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THE PENINSULA

Record Number of High-Level UN Meetings Devoted to North Korean Human Rights in 2024

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North Korea's human rights violations have been a priority of UN organizations since 2004, when the UN Human Rights Council first appointed a UN Special Rapporteur to report annually on the issue to the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly. This focus on North Korea's human rights violations has been in addition to the serious and frequent attention the United Nations has given to the country's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs over the last two decades.

While North Korea has been a major problem for the United Nations, South Korea has played a leading role in the organization. South Korea is currently serving its third two-year term as one of the ten non-permanent UN member countries elected to membership on the Security Council. At the United Nations, North Korea remains an international rogue. Pyongyang has been a frequent high-level problem of international concern as a threat to international peace and security for its nuclear program, as well as its frequently criticized abusive human rights record. North Korea has never served as a member of the UN Security Council, and North Korean diplomats and experts have only served in lower-level, less-sensitive UN staff positions.

As North Korea's human rights practices are highly criticized in the United Nations and elsewhere, the country has not helped its image by sending a significant number of troops, as well as weapons and ammunition, to support Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. The UN Security Council held discussions on North Korean military support for Russia, and North Korean diplomats have participated in the meeting, although North Korea is not a Security Council member but it is an involved party with Russia in Ukraine.

Some have suggested that North Korea ignores UN actions critical of its human rights record, but recently leaked North Korean diplomatic cables suggest Kim Jong-un takes a personal interest in UN scrutiny and criticism of North Korea for its egregious human rights abuses. Ri Il-guy, a former North Korean diplomat and former deputy chief of mission at North Korea's embassy in Havana, Cuba, recently defected to South Korea and gave South Korean officials a trove of secret North Korean diplomatic cables on sensitive topics. Key information from 12 of the leaked cables was publicly released by the ROK Ministry of Unification on November 12.

The Unification Ministry described Pyongyang's concern about human rights discussions at the United Nations: "The cables reveal instructions issued by North Korea's Foreign Ministry before and after discussions on North Korean human rights at the UN, including sessions at the Human Rights Council, General Assembly, and UPR (Universal Periodic Review) and include reports from North Korea's missions in Geneva and at the UN [in New York] detailing the outcomes of these discussions." The Unification Ministry concluded that the leaked documents indicated the North Korean leader's "high interest in Western Discussions on North Korean human rights, including issuing direct instructions" from Kim to North Korean diplomats.

One cable titled "Human Rights Activity" and dated November 1, 2016, from the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs directed North Korean diplomats at the UN headquarters in New York to reject completely and emphatically the draft resolution by the UN General Assembly that criticized North Korea on its human rights record. The delegation was told to walk out of the proceedings after denouncing them.

It so happened that I attended that particular UN meeting in November 2016. I was sitting next to Ambassador Samantha Powers, US permanent representative to the United Nations, on the dais at the front of the UN committee room. When the initial presentation was completed by the UN special rapporteur on human rights in North Korea, the North Korean delegate insisted on being the first speaker to respond. He gave a long and impassioned denunciation of the resolution being considered. At the end of his statement, he demonstrably stood up and walked out of the meeting room with great flourish. Now that we have seen the text of Kim's directive, I can confirm that the North Korean diplomats meticulously followed his instructions. At the same time, however, North Korea has played such a secondary role in the United Nations that most delegates gave the walk-out little attention.

North Korean Human Rights Are a Frequent UN Topic in 2024

UN institutions have given significant attention to human rights abuse in North Korea throughout the year. UN actions clearly indicate that the international focus on the Kim regime's egregious human rights violations remains strong, and the effort to press the regime on human rights will continue.

UN Human Rights Council. In April 2024, the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva devoted a full session to North Korean human rights violations in an interactive dialogue with Elizabeth Salmón, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the

DPRK since 2022. The session marked the tenth anniversary of the publication of the UN Commission of Inquiry report on human rights violations by North Korea, which was released and widely circulated and discussed in 2014.

Earlier this spring, Professor Salmón called for accountability measures from North Korea. Following an open discussion that included responses from the special rapporteur, the Human Rights Council adopted a resolution extending the mandate of the special rapporteur to ensure continued monitoring of human rights abuses in North Korea. The resolution also requested that the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights prepare an updated comprehensive report on human rights in North Korea in the decade since the Commission of Inquiry report was published in 2014.

UN Security Council. In June 2024, the UN Security Council devoted a meeting to North Korea's human rights abuses as a threat to international peace and security. China and Russia, two of the five permanent members of the Security Council, opposed the discussion, but their demands failed because a permanent member's veto does not apply to procedural votes, and the decision to hold the discussion was a procedural issue. Although the two permanent members voted against the agenda of the meeting, it was supported by the other three permanent members (France, Great Britain, and the United States) and seven of the ten elected council members.

In June 2024, South Korea's UN Ambassador Joonkook Hwang held the rotating chairmanship of the Security Council. His role as chair served to highlight differences between Seoul and Pyongyang at the United Nations. South Korea is serving as a member of the Security Council from 2024 to 2025. Since North and South Korea were admitted to the United Nations in 1991, North Korea has never been elected to serve a two-year term as a member of the Security Council.

During a meeting on North Korean human rights, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk told the Security Council that North Korea has "a stifling, claustrophobic environment, where life is a daily struggle devoid of hope." Türk added, "It is not possible to divorce the state of human rights in the DPRK from considerations around peace and security in the peninsula, including increasing militarization on the part of the DPRK." He said North Koreans "are at risk of death for merely watching or sharing a foreign television program," which he called a "particularly chilling example" of the repression of freedom of expression.

Another speaker at that session was Mr. Gumhyok Kim, a "representative of civil society" who was an official of one of the non-governmental human rights organizations involved with the United Nations. He left North Korea at the age of 19 in 2010 to study in Beijing. After using the internet in China, he learned "the horrific truth" about North Korea. He was taught in his homeland that North Koreans "had nothing to envy in the world," but he found out that North Korea was a place where there "were political prison camps, death from starvation, public executions, and people risking their lives to escape."

UN General Assembly. At the October 30 session of the General Assembly's Third Committee, Professor Salmón reported on continuing human rights abuses within North Korea. Her report called for the development of accountability measures, including reparations by the North Korean regime to provide "a remedy when human rights are violated." She called for efforts to "bring an end to serious violations of human rights obligations, such as enforced disappearance and torture upon repatriation."

Based on the report and recommendations of Professor Salmón, General Assembly member countries circulated a draft resolution calling for specific actions from the North Korean government to improve human rights conditions. The resolution has broad support, and adoption by the General Assembly is expected in the next few weeks.

Universal Periodic Review. This year is also the fourth time in the last 20 years that North Korea is undergoing the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process, under which the human rights conditions of all 193 UN member countries are discussed, criticized, and evaluated at the UN Human Rights Council. The process involves a formal self-evaluation by the country being reviewed, critique and comments from other UN member countries, and participation and evaluation by civil society groups. Because of the large number of UN member states, the review takes place for UN member countries every five years.

The UPR takes place at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. The Human Rights Council devotes three-and-a-half hours to a plenary session of the council for a discussion on the human rights status of each UN member country. The meeting on North Korea took place on November 7. The self-evaluation document by the North Korean government reflects the official line on human rights: North Korea, “under the wise leadership of the great Workers’ Party of Korea, made remarkable achievements in its efforts to create conditions for people to fully enjoy their rights in all fields of politics, the economy and culture by adopting important policy, legislative and practical measures and providing scientific and effective guidance to the process of their implementation.”

The UPR report, prepared by the UN human rights staff, relies heavily on the work of the special rapporteur on DPRK human rights and input from the staff of the UN North Korea Human Rights Office in Seoul. These UPR reports are more critical. A third group of reports are submitted by non-government organizations (NGOs), and these are also critical of North Korea’s human rights practices, with some organizations giving particularly harsh critiques.

Conclusion

Every year since 2004, the UN General Assembly has annually discussed human rights abuses in North Korea. These regular discussions in the General Assembly each October, as well as similar discussions annually in Geneva at the UN Human Rights Council in the early spring, provide an opportunity to focus attention on North Korea and urge improvement in its human rights. The annual discussion with the special rapporteur in October at the UN General Assembly further emphasizes North Korea’s human rights problems. This year, we saw an additional high-level discussion in the Security Council in June, as well as North Korea’s UPR in November. North Korea’s abuse of its citizens’ human rights received well-deserved attention.

We have not seen a dramatic breakthrough in progress on human rights as a result of UN actions, just as we have not seen such a breakthrough in limiting or reversing North Korea’s development and testing of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. But it is important that the international community continues to press North Korea on these issues. November 9 of this year marks the 35th anniversary of the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. It took decades of ongoing effort to see that happen. The international community should continue such an effort to press North Korea on human rights with the hope that North Korea can be moved in a more humane direction.

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