

# The Sydney Morning Herald

## More Clout Needed to End North Korea's Oppression

June 25, 2013

*Large-scale human rights abuses continue in North Korea, and Australia has an increasingly important role to play in ending the gulags.*

By Jared Genser

Most Australians don't know much about events in North Korea. Distance, both geographic and diplomatic, provide a good reason for unfamiliarity. But large-scale human rights abuses under the repressive Pyongyang regime continue to rage, despite recent developments in the international community aimed at addressing these atrocities.

And Australia, for its part, has an increasingly important role to play in keeping pressure on North Korea to put an end to these egregious human rights violations, particularly as a member of the United Nations Security Council.

Australia and North Korea have had diplomatic ties since 1974 but these have always been strained. One source of tension is the Pong Su incident of 2003, in which a North Korean ship suspected of smuggling illegal drugs in Australian waters was overtaken by Australian commandos after a four-day chase.

At present, relations are handled by non-resident embassies in Seoul and Jakarta. The North Korean embassy in Canberra was shut in 2008 for financial reasons. On June 5 this year, Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Bob Carr denied North Korea's bid to re-establish an embassy, because of its recent bellicose behaviour.

While Australia-North Korea relations may be up in the air, one thing certainly is not: the continuing abuse of human rights in North Korea's enormous gulag system.

Known as the kwan-li-so, this system of labour camps holding as many as 200,000 people is one of the worst humanitarian disasters in history.

During the dictatorship of Kim Il-sung more than 50 years ago, the regime established a guilt-by-association system that persists to this day. Real and imagined dissenters and their relatives – up to as many as three generations – are brutally punished in an effort to eliminate “the seeds” of bad families.

The gulag is a systematic network of concentration camps where the ultimate purpose is to work and starve prisoners to death.

Men, women and children are forced to labour in dangerous work environments for up to 16 hours a day. They are subjected to torture, sexual violence, and severe malnutrition, often resorting to picking through animal waste to avoid starvation.

Illness runs rampant through the camps but no medical treatment is available. The sick are forced to work until no longer physically able, at which point they are sent to sanatoriums to die. Those who fail to abide by the stringent camp rules are tortured or executed.

Once imprisoned in the gulag, there is little to no hope of escape or release so even those who survive day to day are virtually guaranteed to die as prisoners.

The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea estimates that, during the past few decades, hundreds of thousands have perished under these inhumane conditions.

In addition to these internal violations, North Korea has abducted numerous Japanese, South Korean and other foreign nationals, whose fate remains largely unknown.

For some time, the victims of these continuing abuses have not received the attention they deserve. Their plight has been largely overshadowed by North Korea's nuclear and missile tests.

However, slow but sure progress has been made in recent years towards ending North Korea's human rights violations. In September 2011, the International Coalition to Stop Crimes Against Humanity in North Korea, a group of more than 40 non-governmental organisations, launched an effort to hold Pyongyang accountable. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights supported the call for an independent inquiry into the atrocities, as did the US, the European Union, Japan and South Korea.

Finally, in March, the UN Human Rights Council voted to establish a commission of inquiry into possible “crimes against humanity” in the repressive totalitarian state. Last month the council named the chairman as Michael Kirby, former justice of the High Court of Australia.

In the coming months and years, Australia is bound to play a significant role in international efforts to stop the human rights violations in North Korea. Though the commission of inquiry is a substantial and critical step in this direction, much remains to be done to provide real hope for the victims of this regime.

Australia's strong and serious support is necessary to ensure North Korea feels pressure from the international community – enough pressure to finally end these abuses that have gone on far too long.

*Jared Genser is an international human-rights lawyer who has served as pro bono counsel to the International Coalition to Stop Crimes Against Humanity in North Korea.*