

[RFA Exclusive Interview] Roberta Cohen “North Korea represses news of sanctions on Kim Jong-un to block criticism of his legitimacy.”

Washington – Byun Chang-seop (pyonc@rfa.org)

[Image]

(Caption) Pyongyang: The Korean Central News Agency reported from Kim Il-sung square on July 2 for the ceremony for Kim Jong-un’s induction as the Leader of the Supreme People’s Assembly, part of the national induction convention.

RFA Anchor: The US recently instituted the first sanctions against North Korea Worker’s Party Chairman Kim Jong-un for his human rights violations, but the party has yet to inform the citizens of this news, and is thoroughly restricting related information. Roberta Cohen, an American North Korea human rights activist, interprets these information restrictions as a desperate countermeasure by Kim to block any criticism that would undermine his legitimacy. At this time, we will listen to this expert’s views on this issue during our exclusive interview with Cohen, who is Co-Chair Emeritus of the US non-profit organization Committee for Human Rights in North Korea. Byun Chang-seop reporting.

RFA Reporter: After the US implemented sanctions for human rights violations on fifteen individuals and eight organizations within North Korea, including Kim Jong-un, just two days later North Korea criticized the US in a statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But North Korea has yet to convey this news to its citizens. Why would that be?

Cohen: First, if you look at North Korea’s statement criticizing the US for this action, it says at least three times that Kim Jong-un, the supreme leader’s “dignity” has been hurt. Clearly, those in power in North Korea can not accept the fact that Kim Jong-un has been identified as a “human rights violator” by the USA. That is because being branded a human rights violator means that Supreme Leader Kim’s legitimacy, not to mention that of the North Korean government, has been called into question. During this past May’s Seventh Party Congress and at the meeting of the Supreme People’s Assembly, Kim Jong-un has worked to consolidate his power. He has been inducted as the Worker’s Party Chairman and leader of the Supreme People’s Assembly, and has risen to the top, overseeing the military parades and announcing political policy, but then the US

sanctioned him as an egregious human rights violator. The North Korean government fears that if they inform their citizens of this news it will work to undermine Kim's legitimacy.

RFA Reporter: But if you look at the report, North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs Center for US-Studies researcher Jung Nam-hyeok criticized the US sanctions on Kim for his human rights violations, calling the measures "nonsensical" because the Obama administration implemented them while former US president George W. Bush did not.

Cohen: I don't see it that way. The UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea released a report in 2014 stating that North Korea had committed egregious human rights violations at the government level. When the report, which was based on the testimony of over three hundred defectors and experts as well as related materials, was made public, the North Korean human rights problem was added to the agenda of the UN Security Council, and 120 member states of the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution recommending that North Korean personnel guilty of human rights violations be referred to the International Criminal Court. At that point the stage was set for all nations, including the USA, to take action with regards to North Korea's human rights problem. As stated in the UN report, it has become an internationally-known fact that North Korea is a country with a human rights record unparalleled in the contemporary world.

RFA Reporter: This news agency, citing a North Korean domestic news broadcast, found that according to the contents of July 13th's report, after the USA's recent actions, secret instructions were passed down to key government agencies explicitly forbidding human rights violations. Reading this, it seems that even the North Korean government is paying attention to these human rights sanctions, does it not?

Cohen: Actually, since the UN Commission of Inquiry on North Korean Human Rights report came out two years ago, we've been receiving intermittent reports that North Korea is being careful in some of its practices. For example, forced abortions in prisons and systematic torture in kyowhaso prisons may have been reduced. Of course, there is no way to confirm these reports, but as you have said, after the presentation of the most recent US sanctions on high-ranking North Korean persons, especially Kim Jong-un, if it is true, it is very interesting that the North Korean government would have passed down such instructions. At the same time, while the US announced the targets of the new sanctions, defectors were reported to be executed along the Sino-Korean border. In the

future, the North Korean state security agents participating in these kinds of acts might think twice.

RFA Reporter: Do you mean to say that while North Korea presents a tough, defiant exterior, domestically they are taking the new sanctions seriously?

Cohen: I think that is correct. In 2014, when the UN General Assembly denounced North Korea's human rights violations and passed the resolution recommending that those responsible, including high-ranking leaders, be referred to the International Criminal Court, we began to see the first indications that North Korea was responding. At this time North Korea did not know how to react to the international community's attacks on its human rights violations and was very apprehensive. I think that at that time, perhaps North Korea's middle- and high-ranking officials began to think about their future when their human rights violations appeared in the UN human rights report and accountability was raised. In other words, these officials will have to think about the fact that their human rights violations might well be in violation of international law, that they may come before a court and that there is no guarantee of the continuity of the North Korean regime.

RFA Reporter: So in that regard, this kind of pressure on North Korean human rights might be the most effective means of pressuring North Korea?

Cohen: I see it that way. North Korea, which had been indifferent to the international community's criticism of its human rights record for many years, was made to react by this very form of pressure on human rights. After the UN passed the very first resolution on North Korean human rights in 2004, it continued to do so each year. But when in 2014 the UN General Assembly resolution called for referral of North Korea's own leader Kim Jong-un to the International Criminal Court for human rights violations, the pressure was felt for the first time and we saw the first reactions.

Thank you for your interview. This was Roberta Cohen, US Committee for Human Rights in North Korea Co-Chair Emeritus.

Translation by Chris Buchman, HRNK consultant