
Day 2 Session IV: Dealing with North Korea's Human Rights

Moderator: Baek Buhm-Suk, Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Speakers: Roberta Cohen, The Brookings Institute
Frank Jannuzi, Amnesty International USA
Kil Jeong Woo, National Assembly, ROK
Marcus Noland, Peterson Institute for International Economics

Rapporteur: Olivia Enos, The Heritage Foundation

Arguably one of the worst human rights crises of the modern day, North Korea continues to operate its gulag-like prison camps, and commit massive human rights violations against its own people. The Asan Washington Forum 2013 brought together a variety of experts on human rights including Roberta Cohen, Frank Jannuzi, Kil Jeong Woo, and Marcus Noland to discuss the future of human rights in North Korea.

In recent months and years, the regime in North Korea has continued to violate the dignity of its people. The moderator, Baek Buhm-Suk, noted that Shin Dong-hyuk, the only person born in a North Korean prison camp known to escape, has put a face and a name to the crisis on the Korean Peninsula. His testimony has brought to light the atrocities that occur daily in the North Korean gulags and has placed a spotlight on the plight of North Korean refugees worldwide. The recent return of nine North Korean children from Laos to North Korea has also shed light on the lack of standards in place to deal with refugees. In recent months, there is evidence that North Korea has been cracking down on its border even more. In collaboration with China, the regime has cut down on the number of defectors by half. Without clear solutions to the problem, North Korea will continue to abuse its people unabated.

Roberta Cohen believes that now is the time for the international community to address North Korea's human rights crisis. With nearly 200,000 people estimated to be in the prison camps, and documented atrocities occurring within the penal system in North Korea, Cohen believed that this was evidence in demand of a verdict. Testimony from the labor camps, including prisoners, prison guards, and others from inside North Korea have built up enough evidence to make the claim of prison camps certain. Satellite images have only made it more real. While the prison camps are undeniable, there are other aspects of the human rights crisis that are less verifiable. The number of deaths and individual events of abuse and torture are harder to prove. Despite the fact that the international community has clear evidence of prison camps at its disposal, little practical action has been taken. Resources are limited and few people are willing to write about the crisis.

Roberta Cohen was encouraged that a commission of inquiry was opened by the UN, but she felt that the commission was not an end in and of itself. She believed that the commission would face problems. Due to the fact that individuals' acts of violence, torture, and other nefarious actions of the Kim regime are more difficult to prove, she feared that the process

could get side-tracked. Cohen was also concerned about China's return to the UN Security Council. She encouraged Japan, the EU, and the United States to maintain their stalwart support for the commission. Finally, she felt that international actors should not be so afraid to address human rights issues with North Korean officials directly.

She felt that the 60th anniversary of US-South Korea relations should kick-start growth in the two nations' partnership in the fight against human rights abuses in North Korea.

Frank Jannuzi agreed with Cohen that that any solution to human rights issues in North Korea should include a full-throated comprehensive strategy designed to change the agenda. Jannuzi's experience at Amnesty International gives him a bird's-eye view into the conflict. His opinion is that the human rights crisis in North Korea is arguably the most horrific situation occurring in present-times. In addition to the prison camps, there are major food security and public health problems in Korea. "The difficulty of this task must not be allowed to be an excuse for inaction," noted Jannuzi.

Jannuzi believes that it is possible to address the North Korean officials openly and directly regarding human rights issues. When Amnesty International visited North Korea in 1995, they had honest and open discussions with officials in Korea and Jannuzi believed that these could and should be replicated.

Jannuzi noted that despite the fact that there are many human rights declarations, many of which North Korea is party to, human rights violations continue. So how do we deal with North Korea's poor track record of human rights? Jannuzi contends that a calculated strategic patience approach is vital. Jannuzi was in favor of building and implementing a Helsinki-like accord. He believed that it would be the most effective way to engage the DPRK on security, economics, and human rights. It's time to go beyond bilateral talks and expand to multilateral engagement, Jannuzi noted.

Jannuzi also felt that a frontal assault, similar to the approach policy makers take with nuclear weapons, is the right way to attack the human rights issue. This should encompass a flank attack that is blunt and attempts to change the mindset of both the people and the government of North Korea by engaging with a multifaceted strategy of engagement.

Kil Jeong Woo noted several misconceptions when it comes to South Korea and its willingness to address the North Korea regime. The first misconception he identified was the accusation that South Korea is afraid of a massive inflow of North Korea refugees or the South Korean government might be concerned about jeopardizing negotiations between the two Koreas. His response to the latter was that there hadn't been a serious dialogue between the two Koreas for the past six years. This means that there was nothing to jeopardize relations because talks between the two countries were non-existent.

Kil also noted that most people believed that the biggest opponent to the refugees was China. Kil felt that Vietnam and even Laos were more belligerent in their lack of support for Korean refugees. He argued that most of the refugees had to pass through Chinese borders in the first place to get to third countries in Southeast Asia. While he felt that China could be more aggressive in calling out human rights issues in North Korea, he also felt that China was not the primary culprit.

Finally, Kil praised the South Korean government's resettlement practices for North Korea refugees. As home to over 25,000 refugees he felt that they were providing proper support. However, he believed that the South Korean government should do more to ensure the passage of the South Korean human rights act. It has been eight years since the bill was first introduced, noted Kil, and the fact that it has not yet passed reflects the fragility of inter-Korean relations.

Kil left the audience with a thought to ponder: Are the people of South Korea prepared to live with a refugee population? The 25,000 defectors that reside within South Korea now are relatively small in comparison to the flood of refugees that might result from reunification. Many defectors have found it difficult to assimilate into Korean culture, noted Kil, and South Koreans must do more to make it easier for them. He supported the intervention of international NGOs, religious organizations, and civic organizations to take up the reins and help Korea to prepare for unification.

Marcus Noland felt that policy makers must view the Korean crisis as requiring two layers of policy. He equated human rights issues in North Korea with an iceberg: 10 percent is above the surface (refugee policy) and 90 percent is under the surface (policy that can only be implemented within North Korea). In other words, Noland stated that there were direct policies achieved through diplomatic means, and indirect policies that don't require the compliance of the North Korean government.

Noland gave practical examples of potential future policies to directly address human rights issues. He suggested that on the US-end it was critical that the United States create a more robust North Korean Human Rights Act. He also recommended solutions such as establishing a refugee hotline, providing scholarships to refugees, and engaging with North Korea economically. Noland felt that the United States held the key to pressure North Korea into protecting the rights of its people through economic engagement with the business community. Since the United States is wealthy and North Korea is seeking investment, economic engagement would allow the United States to place strings on its investment to leverage gains in human rights.

Noland contended that the most important contribution the United States could make to the human rights crisis was to address the issue with China. This included forcibly communicating to China that we view North Korean defectors as refugees—something Noland argues that Obama should have brought up in his recent meetings with Chinese officials in the wake of the North Korea-Laos defector crisis. And Noland contended that beyond this, the United States must push for a legal regularization that would permit defectors to stay in China under protected status for a limited amount of time.

Every panelist agreed that North Korea was a unique situation. Unlike Burma, the people of North Korea are not exposed to the outside world. This means they aren't asking questions about their healthcare, their lifestyle, their treatment. They have nothing from the outside world to compare the oppressive North Korean regime to. And finally, people in the DPRK have no means of communication to the outside world.

Without swift and decisive action against the North Korean regime for human rights issues, the people of North Korea will continue to suffer. As many of the panelists noted, a robust and comprehensive strategy that requires a response from the North Korean regime is vital.

The time is now for the international community to pay attention—will they respond to the human rights abuses in North Korea?

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