

KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM

The Honorable Tom Malinowski: Special Address at the Center for Strategic and International Studies

February 19, 2016

A special address delivered by The Honorable Tom Malinowski at the “North Korea: The Human Rights and Security Nexus” conference held in the Center for Strategic and International Studies, as released by the U.S. Department of State.

Thank you, Victor, for the introduction and for the invitation to participate in today’s event. It’s really a privilege to join a group of such committed activists and policymakers. I would also like to thank the folks at CSIS, HRNK, GWBI, NED, and the Yonsei Center for Human Liberty for putting together this conference.

The conversation today is an opportunity for us to reflect on the amazing milestones we have achieved in the two years since the Commission of Inquiry released its historic report, but more importantly is an opportunity for us to think big as we develop a strategy for carrying that momentum forward.

It was not long ago that conventional wisdom advised that the DPRK was impervious to outside pressure on human rights. North Korea ignored international criticism of its human rights record and refused to cooperate with international human rights bodies.

While the North Korean government has sought to hide these abuses by isolating its people from the world, the Commission of Inquiry report lifted that veil.

In many ways the report has been a game changer. The Commission set the record straight on the urgency of the problem: North Korea “does not have any parallel in the contemporary world.

On the scope and severity of the problem: “systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed by the Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea”

On who is responsible: “crimes against humanity have been committed...pursuant to policies established at the highest level of the State.”

The report and the international community’s collective response reverberated loudly in Pyongyang. In the past two years, the government has launched an aggressive campaign to counter the report findings and to defend its record.



North Korea's reaction proves the point that all regimes crave legitimacy. The regime's response has demonstrated that it is plainly vulnerable to any effort that makes it appear less legitimate to its people and the world.

In fact, one of the most illuminating passages in the Commission's report reveals the Supreme Leader is vulnerable to international criticism. According to the report, North Korea's Supreme Leader has issued standing orders to kill all labor camp inmates "in the case of war or revolution, in order to eradicate the primary evidence of the existence of the camps and the conditions prevailing therein."

A regime willing to go to such lengths to cover its human rights violations must on some level recognize that they are a source of shame, for which it could be held accountable. For this reason, we must continue to shine a light on what is happening inside North Korea.

Of course, we are having this discussion at a moment when the international community is once again focused on the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear program. The Obama administration believes that we can and must address both the country's nuclear ambitions and its grave human rights violations. In fact, many of the country's human rights abuses underwrite the regime's weapon's program, including forced labor, through mass mobilizations, political prisoners, and overseas labor contracts, and food distribution policies that favor the military and lead to chronic malnourishment among its citizens.

History has also shown us that while we can and must seek to manage and minimize such threats to our security through diplomacy, sanctions, and strong support for our allies, this problem is not likely to be solved until the people of North Korea have more of a say in deciding their future.

So what should our strategy be? First, we should continue to make clear to the leadership – from those at the top to the middle ranks – that we know what they are doing and that they can be held accountable if at some point in the future things change on the Korean Peninsula. This can help, even if only at the margins, some of the worst abuses these people commit. Second, we should do everything we can to facilitate the flow of information to, from and among North Koreans. This can help to accelerate the bottom up trends already underway in North Korea that could lead to internal change, and to prepare the North Korean people to deal with the challenges such change might bring.

With respect to the first part of this challenge, the COI has helped us greatly. And we will keep up the drumbeat and I'm confident other nations will continue to join us, exposing human rights abuses, demanding accountability, and where possible, singling out specific individuals within the regime who bear direct responsibility.

I have a feeling that there are people within the North Korean leadership who recognize that the future of their regime is uncertain, that one day the Korean Peninsula may look very different. They may be thinking about their personal prospects in such a scenario. We want to make sure they understand that their prospects will be far poorer if they become personally associated with the worst aspects of the regime's repression, like the labor camp system.

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With respect to the second part of the challenge, breaking the DPRK's monopoly on information, there is much we are doing and more we can do.

Since the late 1950's, the regime has taken extreme measures to exert total control over access to information. North Korea is arguably the only totalitarian country in the world that managed to do this long enough to deny most of its adult population knowledge or memory of the existence of alternative ways of life.

Defector Lee Hyeon Seo described the bizarre alternate reality created by the state propaganda in her memoir, *The Girl With Seven Names*. She wrote, "Leaving North Korea is not like leaving any other country. It is more like leaving another universe."

We should remember that the North Korean regime's control of information was absolutely essential to its survival over the years. For if North Koreans knew that there was not only another world but another Korea where people lived better and freer lives, what justification would there be for the continuation of a separate system in the north?

Slowly but surely, this is changing. South Korean DVDs, MP3s, cell phones, and tablets are all now available in North Korea. South Korean soap operas and foreign films have exposed the regime's lies by showing North Koreans the affluence of normal life in other countries.

North Korean traders crossing the border into China, workers assigned to overseas labor contracts, and a growing defector community in South Korea are sharing stories with family members.

Much has changed since Soviet dissidents hand copied banned books for distribution. Micro-SD cards that can store thousands of books can be copied in seconds and distributed discreetly.

A Chinese DVD player can be purchased for as little as \$20 and DVDs themselves are less than a dollar. Netels, attached screen DVD players, which were recently legalized in North Korea are only \$50 and have SD and USB slots and built-in TV and radio tuners. Flash drives that can be quickly removed from TVs and DVD players are cheap and abundant.

The rate of consumption is exploding with more than 3million cell phone users. Recent defector surveys demonstrate that before leaving the DPRK more than 92 percent of survey participants had watched a foreign DVD and more than 70 percent had access to a mobile phone. Nearly 30 percent have listened to a foreign radio broadcast.

And so it begins like this:

A young woman selling the latest South Korean fashion accessories in the market breaks free from economic reliance on the government, and just like that an idea forms and independence begins, which the government can do nothing to stop.

A DVD containing a bootleg copy of Rocky shows not just a boxing ring but a fridge full of food, revealing a life utterly different from that lived by the average North Korean, and just like that an



idea forms and independence begins, which the government can do nothing to stop.

A cell phone allows a family in Pyongyang to talk to their relatives in Seoul, and even to receive transfers of money, which raises their standard of living, changes their perception of a foreign country, and again, an idea forms, independence begins, and the government cannot stop it.

The more information gets inside, the more people's appetite for knowledge increases. A chasm has formed between the traditional state propaganda and people's understanding of the world. It is getting harder for the government to hide the truth about the country's relative poverty and the reasons for it.

So amidst all the horrors still being committed in the DPRK, we do see opportunities. And in this context, my charge from Secretary Kerry is to keep it up and to step it up and to do more. So we will.

We will expand our support of information programs. We'll continue to broadcast into the country, giving North Korean listeners more options for when and what they listen to.

We'll explore new technologies that will help us move information faster and safer to show the average North Korean that there is an alternative way of life where freedom of movement and freedom of expression are commonplace.

Going forward, we will continue to ratchet up the pressure through various UN bodies. We are gearing up for the March Human Rights Council session, which will offer another strong message about accountability.

We will continue to seek opportunities to highlight the egregious human rights violations committed by the North Korean regime. To the men who are commanders of the camps, and their commanders, and other officials all the way up to the top, our message remains: We see you. We know who you are. We know what you are doing. Whenever possible, we will say your names out loud.

Hundreds of defectors continue to participate in efforts to raise awareness about the human rights situation in North Korea, including Grace Jo, who I understand is on one of the panels later this afternoon. Grace was in New York in December when the UN Security Council held its second deliberation on the situation in the DPRK. She, along with another defector, Jung Gwang Il, bravely stood up in the Council chambers as U.S. Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power, described their suffering under the regime's oppressive policies.

Grace witnessed three generations of her family starve to death. Hunger drove Grace and her surviving family members to try to escape North Korea, but they were returned repeatedly against their will. As punishment, Grace was sent to an orphanage where she said children were forced to work from 6 in the morning to 7 at night. She and her remaining two family members finally managed to escape in 2008, when they came to the United States as refugees.

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Grace's story is of the story of millions of North Koreans. It's a story that ought to make us angry. But in a way I think it can also be a source of hope. Because if this young woman and the many others like her can endure such cruelty and loss and still come out strong, confident, and capable of embracing with perfect understanding the ideals that for most of their lives they were not allowed even to know existed, then it should be possible for all 24 million people in North Korea to emerge from the horror they have experienced and to build a normal life.

I have great admiration for everyone in this room who has worked for this cause, sometimes for many years. I know it is not easy. But you should know that every single fight for human rights that I've been involved with in my life has seemed quixotic at first; every sound strategy for advancing change has seemed a failure until it succeeds. The time will come when we will say the same about this effort. With your help, it can come sooner rather than later.

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