

North Korea Extends Its No-Free Zone

by Jack Rendler

North Korea's launch of a long-range rocket on Wednesday is intended to spread that government's particular brand of terror beyond its own borders. Apparently unsatisfied with repressing, imprisoning and starving its own population, Pyongyang is now threatening and intimidating other countries. The same regime whose survival depends on a steady stream of crimes against humanity appears intent on developing the capacity to deliver a nuclear warhead.

The North Korean government may be unique in all the world for its ability and willingness to both starve its people and oppress them, to deny them basic civil rights as well as access to food and health care. The government in its showcase capital Pyongyang does not permit international inspection, does not respond to inquiries, and does not fulfill its obligations. Officials concentrate on keeping the world from North Korea and Koreans from each other.

The regime does not tolerate opposition of any kind. Those who are assumed to be less than loyal are arrested, imprisoned, starved and executed. Entire families are detained or 'resettled' because of the supposed political deviation of one relative. Under the concept of 'collective retribution,' children are punished for the political sins of their parents, denied education and socially ostracized. Any unauthorized assembly or association is regarded as a 'collective disturbance' that is punishable.

Hundreds of thousands are held in a system of prison and labor camps. Torture and ill-treatment are widespread. Conditions in prisons and labor camps are reported to be extremely harsh: even minor infractions are met with deadly beatings.

The government divides the entire society into at least 52 classifications based on an assessment of loyalty, and apportions reward and punishment accordingly. As a result, as many as 18 million people are denied equal access to education, employment, housing, medical care and food. Independent international organizations have reported that food and medical relief are distributed on the basis of loyalty to the state, effectively punishing those most in need.

The average North Korean child is now just two-thirds the size of a South Korean counterpart. Hunger and malnutrition have reached epidemic proportions. Meanwhile, South Korean journalists have assessed the cost of preparing and holding one rocket launch to be equivalent to the cost of feeding North Korea's hungry for eleven months.

Pyongyang may seem impervious to international pressure; in fact, it goes to great lengths to avoid being condemned in multilateral settings. That is precisely why it is crucial for the United Nations to open a Commission of Inquiry into whether Pyongyang's many human rights abuses constitute 'crimes against humanity.' Merely establishing such an inquiry will send a powerful message to the regime and its enabling allies that they are marching on the wrong side of history. An actual determination that such crimes are occurring would open significant avenues of redress for the 23 million long-suffering North Korean people.

Forty human rights groups, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the International Federation for Human Rights, have joined forces to create the International Coalition to Stop Crimes against Humanity in North Korea. The coalition is mounting a worldwide campaign to urge U.N. member states to press for a Commission of Inquiry, drawing on the words of the former U.N. Special Rapporteur Vitit Muntarbhorn who in his final report demanded an "end to impunity" in North Korea, describing violations as "harrowing and horrific," "egregious and endemic," and "systematic and pervasive."

Recently, 179 former North Korean political prisoners and defectors, including survivors of severe human rights violations, lent their support to the efforts of the coalition. This work should receive the full backing of the U.S. State Department and foreign ministries everywhere.

The North Korean people deserve far better leadership. They cannot secure it by themselves. Like so many before them, they need us and our ability to speak out on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves.

Jack Rendler is the North Korea Country Specialist for Amnesty International USA.

Jack Rendler is a founding member of the Steering Committee of the International Coalition to Stop Crimes against Humanity in North Korea.