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For North Koreans in the Gulag, a Glimmer of Hope at the U.N.

Despite Google Earth and satellite imagery, the Pyongyang regime still denies the existence of its vast gulag.

By Jared Genser and Kristen Abrams

With the world focused on North Korea's latest nuclear test and the young dictator Kim Jong Eun's claiming the right to launch "pre-emptive nuclear attack," Thursday's United Nations Human Rights Council vote establishing a U.N. commission of inquiry into possible "crimes against humanity" in the repressive totalitarian state went largely unnoticed.

But not by us. Two years ago, in September 2011, the International Coalition to Stop Crimes Against Humanity in North Korea, a group of more than 40 nongovernmental organizations, launched an effort to hold Pyongyang accountable. Navanethem Pillay, The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, supported our call for an independent inquiry, as did the U.S., the European Union, Japan and South Korea.

The need for such an inquiry couldn't be clearer. North Korea is one of history's worst human-rights and humanitarian disasters. The Kim regime holds as many as 200,000 people in a vast gulag known as the *kwan-li-so*. Under the guilt-by-association system established more than 50 years ago during the dictatorship of Kim Il Sung (Kim Jong Eun's grandfather), real and imagined dissenters and their relatives are punished through backbreaking labor, starvation and sexual violence. Those who get sick are isolated and left without treatment to die. Those who run afoul of the stringent camp rules are tortured or executed.

Despite abundant evidence about the *kwan-li-so*—including satellite imagery from Google Earth that has enabled escapees to corroborate their testimonies—North Korea has long denied the existence of these camps. It has also refused to come clean about its abductions of foreign nationals, especially South Koreans and Japanese.

North Korean Ambassador So Se Pyoung recently told the U.N. Human Rights Council that efforts to hold his government accountable are based on "faked material . . . invented by hostile forces, defectors, and other rabbles." Yet Pyongyang refuses to speak with credible interlocutors such as Marzuki Darusman, the U.N.'s Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in North Korea, or to abide by numerous resolutions urging the end of North Korea's abuses.

While the establishment of a U.N. commission of inquiry is a positive step, there is still a long way to go to assure that it is done properly. First, the U.N. needs to allocate sufficient resources

to conduct a credible investigation and press the North Koreans to provide access to the country. Second, the commission will need to examine the mountain of evidence that has already been gathered and to interview victims, thousands of whom have escaped to South Korea. And finally, based on a legal analysis of the evidence, the commission will need to think creatively about its specific recommendations to the Human Rights Council and U.N. system more broadly. Such recommendations could include proposing that the secretary-general appoint a special representative to North Korea focused on human-rights matters, urging North Korea provide open access for humanitarian relief, or even, if warranted, asking the Security Council to refer the situation to the International Criminal Court for prosecution of crimes against humanity.

While skeptics will note that North Korea cannot be compelled to cooperate with this inquiry, Pyongyang now stands alone on its human-rights record. Thursday's resolution was unanimously passed by the 47 member states on the U.N. Human Rights Council. In the past year, not a single U.N. member called for a vote to challenge resolutions criticizing North Korea's record. Even China, which has long defended Pyongyang in the U.N., has stood aside.

Prior U.N. commissions of inquiry in such places as Yugoslavia, Darfur and Cambodia have had a wide range of important results—from the creation of special tribunals to investigate international crimes, to the referral of matters to the International Criminal Court.

Of course, there is no guaranteed outcome here—of the investigation, of the commission's ultimate recommendations, or of their prospects for adoption. But in a place as dark and hopeless as North Korea, its suffering people—at least those lucky enough to learn of it despite state censorship and then whisper it to friends—will welcome the newfound sense of urgency for action.

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