

HAWAII CONFERENCE 2023 NORTH KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS: “CHALLENGES TO
DEMOCRACY”
DECEMBER 4, 2023
HONOLULU, HAWAII

OVERVIEW

The Peaceful Unification Advisory Council(PUAC)’s Global Strategy Committee, East-West Center, and the ROK Consulate General in Honolulu will host a conference on December 4 in Honolulu, Hawaii. The event will feature the U.S. and ROK North Korean human rights ambassadors and experts on the Korean Peninsula issues to raise awareness of North Korea’s continuous human rights violations and discuss ways to enhance the situation.

On November 9, the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) published a draft of its North Korean human rights resolution. The UNGA has adopted North Korean human rights resolutions for 18 consecutive years, and since 2016, it has adopted the resolution by consensus. “By consensus” means that all UN Member States have agreed to adopt a draft resolution without taking a vote, showing that the international community takes North Korean human rights seriously.

This year’s resolution, particularly, has expressed concerns about the forced repatriation of North Korean refugees following the opening of the North Korean-Chinese border. Recently, China forcibly repatriated more than 500 North Korean defectors based in China, drawing criticism from the international community. The resolution also cited the United Nations Convention Against Torture when referring to China’s forced repatriation.

The Hawaii Conference 2023 will cover global human rights issues, including China’s forced repatriation. The human rights experts from both the U.S. and the ROK will speak about how to improve the human rights of 26 million North Korean people suffering under one person, Kim Jong-un, and ways to enhance human rights.

-Conference Website

STUDENT EXPERIENCES

WRITTEN BY: JISU SHIN

I loved being able to attend the conference. One of the main things I feel like it did was open my eyes to the nature of conflict and the possibilities of actionable peace. It impressed me to see so many people who were deeply involved at all different levels of diplomacy and politics. It was also incredible to be opened to different perspectives. I had never considered nuclearization as a human rights violation, but after Ambassador Lee explained it I have not been able to not think about the two together. I also appreciated the nuanced perspectives that were offered. I think it was incredible (and I know I'm using the word incredible a lot but I'm still kind of in awe at the sheer brilliance, eloquence, grace, and authenticity of Ambassadors Turner and Lee, as well as Suzanne Vares-Lum from the East-West Center) to be able to network and to see the possibilities of careers.

I think it also was just an opportunity to see what Peacebuilding looks like on the ground and got me thinking about the practical applications of Peacebuilding. It makes it harder when it's real, but I feel like if we are not asking ourselves the hard questions of how to apply what we learn in the classroom to human rights atrocities, then we're doing it wrong. If anything, the conference has helped me to think more deeply about the systems of change that need to be in place and the items of actionable peace that were mentioned. I am grateful for the opportunity and hope several students will be able to go and learn more at conferences like these.

WRITTEN BY: HANNAH HARDING

I have always been vaguely aware of the lack of protection for human rights in North Korea; it's common knowledge. However, I had never learned much about the situation or thought about what could be done about it. It seems to me that the human rights violations in North Korea are something that everyone knows about yet ignores. I knew that conditions there are not good, but learning about forced repatriation of escapees and the work camps was a shock. Hearing the comparison of the conditions in North Korea now and those in Europe in World War II was heartbreaking, and made me question if we as an international community are really doing all we can to respond.

My understanding was that due to political instability and the international relationships with North Korea, there wasn't anything that could be done. Attending this conference in Honolulu, where "what can be done" was a large topic, was thus really interesting. From the international scale to individual efforts, there were many ideas given on what we can do, as well as a broad range of opinions on how much we can really do. I found it especially interesting that raising awareness and increasing global focus on the situation as a way to respond was a recurring theme.

It was wonderful to meet and chat with Julie Turner, an ambassador from the State Department, after the conference. She had encouraged the audience to get involved in the ways available to them. While speaking with her, Ambassador Turner said that she would be happy to speak virtually at an event hosted by RFHD or BYU-Hawaii if we ever want her to do so.

WRITTEN BY: ELLE LARSON

The North Korean conference opened my eyes to the grave situation in North Korea. I enjoyed learning about the efforts Koreans and Americans are taking to help rescue people from their corrupted home. My favorite part was getting to know a graduate student from UH who also attended the conference. He explained to me that he came to study in Hawaii from his home in Cambodia. Later, we found out one of my friends, whom I made in religion class here at BYUH, taught his oldest son in elementary school back in Cambodia.

I'm grateful for the incredible connections I've made with people through my experiences at BYUH. The world is big, but by attending conferences like this one and representing one of the nation's most diverse campuses, it becomes clear that we are all connected, and we all share a responsibility to care for one another. That was my biggest takeaway from learning about North Korea in Honolulu.

WRITTEN BY: MADISON JULIEN

I loved this conference, mostly because it ignited inside me the desire to help the people of North Korea. Earlier in the Fall semester I happened across an article that talked about the plight of the North Korean people, and so the issues that North Koreans face had been on the back of my mind for quite a few days after I read the article. When Hannah Harding invited me to this conference I was surprised by the coincidence of the topic I had actually been thinking about, and of course said yes to her invite.

The speakers at the conference did a wonderful job and I felt really grateful that a group of BYUH students got to go be apart of this really professional and informative conference. At the conference they talked about the Human Rights violations that have happened under the rule of Kim Jong Un, and talked about some of the problems the international community faces trying to help the people of North Korea. They brought in a man from South Korea who helps refugees escape and he told us his story of how he came to help these people, it was really heart wrenching to listen to how desperate some of those people were to leave North Korea.

This conference was very informative, and while I didn't fully understand all the concepts that were discussed I still learned quite a bit. I may be in school at the moment but I hope to one day make a difference for those who are oppressed.

WRITTEN BY: JAMIS SCHRINER

I really loved the North Korean Conference on protecting human rights and democracy in the Korean Peninsula. I learned a lot! I am enrolled in both peacebuilding and Political Science courses, so it was a great way for me to see how the theories I have learned about work together in a real world conflict, and it was really incredible to see how these politicians and ambassadors use these theories to communicate the conflict and potential solutions that they proposed. Honestly, I came in pretty cynical, because they were talking about how we were going to change a country's policies, when said country has been historically uncooperative and unwilling to change. However, They proposed some really insightful and realistic steps that the U.S. can take to lessen the reach of North Korea, and in effect, diminish their threats to both democracy, human rights, and security in East Asia and the International World!

I learned a lot from the politicians, but I especially learned a great deal from the South Korean Author Jisung Lee who has taken it upon himself to serve North Korean 'defectors' and aid them in their escape towards freedom. He was very genuine, and while he may gain some amount of recognition from what he does, it is clear that he has spent so much of his time and money into this cause that his motives are unquestionable. He inspired the entire audience to see how much one man can do in bringing about good on a disenfranchised people, without having to be a politician or incredibly famous. I gained a great deal of trust in the political world and saw that while there is definitely corruption in politics, the politicians that we got to meet were good people with motives to make a positive change in their communities and in the world. That changed so much of how I see the American Government as a whole, and helped me to have much more faith in what it is doing in every sphere where it is involved.

WRITTEN BY: ISABELLE HANCOCK

Attending the North Korea conference was such an eye-opening experience for me. The human rights violations are certainly not a new issue, which makes it difficult to understand why more hasn't been done to help the people. This conference provided several perspectives on why very little has changed and possible new solutions to fight the crisis. Something that surprised me was how dangerous it is for those who escape to nearby countries. It was disturbing to learn that once North Koreans flee to China, they are abused and discriminated against instead of rehabilitated.

Ambassador Julie Turner had five suggestions to support the North Korean refugees: first, the United States needs to work closely with allies by lifting the North Korean voices. Second, promote accountability for those who enforce the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Third, press the DPRK to implement United Nations' recommendations. Fourth, support the North Korean refugee community through repatriation. Lastly, seek humanitarian solutions to reunite divided refugee families in the United States. Ultimately, learning from these individuals and seeing how real people tackle world-wide problems was inspiring to me and helped me understand that normal people can have real world impacts.

CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

Opening

2:30pm~3:00pm

- Welcome and congratulatory remarks

Keynote Addresses

3:00pm~3:30pm

- Speeches presented by distinguished speakers

Testimony & Interview

3:30pm~4:30pm

- Interview with special guests
- Testimonies of defections

Panel Discussion

4:30pm~5:50pm

- North Korean Human Rights Violations

Conference Closing Remarks

5:50pm~6:00pm

Buffet Dinner

6:00pm~7:30pm

Presentation of Proclamation

7:30pm~8:00pm

- Award presentation by Hawai'i State Officials

SUMMARY REPORTS

OPENING REMARKS

WRITTEN BY: HANNAH HARDING

Introduction:

Speakers welcomed the audience and expressed excitement for the conference.

Yoon Suk Yeol: *President, South Korea*

In these prerecorded remarks from the opening session of the Peaceful Reunification Advisory Council, President Yoon discussed the critical nature of human rights as they seek to unify. Rights in North Korea must be addressed and truth must be spoken for their efforts to succeed.

Myong Hae Kim (Annie Chan): *Chair, PUAC Global Strategy Special Committee*

Hawai'i plays a vital role in the security of the Pacific because of its ability to be a bridge between Asia and the US, both geographically and culturally. This island and the people here are important in uniting international efforts to help the human rights situation in North Korea.

Bong Ryong Park: *President, PUAC Hawai'i Chapter*

Bong Ryong Park welcomed the audience and thanked them for their attendance.

Suzanne Vares-Lum: *President, East-West Center*

In 2018, the relationship between North Korea and the United States was such that, when a false missile alarm was sent out in Hawai'i, it was believable. The human rights situation in North Korea does not just affect the people living there, but international relationships and stability.

Sam Satoru Kong: *Hawai'i State Senator*

Senator Kong's Chief of Staff attended the conference and spoke in his place, urging the audience to never take for granted their ability to speak freely.

KEYNOTE ADDRESSES

WRITTEN BY: HANNAH HARDING

Introduction:

Ambassadors spoke on the state of human rights in North Korea in context of the broader world and its affect on global issues.

Lee Shin-wha: *Republic of Korea Ambassador for International Cooperation on North Korean Human Rights*

We cannot sideline the issue of human rights grievances in North Korea by only focusing on the issue of nuclear threat; we must balance both issues. Although there was a UN Commission of Inquiry on human rights in North Korea ten years ago, it continues to be a forgotten issue on global media. There are over one thousand defectors from North Korea currently detained in centers in China, which is actively violating international immigrant law by separating families through forced repatriation (sending defectors back to North Korea). Current human rights concerns include food shortages, too long of work days, radiation concerns, and paychecks going directly to the political party. Lee Shin-wha compared these conditions to modern-day slavery. She said we need new and innovative solutions, and that the young people in North Korea are key agents for change. The question is how we can protect and empower them.

Julie Turner: *United States Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights*

Ambassador Turner briefly mentioned the conditions in North Korea; there are enforced labor camps, and even watching K-Dramas and using South Korean slang are illegal. She said that we must “be a voice for the voiceless, and show the people of North Korea that we see them.” We should support the free flow of info into, out of, and within the country. We must push for accountability and work to support the North Korean refugees around the world, because the country’s crisis is linked to international peace.

Morse H. Tan: *Dean of Liberty University School of Law, Former Ambassador at Large for Global Criminal Justice*

The government of North Korea wants 3 things: to improve South Korea’s perception of their country, to weaken US-South Korean relations and the United States’s commitment to defend South Korea, and to take South Korea by force. According to Morse H. Tan, they work to accomplish this with a 5-fold strategy: create a crisis, arrange negotiations as desired, take advantage of benefits, break the commitment, and repeat. He describes the human rights situation in North Korea as “rightlessness;” the people are afforded not one single right listed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Concentration camps exist, with a three-generation detainment policy for those accused of political rebellion. “Peace is not possible in the peninsula without justice,” Tan says. He places the human rights violations, war crimes, and genocide

occurring in North Korea as the number one human rights crisis worldwide, saying that “we should care, and we should act.”

SPECIAL GUEST INTERVIEW
WRITTEN BY: HANNAH HARDING

Introduction:

The audience listened to a keynote address followed by a special interview with this session's speaker.

Jisung Lee: *Activist/Author*

According to Jisung Lee, South Korean citizens are often ignorant of the problems surrounding human rights in North Korea. However, he became involved in the work of rescuing North Korean escapees and raised two million dollars to do so, despite the dangers to his personal life that followed. Not only is there forced repatriation occurring at the border of China by North Korea, but sex and human trafficking for the purpose of organ sale. To Jisung Lee, his religion plays a role in his rescue efforts; he quoted a scripture from the book of Proverbs that teaches us to take care of others when they are in danger.

Interviewer - Greg Scarlatolu: *Executive Director of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK)*

Q: *How do you keep up the motivation for this work?*

Lee: Jisung Lee described feeling fatigued about the situation. He said that, just a few days before, he had wanted to stop and asked himself "Why am I even saving North Koreans?" He said that being given the opportunity to present at this conference was the extra encouragement that he needed to continue. He also quoted his faith once again as his driving force; his identity as a Christian and faith in the Bible is what keeps him going. "One cannot engage in this work without God's help," he said. Then he quoted Matthew 25:40, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

Q: *China's repatriation violates the 1951 UN Refugee Convention--How can we stop it?*

Lee: He suggests that we urge China to change, but also don't depend on it doing so. "You think you can stop it?" he asked, seeming to be incredulous. Jisung Lee said that the simple solution instead is to continue the rescue efforts that are in progress.

Q: *Tell us about your 10-step plan for saving North Korean escapees.*

Lee: Jisung Lee gave a few brief details on the plan, reading from his book titled "10,000 KM: Days with North Korea's Schindler." The plan includes diverse steps, from building a network inside of North Korea to rescuing escapees in China, from building secret shelters for women to establishing missionaries in Thailand, Myanmar and Vietnam.

PANEL DISCUSSION

WRITTEN BY: HANNAH HARDING

Introduction:

Speakers took turns answering pre-written questions and some from the audience.

Lee Shin-wha: *Republic of Korea Ambassador for International Cooperation on North Korean Human Rights*

The Trump administration in the US and the Moon administration in South Korea silenced the issues of human rights in North Korea in favor of focusing on denuclearization issues. We must focus on making sure human rights and human dignity are better protected according to international law.

Julie Turner: *United States Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights*

There is a focus on security within the South Korean-US alliance on addressing human rights in North Korea, but there are also people-to-people interactions. The alliance is founded on shared values, such as human dignity and democracy.

Morse H. Tan: *Dean of Liberty University School of Law, Former Ambassador at Large for Global Criminal Justice*

The correct balance between focusing on security concerns and issues of human rights would be to solve both issues together. The South Korean Constitution states that everyone on the Korean peninsula are a South Korean citizen, even those in North Korea. So, South Korea could indict Kim Jong Un for the human rights violations and put a warrant out for his arrest as disuasion. South Korea passed a North Korean Human Rights act, but they could also set up a Truth + Reconciliation committee to hold those most responsible accountable, as well as use every possible avenue to get the word out.

Col. Grant Newsham, USMC, Ret.: *President of CPAC-Korea*

International security is more than just a military or technological issue, it's also a psychological issue. Identifying human rights violations are important to help your public and military understand why you must take action. There is a regional aspect to the situation in North Korea, we must also look at who provides them oil, electricity, etc.

Lee: North Korea wants to keep their status in the nuclear power area in order to keep their regime. This is done internally through extreme control and policies of fear, which is how denuclearization and human rights are related.

Turner: With other international crises happening, how can we keep North Korean human rights a focus? We should integrate them into global conversations and hold them to international law

instead of treating them as an oddity. “Now is the time for action,” Ambassador Turner said. We should use with North Korea the tools we use elsewhere to document abuses and hold people accountable.

Tan: “No matter what challenges you face in trying to help others, it’s not as great as what they are facing,” said Ambassador Tan. North Korea needs a “mass atrocities determination” by the US. There should never be an immunity for mass atrocities (such as genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity), even if the person is the head of a state; Kim should be prosecuted. We should also do what we can to help North Koreans know that freedom exists outside and increase their access to information.

Newsham: Information is critical in a situation like this, and there ways to gather information here are ways to get info—we should consider using the private sector. The US could act as though North Korean human rights were the number one intelligence priority, and then they’d know just about anything they want to.

Lee: We must use a cautious and deliberate diplomacy approach with China, to show them that they must follow international law if they want to be a global leader. We must also use both brain and heart to solve the problem.

Turner: The testimonies we have from a recent report from the UN shows that the most effective strategies for helping North Korean defectors is to send information back to into the country through things like radio broadcasts and drives. All escapee stories start with someone having contact with foreign information. According to Ambassador Turner, “They need to hear that someone knows what’s happening there and is fighting and advocating for them.”

Tan: There are hundreds of refugees in the US, thousands in South Korea, and hundreds of thousand in China. We must uphold North Korean human rights acts and thus build future leaders of North Korea. The top of the country’s assassination lists are the defectors who are speaking up.

Newsham: How can we change encourage China to change its repatriation policy? One approach is to make it personal, to publicize oversea family members and make leaders think about what they’ll face if they don’t change their policies. We have to put pressure on them to get conversations started. We should use the US’s full potential of political warfare and use psychological strategies instead of only military.

CLOSING REMARKS

WRITTEN BY: HANNAH HARDING

Introduction:

This speaker closed the conference with his comments on the situation in North Korea.

Ralph A. Cossa: *President Emeritus and WSD-Handa Chair in Peace Studies, Pacific Forum*

The leaders of North Korea are not crazy; if we think they are irrational, we just don't understand why they think that what they are doing is rational. They are doing what they are because it works. North Korea is playing a role in other current security concerns, too. We need to put pressure back on North Korea and remind people of their human rights. There is a danger in the fact that we care more about the plight of North Korean citizens than their leaders.

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