

Hotel Pyongyang?

Jay Lefkowitz

Few among us would argue with the importance of promoting human rights. No one wants to live under a government that lacks the consent of its own people – and no such government can claim legitimacy. The effort to secure for all the inalienable and fundamental rights that most of us in the West enjoy is work toward a worthy and noble end.

Promoting human rights is not just a noble end in itself. It is also a means to a broader foreign policy objective. Modern history has repeatedly demonstrated that human rights are also a means to peace. This is demonstrated best by the fact that no two democracies with universal suffrage have ever gone to war with each other. As President Bush noted in his second inaugural address:

There is only one force of history that can expose the pretensions of tyrants, and reward the hopes of the decent and tolerant, and that is the force of human freedom. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.

We need to take notice of atrocities taking place in North Korea and elsewhere, not only because it is the right and the moral thing to do. It is also necessary in order to ensure a lasting peace in an ever-shrinking world where there no longer is such a thing as an ‘isolated’ or ‘contained’ conflict or humanitarian tragedy. We must make clear that in order for the North Korean government to have any legitimacy in the eyes of the world, it must begin respecting the rights of its own citizens.

Scope of Human Rights Abuses

Our State Department’s human rights report documents the many atrocities of the North Korean regime:

- The extra-judicial killings, disappearances, and arbitrary detention.
- Prisoners who face life-threatening conditions, torture, forced abortions and infanticide.
- The complete denial of a fair trial, freedom of speech, press, and assembly.
- The practice of faith and religious belief is suppressed.

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- The government attempts to control all information and sustains a cult of personality around its dictator.
- There is no freedom of movement.
- Prisoners are sentenced to death for such ill-defined offences as ‘ideological divergence,’ ‘opposing socialism,’ and ‘counterrevolutionary crimes.’

In March of 2005, a video filmed in the country clandestinely, showed the public execution of three men accused of helping a refugee cross the border into China. Border guards reportedly had orders to shoot to kill potential defectors.

There are an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 North Koreans who are in a vast network of political concentration camps. Those who have been there and lived to tell about their horrifying experiences tell truly chilling tales. Defectors believe the camps cover areas as large as 200 square miles and contain mass graves.

Hotel Rwanda?

During the 1990s, a famine occurred as a result of state policies, and it is estimated that between one and two million North Koreans died. Shockingly, the average North Korean male is now several inches shorter than his South Korean neighbor – a change that has taken place only in the last thirty-some odd years, and because of malnutrition. When contemplating the number of people effected, it is important to remember that North Korea only has about twenty to twenty-two million people. That would be akin to having three to six million people in the U.K starving to death.

The famine, combined with repression, resulted in a refugee exodus into China and beyond. Some non-governmental organisations estimate the size of this population to be as much as a quarter of a million. The refugees’ suffering did not end when they left North Korea, and for many, it continues to this day. Indeed, just last year, there were widespread reports of defectors being sent back to North Korea by the Chinese.

What we are seeing in North Korea is in some respects an Asian Darfur. Many of you are familiar with the movie *Hotel Rwanda*, which documented the genocide in that country. Rather than lament and regret the repression and killing of North Koreans with a *Hotel Pyongyang* movie a decade from now, we need to combine our efforts to do something about it now.

Let me tell you a little about what we are doing. President Bush made it clear to me in our first meeting after he asked me to take this assignment that he wanted to change our policy with respect to refugees. He wanted the United States to open its doors to North Koreans. We have long prided ourselves on being a nation of immigrants – a place of refuge for people in despair. The United States has, in fact, modified its policies, and we are now accepting, without restriction, refugees from North Korea – not a lot, indeed most North Korean refugees, I have no doubt, will chose to go and will be accepted as citizens in South Korea. But for those who do want to come to the United States, our doors are open. We impose no quota or limit on their number. Last year, we welcomed to the United States our first groups of North Korean refugees – people with whom I met and who told me tales of their escape from North Korea: how they had to jump off trains, how they had to hide infants in suitcases and drawers for weeks at a time to protect their lives. It was an incredible story from some of these individuals. But what it reinforced for me was the conviction that the human spirit is so indomitable that we can overcome really any kind of depravity.

In the past, we have provided significant humanitarian assistance to North Korea. We have done so without regard to political issues between our two governments – our sole concern has been saving lives. But we have to insist, and we do insist, that minimum international standards for monitoring and delivering the aid be met. This is essential in North Korea, because the regime has used humanitarian aid for unintended purposes – diverting it, selling it on the black market, funneling it to its military – while depriving those in need. And humanitarian aid that does not reach the population to whom it was intended doesn't serve the purpose of humanitarian aid. Other countries and international organisations also should insist on these minimum, international standards for humanitarian aid. We need to keep pressure on the UN to do so with its aid. Whether it is through organisations like UNICEF, or the UNDP, or the World Food Program, it is absolutely essential that genuine humanitarian aid that goes to North Korea be used to help the people of North Korea, not to perpetuate the regime.

Human Rights: A Means to Peace

The North Korean regime does not only endanger its own people through its barbaric actions. A nation that does not respect the rights of its citizens is almost invariably a nation that will not respect the rights of its neighbours. Dictatorships almost always threaten regional and even global peace. This is true for a number

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of reasons, not the least of which is that authoritarian rulers often need to create enemies simply to justify their repression. That is why human rights is not just an end in itself, but a vital objective of our foreign policy.

North Korea threatens other nations – including yours and mine – by building a nuclear arsenal today and attempting to develop the means to deliver it over great distances. It repeatedly has cited conditions publicly under which it will turn other lands and people into what it calls a ‘sea of fire.’ North Korea also colludes with other bad actors. There were press reports last summer that Iranian observers were present to see North Korea’s July missile launches, and the two have worked together on ballistic missiles in the past.

Human rights as an end and a means is something that Europe has appreciated in the past. A prime example is the Helsinki Accords from 1975, which guided dialogue and exchanges between the two sides of the Cold War. Human rights were included in the dialogue as one of three ‘baskets,’ along with security and economics. In order for there to be accepted progress in one basket, there had to be some progress in the other two. This was a watershed event in understanding the link between human rights and security. It is also a model that we should consider in our own approaches to governments like North Korea.

Common Cause

This issue should unite us all. The law President Bush signed in 2004, which created my position, the North Korean Human Rights Act, was passed unanimously by both houses of our Congress. President Bush cares deeply about the plight of the North Korean people and has hosted meetings in the White House with those victimised by the regime. But this is not just an issue of concern to the President. On the other side of our political spectrum, the new Chairman of the House Committee on International Relations, Tom Lantos, a man who knows firsthand what it is like to suffer deprivations from an oppressive regime – indeed he is the only member of Congress who is a survivor of one of the Nazi concentration camps – has said that ‘[T]he human rights situation in North Korea is one of the world’s worst ... the North Korean people have no hope of changing their government unless the international community stands up for human rights and democracy in the North and continues to push the North aggressively for change.’ So there is common cause in the United States on both sides of the political aisle on this issue.

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It is not just the US that has spoken up about this issue. Great Britain and other European nations have exhibited commendable leadership. In recent years, it has been the European Union that has sponsored resolutions condemning North Korean human rights atrocities at the UN General Assembly's human rights committee. Thanks largely to European efforts, that resolution passed by 91-21 this year, and South Korea – significantly – abandoned its past practice of sitting out the vote, and joined with the international community in voting in support of that resolution. In addition, the European Parliament passed a resolution addressing North Korea's human rights abuses during the year.

Enhancing Europe's Engagement

What I have come today to urge that you do is consider taking this a step further. We should work together to place an even greater emphasis on this issue and better use the tools at our disposal. In fact, it is Europe not the United States, that may be in the best position to do so.

I encourage those nations that have diplomatic relations with Pyongyang, including the UK and many of your neighbours, to request greater access to the North Korean country and its population. After all, what is the purpose of an embassy if not to gain a greater understanding of the other nation in order to better communicate with the nation and its people? If such access is granted, it would mark a welcome turning point for Pyongyang and a significant step towards transparency. If such access is not granted however, this too needs to be highlighted so that the society of nations can be fully aware that the isolation of North Korea is largely self-imposed. They may claim it is inflicted by the West. They may claim it is a conspiracy by the US and the UK. We know the truth and we need to shed light on that truth.

We can do more to spotlight the atrocities. In America, we refer to the Presidency as a 'bully pulpit.' It is a reference to the American president's ability to draw attention to an issue – a testament to the power of ideas. The more people know of this, the closer North Koreans will be to securing their rights.

That was my own personal experience as a youngster when I was involved in my first human rights struggle, working toward the freedom of Soviet Jews – people known in their time as 'Refuseniks.' I remember being at the home of one of the most prominent Refuseniks, in the fall of 1987. His name was Vladimir Slepak. He had been in 'refusal' for seventeen years and I happened to be at his home the

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day the phone rang and it was a call from OVIR, the Soviet Union's visa service, telling him he had been granted his exit visa. My parents had visited with him ten years earlier on a clandestine trip of their own to the Soviet Union, and here I was standing next to a man who had been a hero of mine because of his struggle against totalitarianism, and I was with him the moment he learned he would be free.

We have heroes like that right now in North Korea, who are in bondage behind bars. We know of a few prominent defectors who have gotten out, but because this society is so closed, we do not even know the names of most of the people behind bars, who are languishing in those prison camps. And until we learn their names and until we can arm people publicly with the information, so that governments around the world can all attention to their cause, I fear that we will not be able to mobilise the international community in the right way for the right public struggle.

If you haven't already, try to hear from those who have witnessed the matter first-hand. Give them a pulpit of their own. No one who has listened to Kang Chol-Hwan tell his story has been unmoved. He wrote *Aquariums of Pyongyang*, a book about his long incarceration in the infamous Yodok prison camp. It was the first thing the President told me he when he appointed me: He said, go out and get the book and read it, and then meet with Kang, talk to him. When I met with him, it was one of the most moving experiences. That's what the President said, and it's true. It's hard to read his account of life in the gulag in North Korea with a dry eye.

There are other rescuers as well – people like Philip Buck, who recently got out of jail in China. He had been incarcerated for helping North Korean refugees find the underground railroad that brings a small number of people out of China to freedom. I met him recently. His story has been publicised in the press in the United States. There are many others like him, and each time they are heard, the movement grows. So I encourage you to invite people like them to come; to give them a forum here as well.

The US is also doing its part to get the message out. We are expanding our efforts to increase the broadcasting of news and information into North Korea. This is something on which we can co-operate with the UK. The BBC is one of the most powerful engines of a free press the world has ever known. Just like Voice of America, the BBC can be broadcasting into North Korea so that people armed with their clandestine radios can learn that they don't live in a socialist utopia, but

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can learn that there in fact is a world outside, which is not a utopia, but is far, far better than the one to which they are confined.

Europe has the tools to make a major impact on the lives of North Koreans, and achieve another laudable end through this means – namely peace on the Peninsula. You have it in your power to help advance this movement for the recognition of rights intended for everyone by the Creator, and in so doing, to help bring about a more secure world.

Conclusion

I would like to leave you tonight with a quote from the namesake of my host organisation tonight, the late Senator ‘Scoop’ Jackson – still my favourite American Democrat – one that reflects his recognition of the link between human rights and security. He said: ‘If you believe in the cause of freedom, then proclaim it, live it and protect it, for humanity’s future depends on it.’ There is no greater calling for people in public service than to try to help to save lives, to bring about change. In the struggle for human rights in North Korea, we not only can help try to save the lives of the North Korean people, most immediately, but we can also try to help make the region and the world safer by helping to bring about a transformation in North Korea.

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