



TALKING POINTS

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Talking Points for: Greg Scarlatoiu, U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea

A concept first raised in the UNDP’s 1994 Human Development Report, human security is a bottom-up framework that analyzes people’s condition, in contrast to traditional security studies that focus on states. Concerned with human life and dignity, human security naturally coincides with human rights—the two are “mutually reinforcing.” However, there is also a clear distinction. The concept of human rights is historically based on values engrained in the Age of Enlightenment and supported by a universal framework that originated within the UN system. The emergence of human security discourse was the product of a convergence of factors at the end of the Cold War. The explosive rise in the demand for democratization and international human rights opened a space in which both ‘development’ and concepts of ‘security’ could be reconsidered. Human security developed organically from the developed and the developing world, promoting protection and empowerment. Human rights offers the legal framework and implementation capacity states must apply to protect individuals.

While failing to provide human security to its citizens, North Korea does not abide by its international legal obligations to uphold human rights instruments it has acceded to, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights. The economic insecurity of North Korea’s people is largely the result of the songbun social classification system, and the regime’s refusal to accept reform. Food security continues to be grim, within the context of ongoing nutritional challenges. Health security is affected by widespread infectious and vector borne disease. Environmental security has eroded largely due to decades of reckless deforestation. Personal security is severely challenged by an astoundingly high homicide rate and severe human rights violations. Community security is made impossible by the songbun social classification system and the all-pervasive informant networks. Political security simply does not exist in North Korea, as human rights are egregiously violated and political freedom is an alien concept.

While human rights and human security are “mutually reinforcing,” focus on human security should by no means imply the application of a different standard to assess compliance with international human rights standards in North Korea. For the past six decades, human rights standards, concepts, and vocabulary applicable to all members of the international community have been developed. Discussion of human security in North Korea must acknowledge the quintessential importance of human rights, and must by no means be employed to derogate from the universal responsibility of ensuring compliance with internationally accepted standards.

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