



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**

### **North Korea: Denuclearization Talks and Human Rights**

**Thursday, September 13, 2018**

**2:00 – 3:30 p.m.**

**2255 Rayburn House Office Building**

#### **Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery**

Good afternoon. I join my colleague and co-chair Rep. Hultgren in welcoming the witnesses and those of you in the audience to the Commission's hearing on human rights and denuclearization in North Korea.

These days there are not many issues that inspire near universal agreement in the international community. But recognition of the horrendous human rights situation in North Korea is one of them.

In 2013, the UN Human Rights Council established a Commission of Inquiry to investigate "the systematic, widespread and grave violations of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea ... with a view to ensuring full accountability."

The Commission's final report found that the North Korean regime had committed crimes against humanity and called for a UN Security Council referral to the International Criminal Court. In 2014 the UN General Assembly approved a resolution echoing that call with an overwhelming vote.

In March 2017 the UN Human Rights Council resolved to establish a repository to archive evidence detailing the country's human rights violations.

These uncommon UN actions reflect the severity of the abuses in North Korea, which include a total denial of civil, political and religious liberties; mass imprisonment with severe

physical abuse; torture and executions; food shortages leading to starvation and lack of access to medical care; and lack of freedom of movement.

Essentially every single right that **should** be guaranteed is not.

Meanwhile, North Korea has active nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, and is also believed to have chemical and biological weapons capacities.

On the nuclear front, North Korea is unconstrained by international agreements. It unilaterally withdrew from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in 2003, is not a party to the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, and has conducted six increasingly sophisticated nuclear tests since 2006.

I think it's fair to say that Kim Jung-un makes most of us very, very nervous. And for that reason alone, most people welcomed the de-escalation of tension between the U.S. and North Korea that accompanied President Trump's summit with the North Korean leader last June.

But it is also clear that the summit marked the beginning of a process, not the end. No agreement is in place, and negotiations seem to be on-going.

So it is a good moment to ask how the human rights situation interacts with the nuclear problem, and whether the two can or should be addressed simultaneously.

I strongly support denuclearization, not just in North Korea but throughout the world. Ridding the world of the threat of nuclear destruction would be one of the greatest gifts we could give to our children and the generations to come.

I also believe that the way to achieve that goal is through direct, strong, persistent, multilateral diplomatic engagement. I have not taken the position that human rights must be part of nuclear negotiations, and I would not want a failure to improve human rights to preclude a nuclear deal.

But although we know that Kim Jung-un believes nuclear weapons are necessary to secure his regime's existence, the risks to the regime are not only – or perhaps even mainly – external. In the long run, I expect the biggest and most important threats are internal.

The Commission of Inquiry described the human rights violations in North Korea not as mere excesses of the state, but as “essential components” of a political system that seeks to dominate every aspect of its citizens' lives and terrorizes them from within.

Certainly fear can be deployed to sustain a barbarous regime for a while – but not forever.

And as western media and others begin to have at least some limited access to the country, we are also seeing how decades of near-isolation have consolidated the state's hold over how its citizens think, believe, and interpret the outside world.

Perhaps we need to rethink the role human rights could play in denuclearization talks.

Instead of dropping discussion of human rights once the regime comes to the table, maybe we should approach measures to improve human rights as strategic steps to ease internal sources of pressure and instability – as well as ways to increase the confidence of the international community.

The reunification and communication between family members living in the North and the South are other ways tensions might ease not just in the political sphere, but in the human rights landscape as well.

A nuclear North Korea is not in anyone's interest. But neither is a North Korea that collapses due to internal unrest.

Our witnesses will be discussing ideas along these lines today, and I look forward to hearing their views and recommendations.

Thank you.