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Panel: R2P and North Korean Human Rights (GB3)

Date/Time: Tuesday, April 22, 2014 / 14:30-15:45

Talking Points for: Barbara Demick, Los Angeles Times

The U.N. Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea has suggested that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un could be prosecuted for crimes against humanity. Few dispute the litany of crimes listed in the report --- that the North Korean regime has committed torture, extermination, enslavement, rape, forced abortion, political and religious persecution and “knowingly causing prolonged starvation.” But a legitimate debate exists about whether Kim Jong Un should be held responsible for the system he inherited less than three years ago and whether the situation has improved at all under his leadership. Among the few who have dared to suggest possible improvement are the scholar, Andrei Lankov, who wrote last year that “thing have moved from being disastrous to being merely very bad.” He wrote that the system of collective punishment for family members had weakened in recent years and said that bribery and corruption made it easier for people to escape Draconian punishment. North Korean defectors and border crossers in China who I have interviewed personally suggest that the restrictions on market activity eased from 2012 onward following Kim Jong Il’s death. It is much easier for men and women of all ages to work at the markets with fewer prohibitions on opening hours and products that can be sold. Economic liberalization has not been accompanied by any political reforms, suggesting that the North Koreans are trying to follow Beijing’s model. And defectors believe that the political system might be tightening up again following the purge of Jang Sung Taek.

Questions for discussion:

Human rights in North Korea in recent years have been seen as secondary to the nuclear crisis. With the nuclear talks stuck, should human rights be elevated?

* The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

TALKING POINTS

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Will there be any change in the international community’s handling of human rights in North Korea as a result of the U.N. report?

Is it possible for North Korea to liberalize economically without weakening political controls?

To what extent should Kim Jong Un be held accountable for the crimes of his father and grandfather?

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