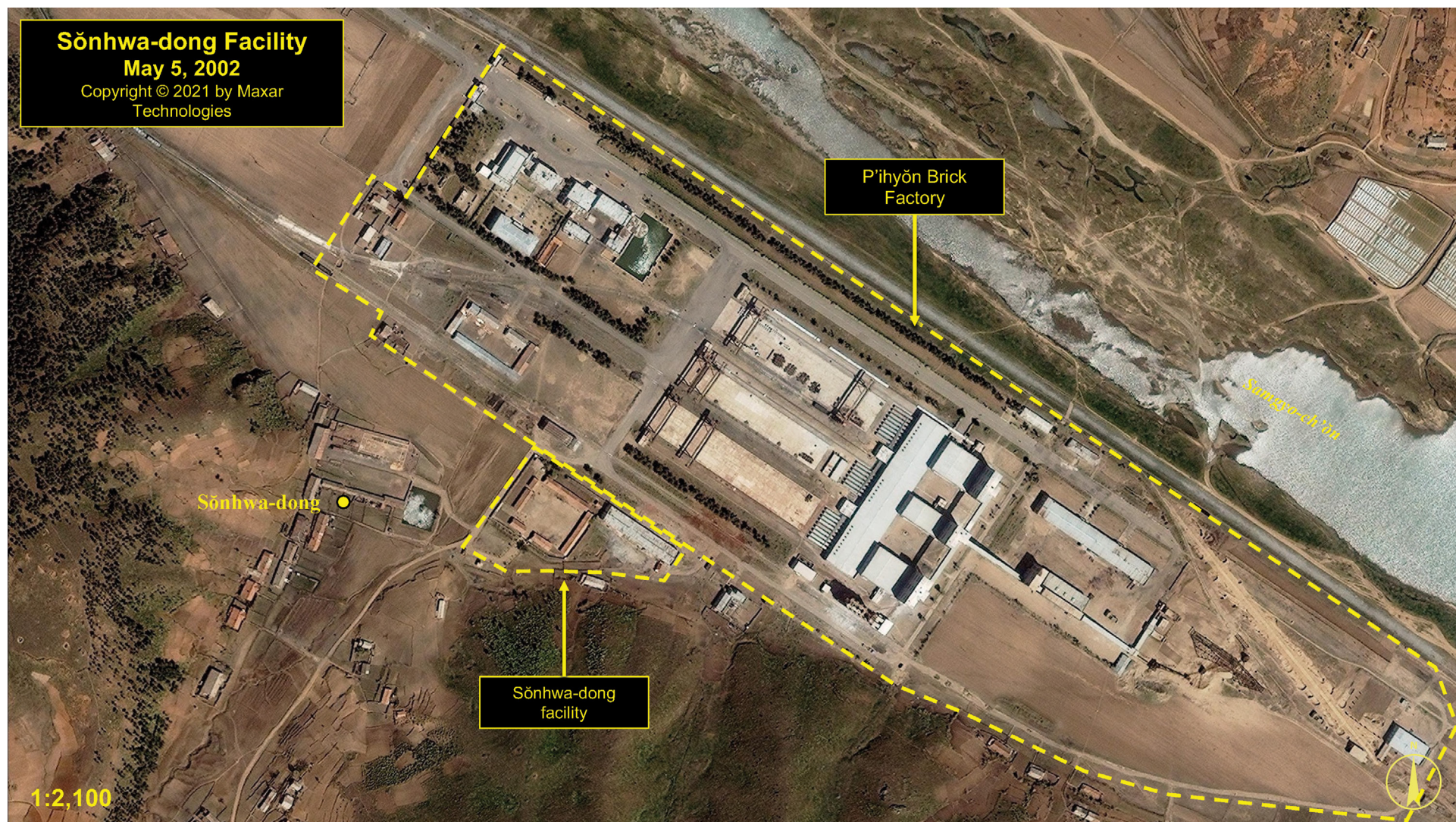
The first readily-available, high-resolution commercial satellite image of the Sŏnhwa-dong facility was acquired on May 5, 2002 and shows an irregularly-shaped facility with a perimeter wall that is attached to a warehouse-type building. The compound has entrances in its northeast and

southwest perimeter walls, and what appear to be guard positions on the north and south corners. While the southwest entrance is a formal entrance with a gate, the northeast entrance appears to simply be an opening in the perimeter wall. This northeast entrance is 25 meters from the

south entrance of the P'ihyŏn Silica Brick Factory. Overall, the walled compound encompasses approximately 4,700 square meters (5,620 square yards) and measures 72 meters by 64 meters (79 yards by 70 yards). Within the compound are seven structures of various sizes and small sheds. All

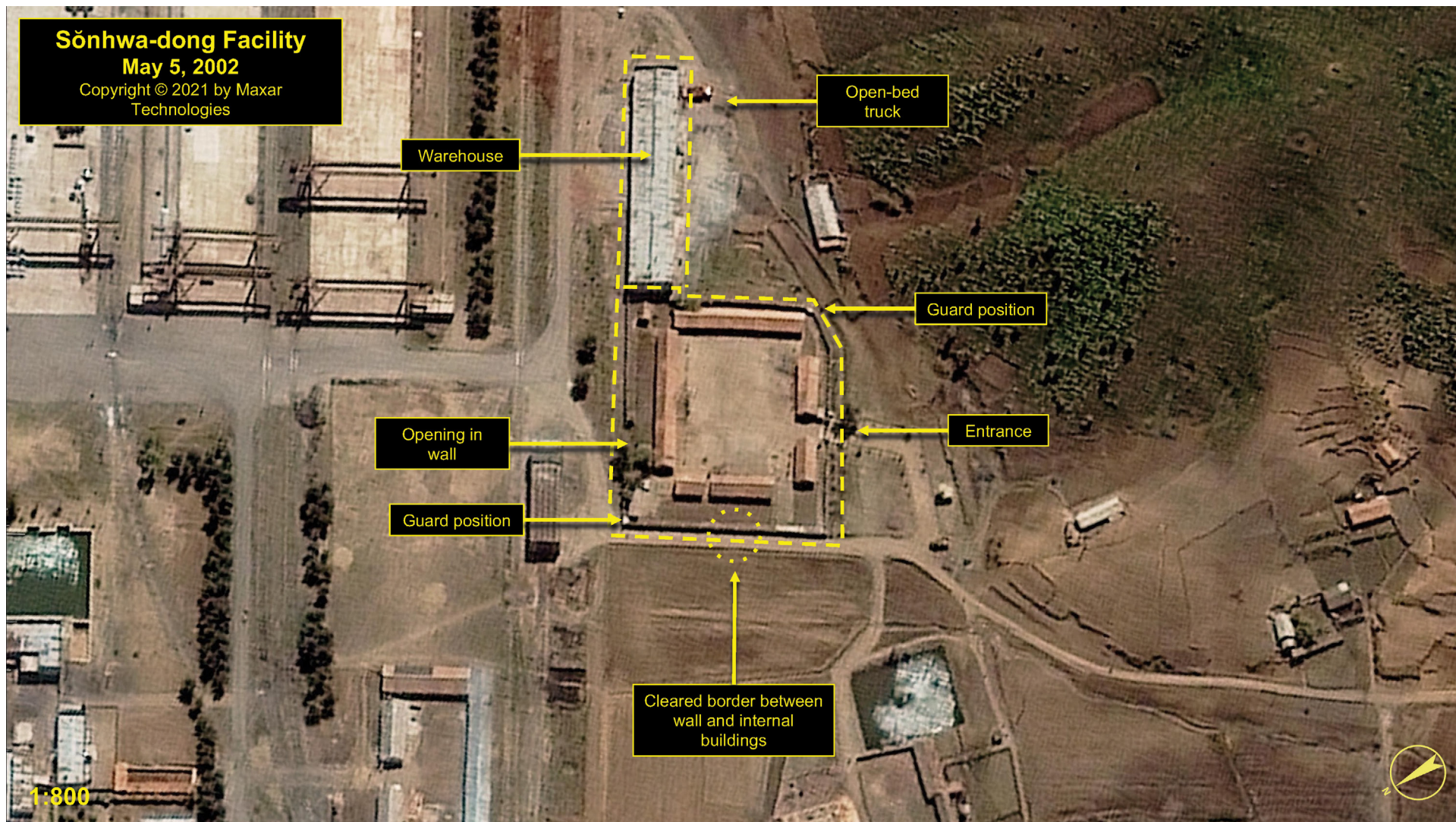
of these are spaced approximately 3 or 4 meters from the inside of the perimeter wall, creating a cleared border.

Figure 4



Overview of the Sŏnhwa-dong facility and P'ihyŏn Silica Brick Factory as seen on May 5, 2002. The close proximity of the two facilities is clearly visible.

Figure 5



Close-up view of the Sŏnhwa-dong facility as seen on May 5, 2002. Notably, there is the opening in the northeast wall and the cleared border around the interior of the perimeter wall.

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A large warehouse-like building is attached to the east corner of the compound and encompasses approximately 1,095 square meters (1,310 square yards) and measures 73 meters by 15 meters (80 yards by 16 yards).

The proximity of the Sŏnhwa-dong facility and warehouse to the P'ihyŏn Silica Brick Factory clearly indicates their relationship to the factory and is a strong indicator that, if it is a prison, any prisoners held here are engaged in labor within the factory.

Imagery collected on April 10, 2006 shows that during the previous two years, the opening in the northeast wall has been closed and a new shed built within the

northern corner of the compound. A new walled yard had also been added on the north side of the warehouse building—the warehouse and its walled yard now encompassed a total of approximately 1,095 square meters (1,310 square yards). It also appears that the two guard positions were in the process of being modified or removed as they are now lower than the exterior wall.

By April 6, 2010, additional changes had taken place. The guard position in the southern corner of the compound had been removed and several buildings had new roofs. Within the courtyard, what appear to be small walls with patriotic or propaganda slogans had been erected and a volleyball court in-

stalled. A new shed had also been erected within the walled yard attached to the warehouse.

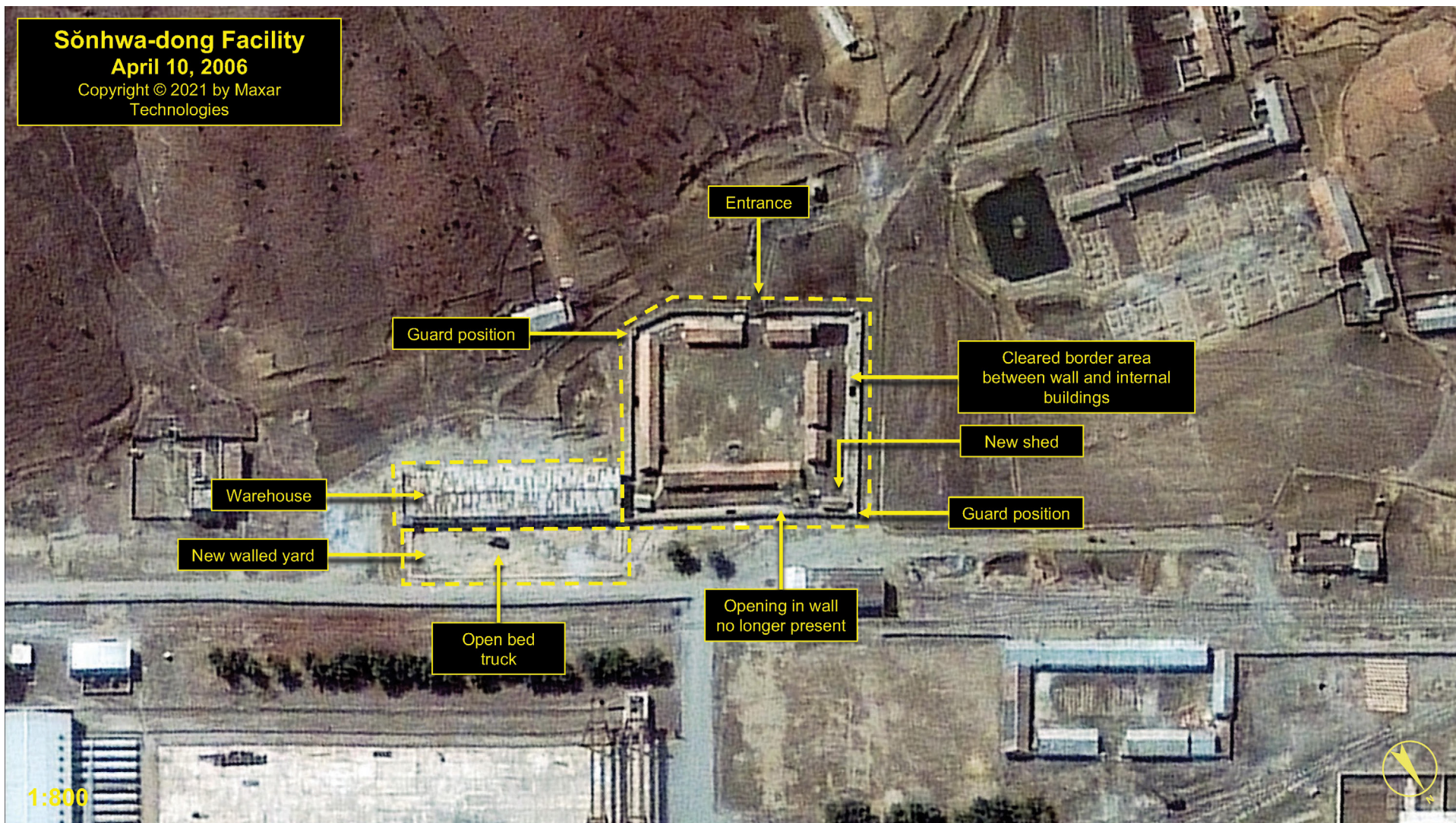
Imagery collected on May 5, 2015 shows additional minor changes to the facility. Most notably, a walled-in fish pond has been built along the outside of the southwest wall of the compound. A new guard position had been built on the west corner of the compound's perimeter wall—bringing the number of such positions back to two, the other being on the north corner.

The only significant change observed three years later, on November 13, 2018, was that a large pile of sand had been deposited in the courtyard of the facility. The

reason for the large pile of sand deposited in the center of the courtyard is unclear. Additionally, the warehouse's walled yard now contained a number of vehicles, trailers, and shipping containers.

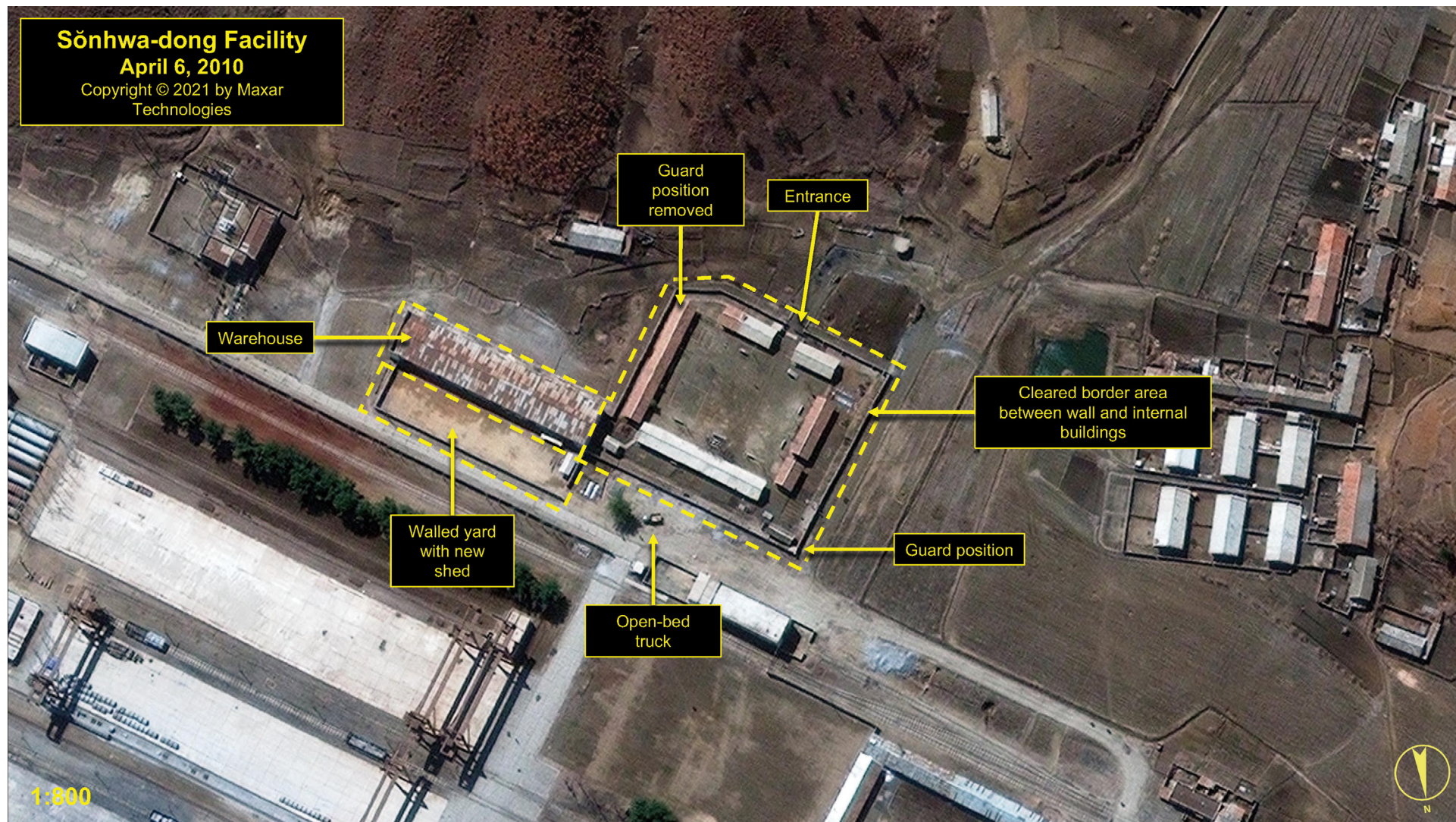
The following year, an image collected on December 12, 2019 showed that no significant changes had occurred. At this time the main facility encompassed approximately 4,700 square meters (5,620 square yards) and contained eight buildings, while the warehouse and fish pond increased the total area encompassed in the facility to approximately 7,140 square meters (8,540 square yards).

Figure 6



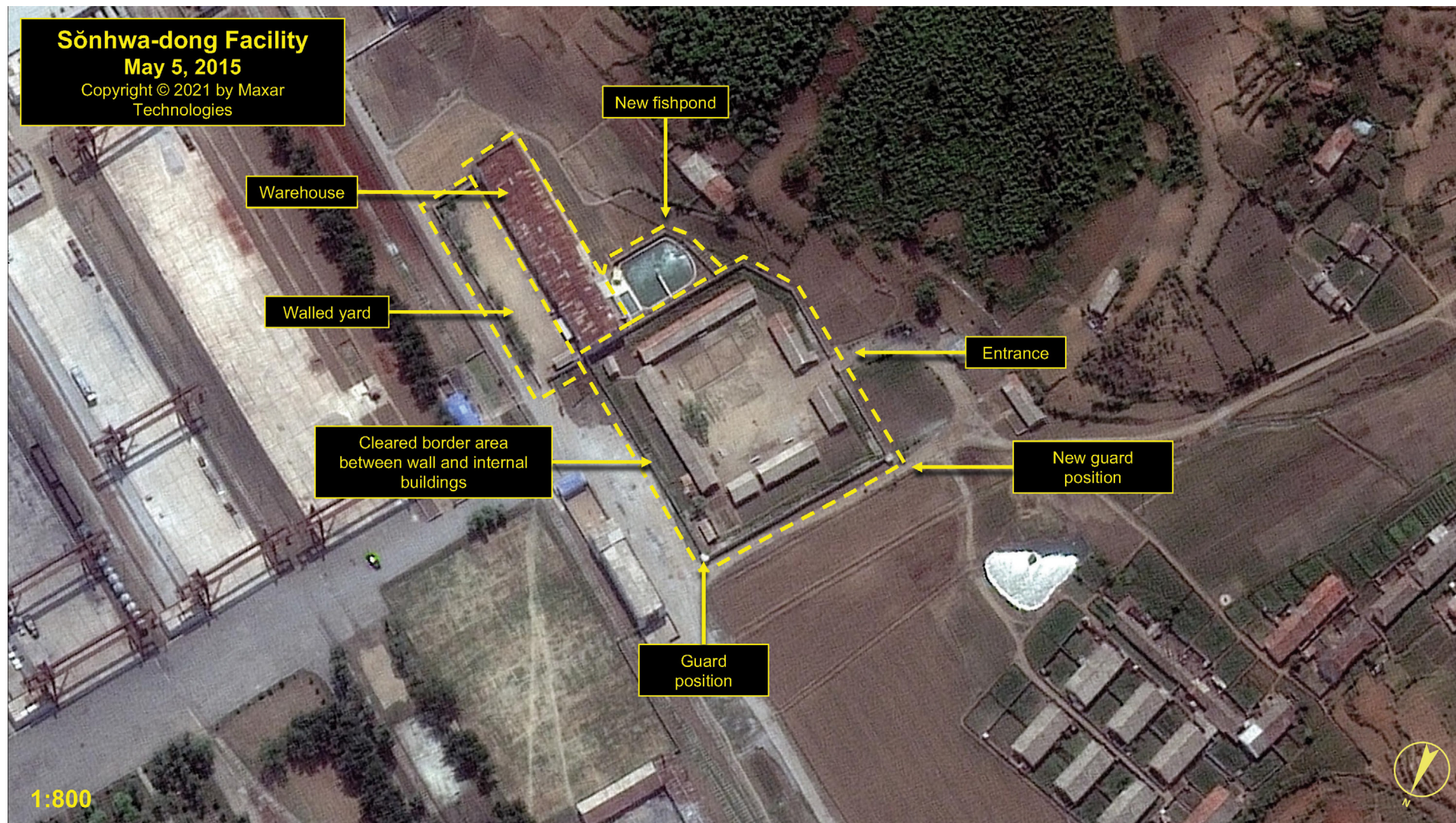
Close-up view of the Sŏnhwa-dong facility as seen on April 10, 2006. It is notable that the opening in the northeast wall has been closed and that a walled yard has been added to the warehouse building.

Figure 7



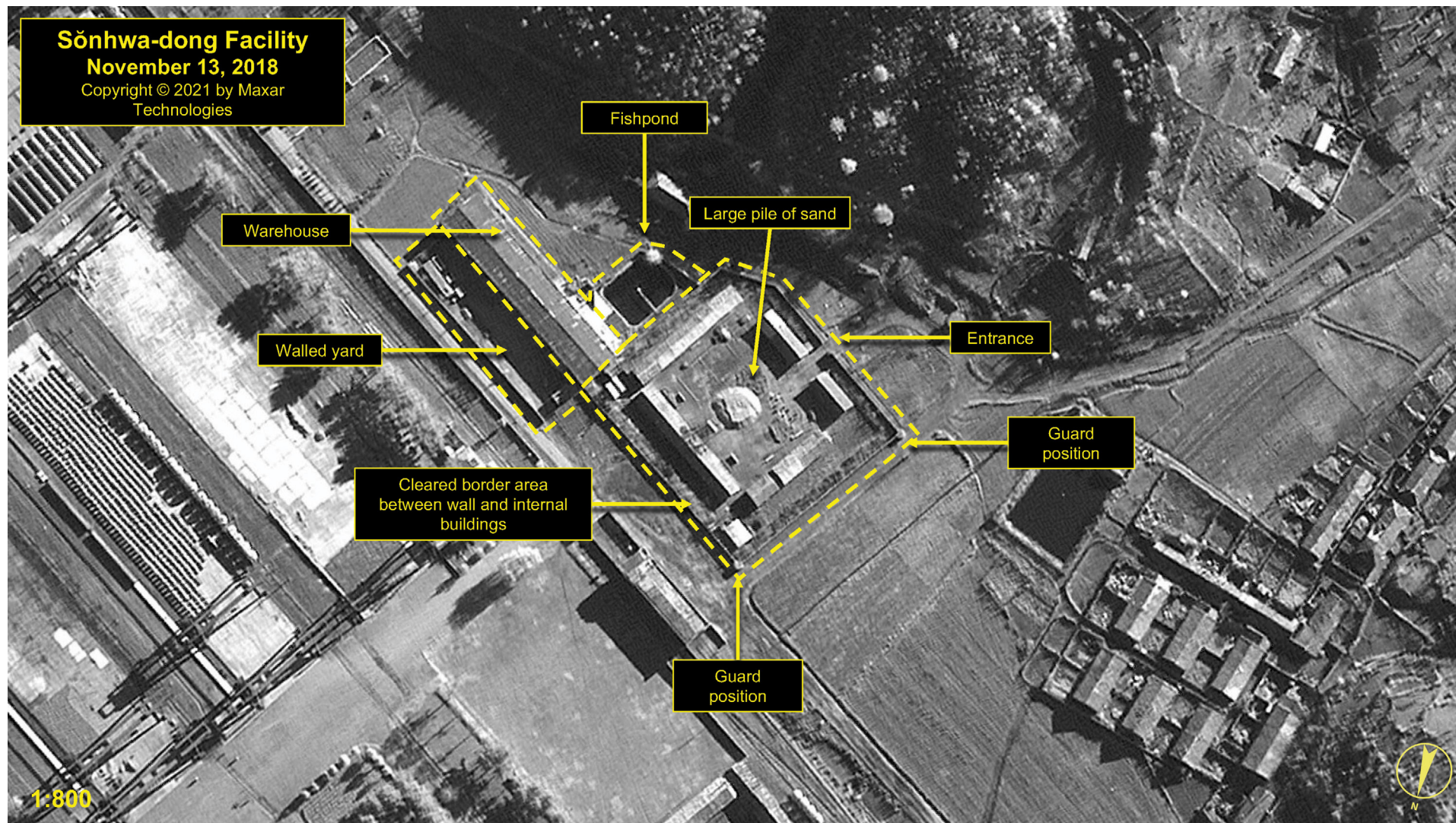
Close-up view of the Sŏnhwa-dong facility acquired on April 6, 2010. Notable in the image is that the guard position on the south corner has been removed and a small shed has been added to the warehouse walled yard.

Figure 8



This is a close-up view of the Sŏnhwa-dong facility as seen on May 5, 2015. A new guard position has been built on the western corner of the compound and a new fishpond has been built on the outside of the southwest perimeter wall.

Figure 9



Close-up view of the Sŏnhwa-dong facility showing that a large pile of sand has been deposited within the center of the compound as seen on November 13, 2018.

Figure 10



Overview of the Sŏnhwa-dong facility and P'ihyŏn Silica Brick Factory as seen on November 13, 2018.

Figure 11



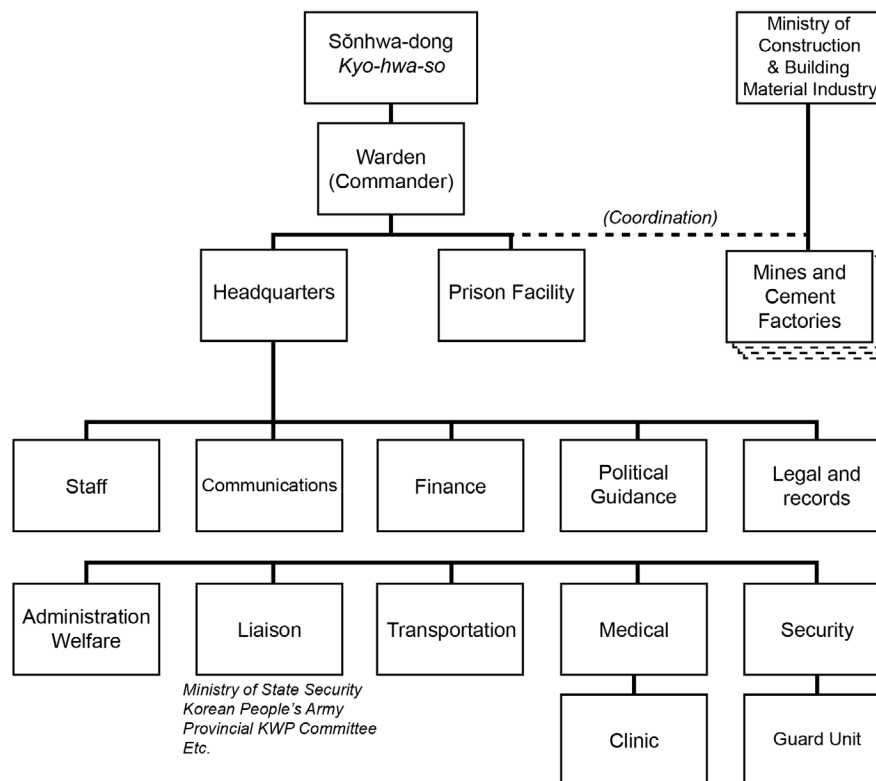
Close-up view of the Sŏnhwa-dong facility as seen on December 12, 2019.

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Taken as a whole, the changes observed between 2002 and 2019 were small and are consistent with what would be expected to be seen at either a small warehouse facility or detention facility.

Organization

The administrative organization of the Sönhwa-dong facility is unknown. Former prisoner testimony from other detention facilities, limited publicly available information, and known North Korean organizational patterns, however, provide a general understanding of the administrative and security organization of a typical *kyo-hwa-so*. It is likely that if the Sönhwa-dong facility is a *kyo-hwa-so*, it would follow a similar, albeit smaller, organizational pattern.



Provisional organization of the Sönhwa-dong facility if it is a *kyo-hwa-so*.

Assessment

At present, HRNK is unable to either confirm or deny whether the facility at Sönhwa-dong identified in this report is a *kyo-hwa-so*. Analysis of high-resolution satellite imagery of the Sönhwa-dong facility and its environs collected between 2002 and 2019 indicates that regardless of function:

It is operational and the grounds, buildings, and work areas appear to be well maintained and in a moderate state of repair.

The facility has undergone minor infrastructure changes since 2002.

Perimeter walls and the main entrance remain well maintained and in good repair.

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What appear to be two guard positions are well positioned to provide overlapping fields-of-view of the facility and are well maintained and in good repair.

If the Sŏnhwa-dong facility is a *kyo-hwa-so*, it is unlikely that its prisoner population exceeds more than 100-150 people given the physical size of the facility and the number of structures present. According to the testimony of former prisoners from other detention facilities who were forced to undertake manufacturing work and build with bricks and concrete, it is likely that any prisoners at Sŏnhwa-dong are suffering not only from daily abuse, malnutrition, and overwork, but also from respiratory complications due to unsafe working conditions.¹⁰

Recommendations

HRNK recommends continued background investigation and ongoing monitoring of the Sŏnhwa-dong facility to either confirm or deny its function as a *kyo-hwa-so*. Until such a determination is

made, this ongoing monitoring should seek to provide a more detailed accounting of its previous operations, develop an objective baseline understanding of its continuing activities, maintain an evidentiary catalog of physical changes at the facility, and update its status. Should the determination be that this is a *kyo-hwa-so*, then every effort should be undertaken to develop evidence of prisoner population size, address any medical conditions related to unsafe working conditions, and assist with the identification of possible human rights abuses.

HRNK calls upon the United Nations and any international organizations or civil society organizations operating near the Sŏnhwa-dong facility to consider the vulnerability of prisoners and incorporate a Human Rights up Front approach when delivering humanitarian aid to North Koreans in need.¹¹

HRNK calls on North Korea to abide by the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treat-

ment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules) and the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Female Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules).

HRNK requests that North Korea “[g]rant immediate, free and unimpeded access to international humanitarian organizations to provide assistance to the most vulnerable groups, including prisoners” as per Ireland’s May 2019 Universal Periodic Review recommendation, which North Korea supported.¹²

Gazetteer

Location	Latitude (N)	Longitude (E)
Sinŭiju (신의주)	40.100556	124.398056
Sŏnhwa-dong (선화동)	40.054167	124.583333
Sŏnhwa-dong facility (선화동 시설)	40.053775	124.580637
Yongch’on (용천)	39.983611	124.463333

Note

HRNK would like to extend a special note of thanks to Allen Anderson for his gracious support of HRNK’s efforts to document North Korea’s prison system and the tragic conditions present within that system.

Endnotes

- 1 UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, A/HRC/25/63, para. 77, February 7, 2014, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/CommissionInquiryonHRinDPRK.aspx> , http://hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/A_HRC_25_63.pdf (hereafter "A/HRC/25/63").
- 2 Previous reports in the project can be found at <https://www.hrnk.org/publications/hrnk-publications.php>.
- 3 The P'ihyŏn Silica Brick Factory was built in 1986 and has often been cited in annual North Korean economic reports. For example, *Yonhap News Agency. North Korea Handbook*, (Armonk, New York: East Gate Book), 2003, 78. "Annual 1987 Budget Plans, 1986 Budget Reviewed, DPRK Finance Minister Budget Report to SPA," *Pyongyang Radio*, April 22, 1987. It should be noted that the term "brick factory" is somewhat misleading in that the P'ihyŏn Silica Brick Factory not only produces concrete and cement blocks but also many other concrete products (e.g., pipes and forms).
- 4 Email correspondence between Amanda Mortwedt Oh and a former Sinuiju resident, April 3–5, 2021.
- 5 The term "high resolution" in this report refers to digital satellite images with a ground sample distance (GSD) of less than 1 meter. The GSD is the distance between pixel centers when measured on the ground. Of the 17 images acquired and analyzed for this report only 7 are present here.
- 6 In this context, the term "roughly even chance" equates to a 50% probability that the assessment is correct.
- 7 Joseph S. Bermudez, Jr., Greg Scarlatoiu, Amanda Mortwedt Oh, & Rosa Park, "North Korea's Chŭngsan No. 11 Detention Facility," December 21, 2020, https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Chŭngsan%20No_%2011%20Detention%20Facility%20Web.pdf.
- 8 According to at least one media report, during early 2020 North Korea has changed the name of the Ministry of People's Security back to its older name of Ministry of Social Security (사회보장부, *Sa-hoe Bo-jang-bu*). This, however, remains to be confirmed. <https://www.nknews.org/2020/06/north-korea-likely-renames-ministry-of-peoples-security/?t=1591178315505>. In this context, the term "almost certainly" equates to a 85-95% probability that the assessment is correct.
- 9 French for «Satellite pour l'Observation de la Terre,» <https://earth.esa.int/eogateway/missions/spot>.
- 10 Lim Soon-hee et al., *White Paper on North Korean Human Rights 2019* (Seoul: Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 2019), 252, 350, and 477.
- 11 "Rights Up Front," May 2014, <http://www.un.org/sg/rightsupfront/doc/RuFAP-summary-General-Assembly.htm>; see also Roberta Cohen, "Must UN Agencies Also Fail in North Korea?," *38 North*, April 21, 2015, https://www.38north.org/2015/04/rcohen042115/#_ftn2.
- 12 Recommendation 126.58. *List of all recommendations made to Democratic People's Republic of Korea and its responses*, Session 33 - May 2019, https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/korea_dpr/session_33_-_may_2019/2rps_dprk.pdf.

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HRNK is the leading U.S.-based bipartisan, non-governmental organization in the field of North Korean human rights research and advocacy, tasked to focus international attention on human rights abuses in that country. It is HRNK's mission to persistently remind policy makers, opinion leaders, and the general public in the free world and beyond that more than 20 million North Koreans need our attention.

Since its establishment in 2001, HRNK has played an important intellectual leadership role on North Korean human rights issues by publishing over 50 major reports (available at <https://hrnk.org/publications/hrnk-publications.php>). HRNK became the first organization to propose that the human rights situation in North Korea be addressed by the UN Security Council. HRNK was directly, actively, and effectively involved in all stages of the process supporting the work of the UN Commission of Inquiry. HRNK has been invited numerous times to provide expert testimony before the U.S. Congress. In April 2018, the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) granted HRNK UN consultative status.

For media inquiries, please contact Executive Director Greg Scarlatoiu at +1 202.499.7973 or by e-mail at executive.director@hrnk.org.

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