

Pillay urges more attention to human rights abuses in North Korea, calls for international inquiry

GENEVA (14 January) – The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights called Monday for the international community to put much more effort into tackling the “deplorable” human rights situation of people in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), and said the time had come for a full-fledged international inquiry into serious crimes that had been taking place in the country for decades.

“There were some initial hopes that the advent of a new leader might bring about some positive change in the human rights situation in DPRK,” Pillay said. “But a year after Kim Jong Un became the country’s new supreme leader, we see almost no sign of improvement.”

“I am also concerned that, at the international level, the spotlight is almost exclusively focused on DPRK’s nuclear programme and rocket launches,” she said. “While these, of course, are issues of enormous importance, they should not be allowed to overshadow the deplorable human rights situation in DPRK, which in one way or another affects almost the entire population and has no parallel anywhere else in the world.”

In December, the High Commissioner met with two survivors of DPRK’s elaborate network of political prison camps which are believed to contain 200,000 or more people. “Their personal stories were extremely harrowing,” she said. “They described a system that represents the very antithesis of international human rights norms. We know so little about these camps, and what we do know comes largely from the relatively few refugees who have managed to escape from the country. The highly developed system of international human rights protection that has had at least some positive impact in almost every country in the world, seems to have completely bypassed DPRK, where self-imposed isolation has allowed the government to mistreat its citizens to a degree that should be unthinkable in the 21st century.”

“The camp system not only punishes individuals for legitimate, peaceful activities – such as expressing dissenting opinions – it also involves rampant violations, including torture and other forms of cruel and inhumane treatment, summary executions, rape, slave labour, and forms of collective punishment that may amount to crimes against humanity,” Pillay said. “Living conditions in the camps are also reported to be atrocious, with totally insufficient food supplies, little or no medical care and inadequate clothing. One mother described to me how she had wrapped her baby in leaves when it was born, and later made her a blanket by sewing together old socks.”

The High Commissioner cited the case of one of the people she met who was born in a

camp and spent the first 23 years of his life there, where he was not only tortured and subjected to forced labour but, at the age of 14, was also made to watch the execution of his mother and his brother.

“The death penalty seems to be often applied for minor offenses and after wholly inadequate judicial processes, or sometimes without any judicial process at all,” Pillay said. “People who try to escape and are either caught, or sent back, face terrible reprisals including execution, torture and incarceration, often with their entire extended family.”

The High Commissioner has also previously met with families of Japanese nationals abducted by DPRK agents over many years – particularly in the 1970s and 80s – whose fate remains unknown.

“There is an urgent need to clarify the fate of the many South Koreans and Japanese, abducted by DPRK over the years, as well as the countless civilians in the South rounded up and taken to the North during the Korean War, and to seek truth, justice and redress for their long-suffering families,” the High Commissioner said.

“Six decades after the war, the plight of the tens of thousands of families separated by the conflict across South and North also remains largely unresolved,” she added.

“We have only had glimpses of this terrible system from those who do succeed in getting out, but what we do know should compel the international community to action,” she said. “For this reason, I believe it is time the international community took a much firmer step towards finding the truth and applying serious pressure to bring about change for this beleaguered, subjugated population of 20 million people.”

Noting that both the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly have adopted strong resolutions, without a vote, condemning the Government for the systematic human rights abuses taking place, the High Commissioner said it was time to take stronger action, and that a very significant first step could be made by setting up an independent international inquiry.

“For years now, the Government of DPRK has persistently refused to cooperate with successive Special Rapporteurs on the situation of human rights in the DPRK appointed by the Human Rights Council, or with my Office,” the High Commissioner said. “For this reason, and because of the enduring gravity of the situation, I believe an in-depth inquiry into one of the worst – but least understood and reported – human rights situations in the world is not only fully justified, but long overdue.”

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