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Investigate North Korea's Gulag

U.N. action is the best hope for creating pressure to hold Pyongyang accountable.

By Jared Genser and Kristen Abrams

Seoul – Today the International Coalition to Stop Crimes Against Humanity in North Korea is submitting a petition to the United Nations calling for an investigation into the country's system of prison camps. Pyongyang holds as many as 200,000 people in a vast gulag known as the kwan-li-so. We believe that exposing these crimes against humanity to international scrutiny and debate is an important step toward ending the victims' suffering.

Few would dispute that North Korea represents one of the most egregious human-rights disasters in the world. But many will no doubt ask, what can the U.N. realistically do? Its record of bureaucratic waffling might suggest that the international body will fail to act on behalf of North Koreans.

Moreover, the world is focused mainly on the threat that North Korea poses to its neighbors. Its nuclear weapons and missile programs also raise the specter of proliferation. The great powers will inevitably put the security issue above the suffering of the North Korean people.

These objections are precisely why an investigation is needed. It would independently collect evidence from a wide range of sources, so that no country can dismiss the findings as the product of a political vendetta against Pyongyang by its enemies. And those who favor engagement with North Korea to stop its weapons programs will not be able to sweep aside the human rights issue in order to reward Pyongyang with assistance.

In other words, the findings of such an investigation will make it difficult for the world to ignore the crimes of the North Korean government. This will also force the regime and its interlocutors to acknowledge that improvement of the human rights situation is required before Pyongyang's relationship with the outside world can be normalized.

Toward that end, the coalition is calling on the U.N. to initiate an investigation and demand access to the gulag; outline the size and scope of the gulag system; render a conclusion that the gulag's operations constitute crimes against humanity; work with the North Korean government to initiate a process that holds perpetrators accountable and provides appropriate reparations to victims and their families; and take additional action with the full range of U.N. organs such as initiating a formal commission of inquiry to engage with North Korea about the gulag system.

To be sure, getting to that point will be a long process, with this investigation by the Human Rights Council of the U.N. just the first step. Nevertheless, it is encouraging that last week the

council condemned North Korea for the first time by consensus. Frustration with Pyongyang's behavior is growing across the board, even in countries like China, which has traditionally been a North Korean ally. This petition could have a ripple effect uniting the world in an effort for real change.

Governments are being forced to acknowledge the reality of the horrors in North Korea in part because of the compelling testimony of survivors. Not only are real and imagined dissenters imprisoned but so are their relatives—including the elderly and children—under a guilt-by-association system. Prisoners, even children, are subjected to backbreaking labor such as mining, logging and farming, seven days a week for twelve or more hours a day.

In addition to enduring backbreaking labor, prisoners are forced to survive on starvation-level food rations. One defector described the daily ration as approximately twenty grains of corn per inmate, a ration so meager that, to stave off death, prisoners must dig through cow dung to search for undigested grain.

Although pneumonia and tuberculosis run rampant in the camps, there is no medical treatment available for prisoners. They are forced to work through illness, and those who are no longer able to work are sent to sanatoriums to await their death. Alongside the hard labor and starvation, prisoners also face torture, rape and extra-judicial killing.

As a result of these horrific conditions, up to 25% of the prison population dies each year. It is estimated that over the past few decades more than 400,000 camp prisoners have perished.

The good news is that knowledge of these atrocities has created pressure for change. The best way to build on that momentum is an investigation and report, followed by a formal U.N. commission of inquiry. Cynics may question what good our petition can do when at the end of it all the U.N. may not act against Pyongyang. But the alternative is for us to do nothing, which is to commit the same mistake that they accuse the U.N. of making.

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