



Unusual Activity at the Kanggon Military Training Area in North Korea: Evidence of Execution by Anti-aircraft Machine Guns?

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While examining satellite imagery of an area near the North Korean capital city, the *Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK)* and *AllSource Analysis, Inc. (ASA)* may have come across evidence of a ghastly sight: the public execution of several individuals by anti-aircraft machine gun fire.

A military training area generally known as the Kanggon Military Training Area is located approximately 22 km north of the capital city Pyongyang (Pyongyang-si). Given the size, composition, and location of the training facility, it is likely used by both the students and staff of the elite Kanggon Military Academy (6 km to the southwest) and units from either the Pyongyang Defense Command or the Ministry of State Security. Encompassing approximately 12km², the training area is composed of a number of dispersed small facilities. One of those facilities, located 1.5 km northeast of the small village of Söngi-ri, is a small arms firing range (39. 13 48.64° N, 125. 45 29.03° E). This firing range is approximately 100 meters long by 60 meters wide and consists of 11 firing lanes. A range control/viewing gallery and parking area are located immediately south of the firing range. A small drainage ditch horizontally bisects the firing range. This firing range is typical of many ranges throughout North Korea and is designed for small arms training and maintaining proficiency for weapons ranging from pistols to light machine guns, and chambered for 7.62mm (the standard AK-47 rifle round) or less.

Sometime on or about October 7th, 2014, some very unusual activity was noted on satellite imagery of the Kanggon small arms firing range. Instead of troops occupying the firing positions on the range there was a battery of six ZPU-4 anti-aircraft guns lined up between the firing positions and the range control/viewing gallery. The ZPU-4 is an anti-aircraft gun system consisting of four 14.5mm heavy machine guns (similar to a U.S. .50 caliber heavy machine gun) mounted on a towed wheeled chassis. It is neither safe nor practical to use such weapons on a small arms range, as the combined weight of fire from the six ZPU-4 (a total of 24 heavy machine guns) would quickly destroy the downrange backstop and necessitate reconstruction. A few meters behind the ZPU-4s there appears to be either a line of troops or equipment, while farther back are five trucks (of various sizes), one large trailer, and one bus. This suggests that senior officers or VIPs may have come to observe whatever activity was taking place. Most unusual in the image, perhaps, is what appears to be some sort of targets located only 30 meters downrange of the ZPU-4s.

The satellite image appears to have been taken moments before an execution by ZPU-4 anti-aircraft machine guns. Busing in senior officers or VIPs to observe a ZPU-4 dry-fire training exercise at a small arms range amidst North Korea's fuel shortages would make no sense. If the ZPU-4s were brought to the range solely to be sighted in, conducting this exercise at a 100 meter small arms firing range would be impractical. A live-fire exercise would be even more nonsensical. Rounds fired by a ZPU-4 have a range of 8,000 m and can reach a maximum altitude of 5,000 m. Positioning a battery of six ZPU-4s to fire horizontally at targets situated only 30 m downrange could have no conceivable utility from a military viewpoint. The most plausible explanation of the scene captured in the October 7th satellite image is a gruesome public execution. Anyone who has witnessed the damage one single U.S. .50 caliber round does to the human body will shudder just trying to imagine a battery of 24 heavy machine guns being fired at human beings. Bodies would be nearly pulverized. The gut-wrenching viciousness of such an act would make "cruel and unusual punishment" sound like a gross understatement.

Given reports of past executions this is tragic, but unfortunately plausible in the twisted world of Kim Jong-un's North Korea. In December 2013, following the execution of the leader's uncle Jang Song-thaek, Choe Sang-Hun and David Sanger reported for *The New York Times* that Jang Song-thaek's top two lieutenants had been executed using anti-aircraft machine guns.¹ In the summer of 2013, South Korean intelligence officials

¹ Choe Sang-Hun and David Sanger, *Korea Execution Is Tied to Clash Over Business*, THE NEW YORK TIMES, Dec. 23, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/24/world/asia/north-korea-purge.html?_r=0.

and news media reported that purged North Korean artists had been executed using the same gruesome method.

The purge that began in early 2009, as the regime began preparing for the second hereditary transmission of power, continues. On April 29th, 2015, Associated Press reported that, according to South Korean intelligence sources quoted by ROK National Assemblyman Shin Kyoung-min, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un ordered the execution of 15 senior officials this year. According to Assemblyman Shin, the officials were accused of challenging the supreme leader's authority. One of them, a vice Cabinet minister, "was executed in January for questioning Kim's policies on forestation."²

On April 13th, 2015, Dr. Stephan Haggard and HRNK board member Marcus Noland (Executive Vice President and Director of Studies, Peterson Institute for International Economics) drew attention to a quotation from *New Focus International* in a *North Korea: Witness to Transformation* article.³ *New Focus* indicated that, following instructions received from the top leadership, North Korea's State Security Department (SSD) and Ministry of People's Security (MPS) launched the so-called "9.8 measures" in the fall of 2014. The measures involved the further "militarization of State Security and People's Security," so that surveillance, control, coercion, and punishment could be carried out more effectively.

Some of the directives in this new, broad initiative included the following:

"'[M]ost criminals who are forgiven are likely to commit another crime'... 'the time has come when words are not enough. The sound of gunshot must accompany the destruction of impure and hostile elements, and when necessary, public executions are to be used so that the masses come to their senses.'" According to *New Focus*, the directives allegedly ratified the following clause, seemingly instigating extra-judicial killings: "If an anti-regime act is uncovered, State Security soldiers are to judge and execute by gunfire of their own accord, and afterwards file a report on the person and crime to Pyongyang."⁴

2 Associated Press. *S. Korea Says Kim Jong Un Executed 15 Officials This Year*. Story relayed in, THE NEW YORK TIMES, Apr. 29, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/04/29/world/asia/ap-as-koreas-tension.html?_r=0.

3 New Focus International, *North Korea's State Security and People's Security Ministries Implement '9.8 Measures'*, New Focus International, Apr. 12, 2015, <http://newfocusintl.com/exclusive-north-koreas-state-security-and-peoples-security-ministries-implement-9-8-measures/>.

4 Stephan Haggard, *Slave to the Blog: Trojan Horse Edition, Witness to Transformation* (blog), Apr. 13, 2015, <http://blogs.piie.com/nk/?p=14032>.

If true, the “9.8 measures” instructing agents of the state to shoot to kill fellow North Koreans constitute a flagrant violation of Article 6, Paragraph 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which stipulates that “no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his life.”⁵ Furthermore, public execution by way of heavy machine gun fire is arguably a violation of ICCPR Article 7, which states, in part, “No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”⁶ North Korea acceded to the ICCPR in 1981.⁷ In its 2014 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea, the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) notes that public executions have been reportedly more frequent in North Korea since the late 2009 confiscatory currency reform.⁸ KINU further anticipates that this trend is not likely to subside in the near future, due to “the tightening of internal control under Kim Jong-un’s regime.”⁹

The report of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (UN COI) established that, “as a matter of State policy, the authorities carry out executions, with or without trial, publicly or secretly, in response to political and other crimes that are often not among the most serious crimes.”¹⁰ The UN COI report further determined that the policy of regularly carrying out public executions serves to instill fear in the general population.”¹¹ The report, released in February 2014, noted that, as of late 2013, “there appeared to be a spike in the number of politically motivated public executions.”¹² Public executions are one of the dreadful tools employed in the implementation of the Kim Jong-un regime’s “fearpolitik.”¹³

5 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 6, <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>.

6 *Id.* at Article 7.

7 OHCHR, *Status of Ratification: Interactive Dashboard*, <http://indicators.ohchr.org/>.

8 Han Dong-ho et al., 2014 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea, *Korea Institute of National Unification (KINU)*, 115, http://www.kinu.or.kr/eng/pub/pub_04_01.jsp?bid=DATA04&page=1&num=40&mode=view&category=.

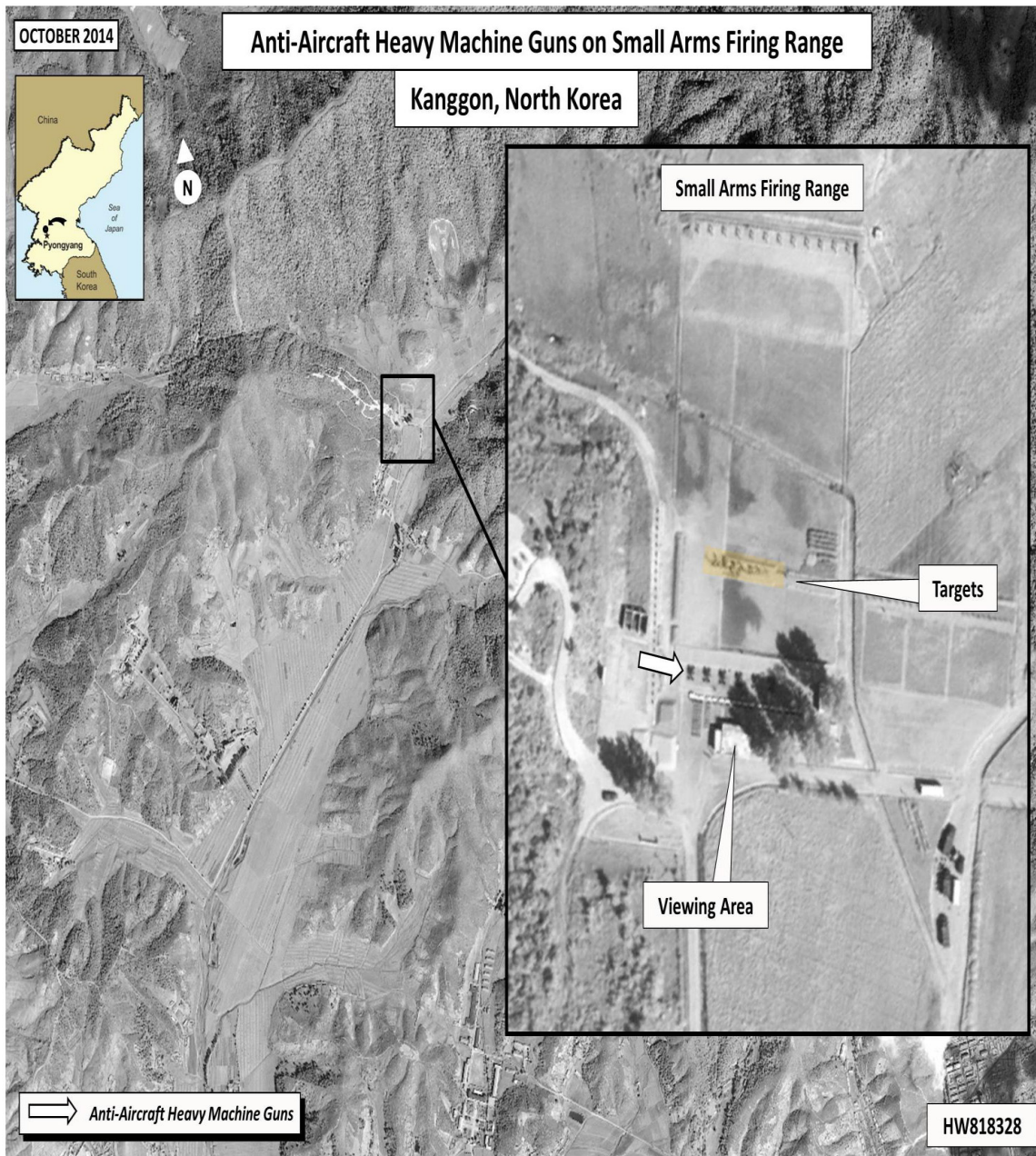
9 *Id.* at 26.

10 *Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea*, UN Human Rights Council, 25th sess., Agenda Item 4, UN Doc. A/HRC/25/63, p. 12, para. 63 (7 February 2014), available at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/ReportoftheCommissionofInquiryDPRK.aspx> (hereinafter “COI Report”).

11 *Id.*

12 *Id.*

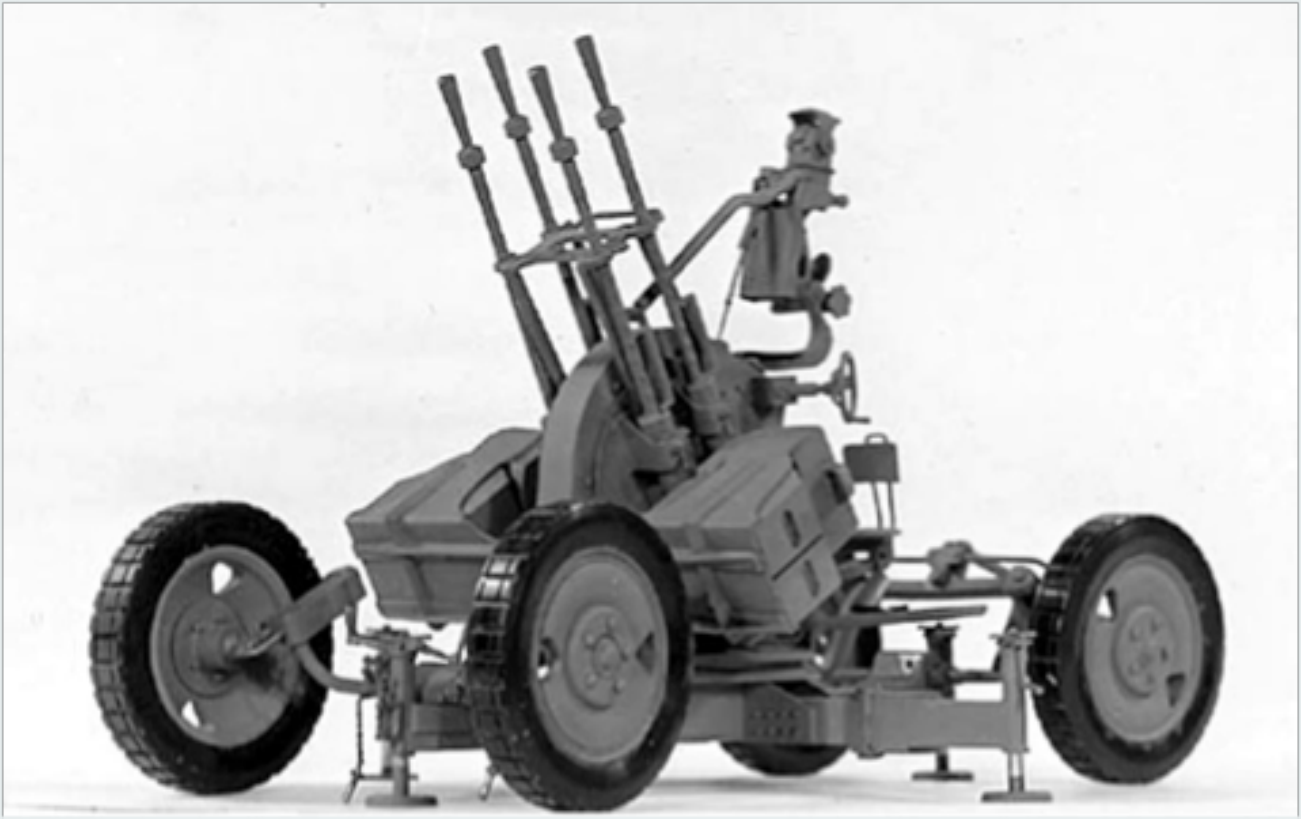
13 Voice of America (VOA), *North Korea Human Rights Outlook for 2014... ‘Concerning of Political Camps Expansion and Reign of Terror,’* HRNK Insider, Jan. 3, 2014, http://www.hrnkinsider.org/2014_01_01_archive.html.



The small map inserted at the top left corner shows the location of the site in the image. It is located on the outskirts of Pyongyang. The larger background image is a photo of the site and its surroundings. The inset on the right side of the image is a close up of the small arms range showing the viewing area, the anti-aircraft heavy machine guns in front of the viewing area, and targets on the range.



Kanggon Small Arms Firing Range, October 16th, 2014, ZPU-4 systems or targets not present. (© DigitalGlobe 2015)



ZPU-4 Anti-aircraft Machine Gun System (Photo credit: U.S. Army)