

Seoul supports UN probe of North Korean human rights abuses

South Korea's new president reverses pledges of softer line on Pyongyang, damaging chances of closer engagement

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South Korea's President Park Geun-hye – she had vowed to soften policy towards North Korea. Photograph: Lee Jae-Won/AP

[South Korea](#)'s decision to support a [United Nations](#) investigation into human rights abuses by [North Korea](#) signals that Seoul's new conservative administration is willing to pressure its neighbour on such issues – even if it hurts the chances for engagement.

South Korea's pledge last week to give "active" support to the investigation came just two days after the inauguration of President Park Geun-hye and is likely to infuriate the North, which views discussion of its human rights as a "grave violation". Seoul struggled with the decision, which forced a choice between two key goals: restoring civil relations with Pyongyang, and pressing its government to improve the treatment of its 24 million people.

The South's commitment, announced by Seoul's deputy foreign minister for global affairs at a UN Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva, is significant because the South has influence over global policymaking on North Korea. With South Korea's support, the investigation is all but assured of passage when the resolution is put up for a vote next month among member states of the Human Rights Council, rights advocates say.

The minister, Kim Bong-hyun, said conditions in North Korea have "continued to deteriorate", according to a release from Seoul's ministry of foreign affairs and trade. South Korea has typically kept quiet about the North's rights abuses, to the frustration of more than 20,000 defectors who live in the South. That changed somewhat in the last five years under former president Lee Myung-bak, but Lee faced consequences for his harder-line stance, with Pyongyang twice launching fatal attacks on the South.

On the campaign trail, Park had vowed to soften policy toward the North, raising the prospect of limited economic engagement and meetings between officials from Seoul and Pyongyang. Such ties had been severed under Lee. Many activists had presumed that South Korea's government would not publicly back the so-called Commission of Inquiry (COI), and would instead signal its support in unpublicised meetings with other member nations, and then vote "yes". The US and Japan have also said they are in favour of the probe. The COI, if it wins majority approval from the 47 council member nations, would mark a major shift in attention paid to human rights in North Korea by the UN, which currently has only one person, working on a voluntary basis, to document the issue.

The new UN inquiry would establish a panel of experts who would interview witnesses, document abuses and help formally establish whether the North's government is committing crimes against humanity. In January, Navi Pillay, the UN human rights chief, said in a statement that such an investigation was "long overdue", particularly because there was no sign of improvement under the third-generation leader Kim Jong-eun.

According to government documents, reports from human rights groups and survivor testimony, North Koreans have virtually no right to political or religious freedom. As many as 200,000 are in political prison camps, often sent there for activities – such as selling daily products or criticising leadership – that in most countries would be considered ordinary.

The South, rights advocates say, has particular reason for concern about how the North treats its people. Several hundred who survived the gulags now live in the South.

In addition, North Korea abducted thousands of foreigners, the majority of them South Koreans who were taken by agents of Pyongyang in the decades after a 1953 armistice was signed to end the Korean war. About 86% of those abductees were eventually returned, leaving 517 still unaccounted for, according to the Seoul-based Korea Institute for National Unification, a government-funded think tank.

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