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A New Focus on North Korean Human Rights

A concerted effort is needed to change the nature of the regime.

Navi Pillay finally spoke a truth that hid in plain sight for decades. On Monday, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights declared North Korea's abuse of its own citizens "deplorable" and "long overdue" for investigation on grounds of crimes against humanity.

This is important because the U.N., the U.S. and other nations have treated the ongoing atrocities in the North as mere distractions from stopping its nuclear weapons and missile programs. But those threats can't be resolved until the regime either changes fundamentally or falls. That's why the bribes paid by the international community to get the North to suspend its weapons programs have been ineffective, while propping up the Kim family and prolonging the agony of the North Korean people.

The U.N. appointed a special rapporteur on North Korea in 2004, and some useful information has been collected. However, the Human Rights Council and its predecessor, the Commission on Human Rights, have so far failed to take the next step, a commission of inquiry. That's because the U.N. bodies tasked with defending human rights have been dominated by the chief offenders, who naturally vote to protect each other.

The good news is that the UNHRC session opening next month in Geneva offers a window of opportunity. Countries can only serve on the council for two three-year terms before they must step down for at least a year, which means that China, Russia and Cuba, three of Pyongyang's defenders, don't have a vote.

The International Coalition to Stop Crimes Against Humanity in North Korea, made up of activist groups, has lobbied for a commission of inquiry for more than a year. They say that an investigation will give a voice to victims, particularly escapees from the system of concentration camps believed to house more than 200,000 political prisoners. Thousands

of defectors have made their way to South Korea in recent years, enabling the U.N. to piece together the dismal reality of life in North Korea.

The most important impact of this process could be to change the behavior of humanitarian aid donors. The North has been expert at playing off well-meaning governments and agencies against each other, meaning that even when South Korea or the U.S. have stopped shipments because of Pyongyang's behavior, other sources of aid have filled the shortfall. It's no wonder that the North feels free to continue its domestic repression and external saber-rattling with impunity.

Once a U.N. commission issues its report and pressure builds to indict North Korean leaders for crimes against humanity, it should be easier to reach consensus to tighten sanctions and make aid conditional on concrete goals such as the closure of forced-labor camps. Not only should these reforms have an appreciable impact on North Koreans' lives, the increasing flow of information into North Korea means news of the initiatives will filter in, giving hope to those who are still suffering.

The North Korean elite has been almost impervious to sanctions and other outside pressure because they earn enough through nuclear blackmail, humanitarian aid and trade of goods produced with forced labor to perpetuate the system. Meanwhile, a large proportion of the population must work like slaves under almost unimaginable conditions. Cut off the outside income that supports the elite until conditions improve for the regime's victims and the Kims would finally find themselves in the difficult position of having to change in order to survive.

A push for civil liberties in Pyongyang may seem like the definition of quixotic, and it won't transform the regime overnight. But Ms. Pillay's call for an investigation is a rare case of the U.N. exercising moral leadership. If it becomes the cornerstone of a new international strategy toward North Korea, it could produce small changes that lead to big ones.