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## Ignoring North Korea's Gulags

A U.N. Human Rights Council inquiry is a needed first step.

By Jared Genser

As Americans celebrate President Obama's second inaugural and Martin Luther King Jr. Day — events that symbolize the power of human freedom and perseverance against oppression — for many others such freedom is a distant dream. Among the most repressive countries in the world, North Korea holds as many as 200,000 people in the vast gulag system known as the kwan-li-so. Under the guilt-by-association system established during the dictatorship of Kim Il Sung more than 50 years ago, real and imagined dissenters and as many as three generations of their relatives are punished to eliminate “the seeds” of bad families. Those imprisoned have almost no hope for release, and it is nearly impossible to escape the camps, meaning these people are almost guaranteed to die as prisoners. Over the past few decades, hundreds of thousands have perished, the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea estimates.

But for the first time in recent memory, there is reason to hope that the world might finally take notice. In a clarion call for action, the U.N. high commissioner for human rights, Navanethem Pillay, last week urged the establishment of an independent international inquiry into the mass-atrocity crimes taking place in North Korea.

In the gulag, prisoners are subjected to backbreaking labor, torture, sexual violence and severe malnutrition. Men, women and children are forced to labor in dangerous work environments for up to 16 hours per day. They are given meager rations of corn gruel for food and often eat rats or pick through animal waste for survival. Even though illnesses such as pneumonia and tuberculosis run rampant in the camps, no medical treatment is available. Instead, prisoners are forced to work while sick, and those who are no longer physically able to work are sent to sanatoriums to die. Those who do not abide by the stringent camp rules are tortured or executed. The gulag is a systematic and organized network of concentration camps whose ultimate purpose is to starve and work its prisoners to death. The world also has yet to know the fate of numerous Japanese, South Korean and other foreign nationals abducted by North Korea over the past several decades.

There is a rare window for meaningful action when the U.N. Human Rights Council opens its new session next month. Over the past decade, this body and its predecessor, the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, have adopted annual and ineffectual resolutions on the human rights situation in North Korea. But this year, Pyongyang won't have the votes of China, Russia and Cuba, three of North Korea's biggest defenders; they had to step off the council after serving the maximum of two three-year terms without a break.

To be clear, even if the council establishes a commission of inquiry, that will be no panacea for challenges facing the people of North Korea. But having an independent and impartial group of experts under the U.N. rubric issue a highly detailed report and recommendations for action is a critical step that will make inaction much more difficult.

Almost 70 years ago, toward the end of World War II, the United States opted not to bomb the train tracks to Auschwitz. This decision came despite pleas to stop the largest concentration camp complex of the Nazi regime, which killed more than 1 million Jews and others. Those who were detained at Auschwitz felt, as one prisoner observed, as though “god forgot us and people of the war forgot us.”

No one suggests military action makes sense in the case of North Korea. But as Pillay noted last week, “the spotlight is almost exclusively focused on [the] DPRK’s nuclear program and rocket launches . . . While these, of course, are issues of enormous importance, they should not be allowed to overshadow the deplorable human rights situation in DPRK, which in one way or another affects almost the entire population and has no parallel anywhere else in the world.”

Both Democratic and Republican administrations have consistently declined to focus substantial diplomatic efforts on improving the human rights and humanitarian situation in North Korea, for fear that doing so would drive Pyongyang from talks about its weapons programs. Yet if the United States won’t act decisively to end the widespread abuses of the world’s most brutal regime, who will?

When the North Korean regime collapses and its crimes are fully exposed, historians will surely conclude we had enough information to act sooner. Now is the critical moment for President Obama and the United States to take action — and give the North Korean people hope that the world has not forgotten them.

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