

Breaking the wall of silence on North Korea

By Beatrice Basaldella for Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (09.07.2015) - On 2nd July, a large audience attended an event at the European Parliament on 'Human Rights in North Korea: Voices from the Peninsula,' organised by the European Institute for Asian Studies in cooperation with MEP László Tőkés. Defectors present at the hearing described atrocities and crimes against humanity that are systematically committed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), still ongoing and on a scale without parallel in any other country of the contemporary world.

In today's North Korea, asserted the speakers at the event, human rights are disregarded on a daily basis, even fundamental rights such as the right to food and right to life. Anyone can be arrested at any time under suspicion of disloyalty towards the regime and held on vague charges or for arbitrary reasons. Disappearances, harsh detention, torture and inhuman treatment are a daily reality in the country's extensive system of prison camps.

Such was the case for Gwang Il Jung, a former political prisoner at Camp 15 and defector. He is now the director of a non-governmental organisation called No Chain for North Korea. Jung was arrested and tortured for ten months – including beatings, electric shock, water torture and the infamous 'pigeon torture' – without ever knowing the reason for his detention. He finally ended the ordeal by confessing to the false accusation of being a spy. Jung said that his experience mirrors that which thousands of North Koreans endure on a regular basis.

For three years (April 2000 to April 2003), Jung was also imprisoned at Yodok, a political-penal labour camp located in South Hamgyong Province. He described the inhuman conditions to which the camp's prisoners were subjected: working 16 hours per day – from 4am until 8pm – on corn agriculture during summer and logging in winter. The strain was made even more intense by the meagre ration of food that was provided to prisoners: 200 grams of corn and beans per meal. If the inmate failed to complete his daily tasks, he would not receive his food ration.

Jung described two episodes which he personally experienced. One day a competition was set up by camp's officials: the stake was a kilo of corn cake. The winning group was the one that cut the most trees. Motivated by hunger and in order to win, some prisoners pushed the trees down the mountain, causing the death and injury of several prisoners in an opposing group. On another occasion, Jung passed by the 'death house,' where the bodies of the dead were stored. He heard the sounds of groans and suffering. Then he suddenly realised that many people placed in the death house were still alive and left there to die from the effects of pain and cold. 'That noise stayed with me all night long, (...) I couldn't sleep' he said.

On 21 March 2013, the United Nations Human Rights Council established a Commission of Inquiry on human rights in the DPRK to investigate reports of widespread and grave violations of human rights in the country with the view of ensuring full accountability for these violations, particularly for those which may be found to constitute crimes against humanity. At the end of the Commission's mandate in February 2014, a wide array of crimes against humanity and 'unspeakable atrocities' were reported to have been committed and continue in the country. The report urges an immediate end to these egregious violations.

Eun Kyoung Kwon testified at the event as representative of the International Coalition to Stop Crimes Against Humanity in North Korea, saying that allegations of crimes against humanity have taken place in North Korea are now well documented and undeniable. Imprisonment, enslavement, killings, forced disappearances and other actions committed systematically and on a massive scale against a civilian population constitute crimes against humanity. 'People vanish with the dismantlement of camps,' she said. 'States in relations with North Korea have to ask the government where these people are.'

David Fouquet, a journalist and consultant on European-Asian relations, described the EU attitude towards North Korea as 'interested and engaged to a limited degree.' Stronger

pressure and support coming from the 'outside world' could play a fundamental role in fostering change, he said. One key action would be to press the North Korean government to allocate more money to developing the economy rather than reinforcing the military sector.

Young Hwan Kim, a researcher at the Network for North Korean Democracy and Human Rights, commented that 'North Korea shows no interest in engaging in a dialogue with the EU, but the international community has to show that North Korea is monitored and controlled in terms of human rights violations.'

The evidence against the DPRK government is compelling. Crimes, included crimes against humanity, have been committed. The world is now informed. The North Korean authorities have severely inhibited communication with the outside world, prompting activists to resort to other means for bringing news to the citizens of North Korea. Some have tried to smuggle literature and foreign newspapers, others have used radio, while others have even dropped anti-regime information via hot-air balloons. Still the fiction of government propaganda lives on and critics of the regime are swiftly and brutally suppressed.

North Koreans deserve much more than the obligation to venerate their oppressor, Kim Jong-un. We cannot be oblivious any more to the tragedy that is unfolding in the DPRK. It is time to seek accountability at the International Criminal Court for the atrocities committed in this country. It is our responsibility to break the wall of silence.