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The Significance of the UN General Assembly High-Level Meeting on North Korean Human Rights

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On May 20, 2025, the UN General Assembly held its first-ever “high-level session” devoted to the human rights abuses of North Korea. This latest action ups the ante in calling for reform of North Korea’s abysmal human rights record.

Every year since 2004, the General Assembly has [adopted resolutions](#) criticizing North Korea and calling for improvements in its human rights. The General Assembly’s [Third Committee for Social, Humanitarian & Cultural Issues](#) has held formal sessions devoted to discussing North Korean human rights. In addition, the [UN Human Rights Council](#) in Geneva has held annual formal sessions devoted to discussing North Korean human rights and has designated a special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in North Korea to present annual reports to the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly since 2004. [Elizabeth Salmón](#), distinguished professor of international law at the Faculty of Law of the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, has served as special rapporteur since 2022. The [UN Security Council](#) has also discussed the impact of North Korea’s human rights violations on international peace and security in periodic Security Council meetings over the last decade.

UN General Assembly High-Level Meeting Focuses on North Korean Abuses

A “high-level” session at the General Assembly is a significant step-up in pressing North Korea to make progress on human rights. In December 2024, following the discussion of North Korean human rights in the General Assembly’s Third Committee, a resolution was

adopted that called for holding this high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly. The resolution specifically called for testimonies from victims of North Korean human rights abuse, as well as statements from civil society representatives and experts on human rights law.

Representatives of UN member states convened the high-level meeting on May 20 in the 1,800-seat General Assembly chamber, which underscored the importance the United Nations places on North Korean human rights issues and the growing frustration that little has improved over the decades. In addition to statements by government representatives of UN member countries, speakers included victims who have suffered under the North Korean regime and advocates calling for an end to human rights abuses in North Korea.

Speakers included two escapees from North Korea, who shared harrowing stories of repression inside North Korea and the life-threatening dangers of attempting to leave. One speaker, who left North Korea when she was eleven years old, fled with her mother and sister. They endured human trafficking in China before they were finally able to reach South Korea. The other speaker fled just a few years ago during the COVID-19 pandemic. Her family faced persecution because of her grandmother's religious beliefs, and she reported that friends were executed by the state for the high crime of watching South Korean television dramas.

Speakers also included human rights advocates and experts on North Korean migration, who discussed the link between human rights violations and the repressive regime in Pyongyang. Greg Scarlatoiu, president and CEO of the U.S.-based Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, said the country is no longer just a threat to the Korean Peninsula but "is exporting instability to the Middle East and to Europe." He said that North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons gives the country greater ability to engage in human rights violations.

Special Rapporteur Salmón was one of the principal speakers at the session. She said that excessively strict measures put in place during the pandemic have left North Korea even more isolated. The tightening of the borders has "limited humanitarian assistance from UN and other organizations and tight access to information have aggravated living conditions." Salmón also said that the Kim regime exploits the labor force to finance its military programs because military spending limits resources available for investments in social well-being.

Representatives of a number of countries spoke following the abovementioned statements from victims, human rights organizations, and UN officials. The statement on behalf of the U.S. government was mildly critical of North Korea's human rights actions, saying the United States "calls upon the DPRK government to abide by its international obligations, to dismantle its political prison camps, and to respect the inalienable rights of its citizens." While South Korea and most other governments who spoke during the session were represented by their ambassador or deputy chief of mission to the United Nations, the United States currently does not have a UN ambassador.

The deputy chief of the U.S. mission to the United Nations or another senior U.S. diplomat in New York would normally be the appropriate person to represent the United States under such circumstances. Instead, the person who delivered the U.S. response was a "senior official" from the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor in Washington, DC. This individual's title was not sufficiently important to

identify it. Bringing a relatively junior official from Washington to make that statement reflects the Trump administration's low level of concern on the issue of North Korea's human rights violations. This appears to be a case where the messenger is the message.

Institutionalizing Accountability

The recent high-level meeting at the General Assembly devoted to North Korea's human rights abuse made an important statement. In addition to these formal UN meetings, which have resulted in resolutions criticizing the Kim regime for its human rights abuses, the UN Human Rights Council has designated human rights experts who continue to report periodically on abuses in North Korea.

As mentioned above, the UN Human Rights Council has designated a special rapporteur on North Korean human rights since 2004. The rapporteur must be reappointed each year, but the same individual can be reappointed for up to a total of six years. Four highly qualified and committed individuals have served as special rapporteur since the position was created. The reports by the special rapporteur are an important tool in identifying human rights abuses and urging action by UN agencies.

In addition to the ongoing work of the special rapporteurs, the UN Human Rights Council established a commission of inquiry (COI) in 2013 that was tasked with investigating systematic, widespread, and grave violations of human rights in North Korea and issuing a comprehensive and fully documented report. That report was thoroughly evaluated by the UN Human Rights Council and the General Assembly, and its analysis and recommendation have played a critical role in pressing North Korea to make changes.

Another important step that followed the release of the report of the COI was the establishment of the UN Human Rights Council office in Seoul in 2015. In the ten years that the office has been operating in South Korea, UN officials have published an important collection of well-documented reports on North Korean human rights abuses based on interviews with recent defectors from North Korea.

Conclusion

The United States has played a major role in calling international attention to North Korea's human rights abuses. Congress adopted the North Korean Human Rights Act in 2004, and the legislation was extended in 2008, 2012, and 2018. It provided aid to North Korean refugees, support for UN efforts to encourage human rights in North Korea, and the appointment of a U.S. ambassador/special envoy to lead the human rights effort. During Donald Trump's first term in office, he signed a reauthorization bill for the legislation in 2018 but did not appoint a human rights envoy for North Korea. President Joe Biden did appoint an envoy, although the legislation requiring the envoy had expired.

When Trump returned to the White House in January 2025, the special envoy for North Korean human rights (a career State Department officer) was named to another position in the State Department, and there are no indications that a new human rights envoy will be appointed. Ironically, Marco Rubio—when he was a U.S. senator—introduced legislation calling for the appointment of the North Korean human rights envoy in 2022 and 2024, but now, as secretary of state, he gives no indication he will seek the appointment of an envoy. In fact, the Trump administration withdrew U.S. participation in the UN Human

Rights Council less than a week after Trump was sworn in, calling into question the administration's commitment to addressing the issue of North Korean human rights abuses.

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