

Promoting North Korean Human Rights: What the Free World Can Do

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Thank you Emanuele for that introduction. It's an honor to be here at the Transatlantic Institute to discuss the steps that can be taken to promote the human rights of the North Korean people. The work you do here at Transatlantic to foster the relationship among the nations of the West is commendable. I also want to acknowledge and thank my friend Willy Fautre of Human Rights Without Frontiers. I have come to know him and his colleagues as tireless and effective advocates for important freedom causes around the globe.

The topic for our discussion is what can be done about North Korean human rights. With North Korea, there is so much attention paid to nuclear issue that often human rights gets only a passing mention. Many people are generally aware that North Korea is a closed-off nation where human rights are abused systematically. But what exactly are we dealing with?

North Korea is quite literally a land of darkness. Many people say that proverbially about countries whose regimes have brought about profound misery or human rights abuses. But with North Korea it is literally true. If you look at aerial pictures of northeast Asia at night, you see lights across Japan, northern China and South Korea—a basic symbol of the modernity and ever-expanding prosperity of that region. In North Korea, there is but a tiny, dim dot on the capital of Pyongyang. The rest of the country lies in complete darkness. North Korea's borders are some of the few political boundaries of the world that you can literally see from space.

What goes on behind that veil? In our annual human rights report, the State Department documents some of the more pronounced usurpations of the rights of North Korean citizens. The government there engages in extrajudicial killings, and is responsible for disappearances and arbitrary detention. Prisoners in North Korea face life-threatening conditions, torture, forced abortions and infanticide. There is a complete denial of fair trial, freedom of speech, press, and assembly. The practice of faith and religious belief is suppressed. There is no freedom of movement or emigration. Prisoners are sentenced to death for such ill-defined offenses as "ideological divergence," "opposing socialism," and "counterrevolutionary crimes." The list goes on and on.

One particularly grim feature is the sprawling network of political concentration camps within the country. It is estimated that they may hold as many as 200,000 North Koreans. Some people are there for no reason other than being related to someone accused of disloyalty. Many of these prisoners are not expected to survive their internment.

Another particularly disturbing feature of North Korea is the complete control of information exercised by the regime and the cult of personality maintained around the dictator and self-titled "Dear Leader" Kim Jong Il, and his father, who remains "Eternal Leader" despite the impediment of being deceased. As documented in a report by the U.S. Committee for International Religious Freedom, the first phrase North Korean parents are expected to teach their children is "thank you father Kim Il Sung." Everything good in North Korea—no matter how small—is typically attributed to the Kims. The regime churns out propaganda so strident and improbable it would make the likes of a Leni Riefenstahl blush. It is worth taking a look at the Korean Central News Agency—or KCNA—which translates the regime's news into English on the web, if for no other reason to glimpse rhetoric not otherwise seen since the darker days of the early Cold War.

In seeking to resolve disagreements including those over human rights, European governments often put a premium on dialogue. We too often seek dialogue with governments that do not recognize or respect the inalienable rights of their citizens. But it should be noted that this has been a challenge with North Korea. For example, the aforementioned KCNA made the following pronouncement in June after Special Envoy Lefkowitz submitted his annual report to our Congress:

"A spate of rhetoric heard from the U.S., a centre of plot-breeding, fraud and swindle, do not deserve even a passing note, but there is the need to let the world community know clearly about the U.S. sinister aim lurking behind the nonsensical malarkey let loose by this guy in view of its crafty and serious nature. Lefkowitz's efforts are futile. The DPRK has remained a bulwark of socialism and emerged ever-victorious despite all kinds of obstructions on the part of the U.S. as it has held fast to the banner of Songun, the banner of independence and dignity as an invincible treasured sword."

In order to have the prospect of being effective, a human rights dialogue has to take place among two or more willing partners that recognize the legitimacy of the issue. As the statement I just read indicates, the North Korean government has yet to demonstrate it has reached this level. We of course hope the government does come to see that beginning to recognize the human rights of its citizens is a necessary step, and one that is in its interest. As Special Envoy Lefkowitz has said, this a prerequisite for the international community to view this government as legitimate. U.S. officials at many levels have also stated that human rights will have to be part of any dialogue on the normalization of relations between North Korea and the U.S.

In the mean time, the free world should pursue various means at its disposal to help the people of North Korea achieve the inalienable human rights to which they are entitled. I will speak more on this in just a moment.

First however, there is the issue of why the free world should take an interest in this at all. Speaking at the APEC summit in Sydney last month, President Bush said: "We must work for the day when the people of North Korea enjoy the same freedoms as the citizens of their democratic neighbors."

Why is that? Well, first of all, we believe that achieving human rights-helping other people to get their governments to recognize their own inalienable rights, which we view as their birthright from the Creator-is a worthy end in and of itself. But quite frankly human rights is also a means to other ends: namely enhanced security and peace.

Special Envoy Lefkowitz discussed why we believe this last month at Yale University: "Government conduct at home also influences its conduct toward other nations. With the maximum dictators of the 20th century-Hitler, Stalin and Mao-the march of tyranny at home was an antecedent to international aggression. Even repressive regimes without stated ambitions of conquest and expansion cause problems for their neighbors. For example, the illegitimate, unelected junta that runs Burma, in addition to creating an economic and humanitarian black hole in the heart of Southeast Asia, has caused a refugee crisis that puts serious strains on its neighbors. Its presence also contributes to a community of repressive nations that today cooperate with China in preserving an illiberal model of government that does not seek its citizens' consent to govern. Dictatorships therefore threaten security by their very being. Their arsenals are simply the most visible means of such a threat; the root cause of the threat is actually their illiberal nature-prone to violence at home and abroad. For this reason, making human rights part of our national security agenda is not only an appropriate policy, but also a necessary one."

In other words, the U.S. champions the aspirations of freedom of those abroad because it has been a part of our heritage since our founding. But it is also a calculated means to advance our national security interests-and those of our democratic allies.

Now-more on what specifically we and others in the free world are doing-and of which we all could perhaps do more. First and foremost, we seek to build an international consensus on the North Korean human rights situation. Much of this comes down to getting out the word on what we believe to be happening in North Korea, and also what is happening to North Koreans in China and elsewhere.

This can be accomplished through a number of mechanisms. At the United Nations, we have supported actions that spotlight North Korean human rights abuses. Last week, in the General Assembly's human rights committee, a resolution on North Korea was tabled. As in past years, it was proposed by the European Union. These resolutions have passed with good margins in years past, and we hope to see support grow again this year. Last year, we were pleased to see South Korea vote to condemn North Korean human rights abuses-ending its past practice of abstaining from those resolutions. This was a key development, and we hope South Korea will continue to take into account issues of human rights and governance when formulating policy toward its neighbor.

Another pillar of our strategy is to take active steps to help empower the people of North Korea directly-for it is they who must ultimately bring about change. Given the closed nature of North Korea, the most promising feasible method of doing this is through radio broadcasting. Veterans of repressive regimes in Eastern Europe and elsewhere have spoken of the positive effect that accurate information from the free world had on them. President Bush met with a North Korean defector who though his position in the army was able to listen to foreign broadcasts. It was this method of obtaining information that caused an awakening in him and led him to seek freedom. One consequence of the regime's control of information and improbable message is that it takes but a glimpse of the outside world and reality to open eyes to the truth about North Korea.

Radio broadcasts overseen by the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors, such as the Korean services of Radio Free Asia and Voice of America have received significant increases in funding over the past couple of years. We have also sought to obtain resources for the growing number of independent groups that transmit information into North Korea. These 'journalists with a cause' are quite effective at communicating with North Koreans. Some of the broadcasters are themselves defectors from the North. Supporting independent efforts like this is a possible method by which European governments and institutions could contribute to North Korean human rights.

The third pillar of our approach is seeking to assist refugees in reaching safety. Many thousands of North Koreans have fled to China, especially beginning after a famine in the mid-90s, which is believed to have killed 1-2 million North Koreans. There are still many North Koreans in China. Exact numbers unknown. Many have a well founded fear of persecution if forcibly repatriated to North Korea. They are unable to appeal to authorities in China and some of the other countries where they are present-making them susceptible to exploitation, such as being trafficked into servitude, or blackmailed. Some countries in the region treat them humanely. Others do not. We continue to press China to abide by its obligations under the UN refugee protocol is signed. To date, it has not, and instead prohibits the High Commissioner for Refugees from accessing and protecting the vulnerable population.

European nations have a good record of speaking out about human rights abuses, even when they occur in far-away places like North Korea. But more can always be done, especially at higher levels of government. We should all be frank about the North Korean human rights situation.

When government leaders speak clearly about human rights, it can help those in repressive countries immensely.

A recent example of this has occurred over the past several months, with separate meetings between the leaders of Canada, Germany and the U.S. and the Dalai Lama-a widely revered spiritual figure. These meetings proceeded despite intense criticism from the Chinese government. The three leaders were willing to sustain this criticism in order to signal the importance they place in a key human rights issue.

The effect on those striving for freedom was significant and beneficial. After the President met with the Dalai Lama and awarded him the Congressional Gold Medal, the *Independent* quoted a Tibetan saying: "In our hearts we were so happy, we just went out into the streets to celebrate. We saw it on TV, the government didn't know. We were very, very glad."

When leaders of free nations take the time to signal their support for human rights movements-to meet with leaders of the movements-it can have a powerful effect. Often, it is a great shot in the arm for those working peacefully for change in repressive nations.

That is our approach to advancing the human rights of the North Korean people. We hope European nations continue to take interest in this important moral and security issue, and consider joining some of the specific efforts we support. This is important not just because of the moral imperative to help one of the most abused populations of people in the world today. It is also critical to advancing the peace and security of a key region, where events tend to impact countries as far away as the Americas and Europe. Governments that do not respect the rights of their citizens are highly unlikely to respect the rights of their neighbors. By advancing this human rights effort and others like it, we enhance the prospects of peace and security.