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Statement to the Security Council

on

The Situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea

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Mr. President,
Distinguished Members of the Council

Earlier this year, the representative of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea spoke very vividly to this Council about, I quote, the "savageness and brutality" of crimes against humanity committed against the Korean people during the Second World War.

Ambassador Ri listed massacres, abduction, forcible recruitment, forced labor and sexual slavery, which he said, "trampled on the dignity of Korean women and of the Korean nation as a whole."

This is the kind of compassion that we are seeking for victims in the Korean peninsula today. Victims of extermination. Of murder, enslavement and torture. Of rape, forced abortions and other sexual violence. Victims of persecution on political, religious, racial and gender grounds. People who have been forcibly transferred. Whose loved ones have been abducted or disappeared without trace. People who have been deliberately starved for long periods.

According to the Human Rights Council's Commission of Inquiry, these crimes have been perpetrated in the DPRK, in a widespread and systematic manner, as deliberate policy directed by the highest levels of Government. In many instances, they constitute crimes against humanity.

Before you today is the report of that Commission. Rarely has such an extensive charge-sheet of international crimes been brought to this Council's attention. It documents a totalitarian system that is characterised by brutally enforced denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as well as the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, information and association.

Songbun classification, which calibrates perceived loyalty to the State, generates extensive and damaging discrimination throughout the country. Where it intersects with gender-based discrimination, it increases the vulnerability of women and sharply limits their opportunities.

The DPRK Government has also used denial of the right to food to control and coerce its people. Actions by officials have caused the death of hundreds of thousands of people, according to the Commission, particularly during the famine of the 1990s – and have inflicted permanent physical and psychological injuries on survivors.

In November 2013, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Program (WFP) found that 84% of households – eight to nine families out of ten – were not consuming enough food. According to the latest National Nutrition Survey, in 2012, 28% of children under five suffered stunting from malnutrition, and almost 1 woman in 4 had been so starved that she risked giving birth to premature or underweight children.

DPRK nationals who manage to flee the country may fall victim to trafficking networks, and women often face forced marriage or forced prostitution. If forcibly returned, they face persecution, torture, forced abortion, prolonged arbitrary detention and even summary execution.

The Commission expressed its deepest horror at the DPRK's political prison-camp system (kwanliso), whose inmates suffer deliberate starvation, forced labour, executions, torture, rape, forced abortion and infanticide. The Commission estimated that hundreds of thousands of prisoners have perished in these camps over the past 50 years, and that they currently hold 80,000 to 120,000 people.

DPRK representatives have acknowledged the existence of what they term “reformatories”. I firmly believe that with honesty, transparency and international assistance, we can find a way to dismantle the camp system and release and rehabilitate prisoners. Other countries in the region have shown that it is possible to release thousands of political prisoners, and to roll back systems of administrative detention.

Mr. President,

The Commission of Inquiry has highlighted the connections between the human rights situation in the DPRK and security in the region overall. The sustained military focus and nuclear priority of the Government have been pursued at the expense of the economic and social rights – as well as the lives and well-being – of its people. Comprehensive human rights violations by the DPRK have had significant impact on regional peace and security, from international abductions and enforced disappearances to trafficking and the outflow of desperate refugees.

If we are to reduce tension in the region, there must be movement towards real respect for human rights in the DPRK. This is deserving of the Security Council’s fullest attention and action.

Excellencies,

Since the Commission of Inquiry report was published in March, with the prospect of action by this Council, the DPRK authorities have shown promising new signs of engagement with international human rights mechanisms.

They engaged productively in its second Universal Periodic Review in the Human Rights Council, and for the first time, accepted numerous recommendations, addressing humanitarian assistance, women and children’s rights, health and education.

DPRK representatives also held an unprecedented meeting with the Special Rapporteur. The DPRK also indicated for the first time its willingness to accept technical assistance from OHCHR.

Moreover, bilateral negotiations between the DPRK and Japan have reopened the investigations into alleged abductions of Japanese nationals. I hope this process will be conducted in transparency and good faith, leading to truth and redress for the families. It will also be important to bring clarity to reported abductions from the Republic of Korea and elsewhere.

All these developments may present an opportunity for real change. Other countries in the region have shown in the recent past that it is possible to dismantle deep-seated structures of repression and receive assistance in reform, leading to new recognition and standing in the international community.

My Office will naturally give all possible support to such progress, together with the international human rights mechanisms – and here I note that the Special Rapporteur should be invited to visit the DPRK without pre-conditions.

In March 2015, OHCHR will establish a field-based structure in Seoul, as mandated by Human Rights Council resolution 25/25. This will follow up the Commission of Inquiry, boost support to

the Special Rapporteur and serve as a hub for documentation, technical assistance and advocacy to advance accountability and improve human rights in the DPRK.

Excellencies,

Real change in the human rights situation in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea will require not only reform; it demands justice.

For the first time, a UN-mandated body has qualified human rights violations in the DPRK in terms of international criminal law. This is significant in establishing individual and institutional accountability, but it also invokes the international community's responsibility to take action to prevent and punish such crimes.

An overwhelming majority of Member States in the Human Rights Council and General Assembly – as well as victims, survivors and civil society organisations around the world – have asked that you, the Security Council of the United Nations, take action on this report, including by referral to the International Criminal Court and by adopting targeted sanctions.

As we have seen this year, concerted actions by the international community can have a powerful deterrent effect, and may begin to change the policy of the DPRK.

I believe that the Security Council can advance two crucial goals: accountability, and engagement for reform. Today's discussion has placed the DPRK on notice. The Council should carefully monitor developments in the coming months to see whether engagement leads to real change, or should take further action.

Distinguished members of the Council,

The people of the DPRK have endured decades of suffering and cruelty. They need your protection. And the cause of justice, peace and security in the region requires your leadership.

Thank you.