

# IN THE PUBLIC EYE: MONITORING HUMAN RIGHTS IN NORTH KOREA

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*Interview with Signe Poulsen*

*Representative at UN Human Rights Office Seoul*

*The Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, established by the United Nations Human Rights Council, released a ground-breaking report in February 2014. The Yonsei Journal of International Studies was able to interview the Hon. Michael Kirby, the Chair of the Commission of Inquiry in our Vol. 6 no. 2 Issue "Modern Conflicts". As a follow up to interview with Hon. Michael Kirby, the Yonsei Journal's Editor Gene Kim sat down with the Representative of the United Nations Human Rights Office in Seoul which was established as a follow-up to the COI Report.*

## **Y: Please tell us about your current position in Seoul**

Our office, which opened in June, is in a way is a follow-up to the Commission of Inquiry report that came out in 2014. In that report, the Commission of Inquiry did a lot of research on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and concluded that the human rights violations committed there in many cases amounted to crimes against humanity. So, following that very strong statement and that very strong report, the Human Rights Council issued a resolution in which it agreed to set up an office to follow up on COI recommendations but more than that to look into the human rights situation in the DPRK more broadly. That resolution also specifies that we have other tasks. One of them is technical cooperation, and that can mean working with relevant governments, including the DPRK government, if that should be possible, but also the governments of Japan, the Republic of Korea, the US and others who are involved, to implement human rights standards in relation to the DPRK.

And also to engage in outreach, keeping the issue in the media, getting the correct information out there, working with civil society, hosting seminars, all of those kinds of things. In terms of both the monitoring and outreach mandate, we have worked very closely with civil society and other institu-

tions that exist in Seoul already and beyond Seoul, too, because a lot of them have so much information and experience in this. We are sort of the new people coming in, and we don't have as much expertise in the Korean context. But we do have the UN context, and I think that's what we are trying to contribute, to bring the human rights situation in the DPRK into the international arena as a true international human rights problem.

**Y: Please tell us about your background**

I started out in the UN about ten years ago. My background is mainly in peacekeeping operations, so I worked mainly in Liberia and East Timor for many years, but I also had postings in Kyrgyzstan and in Papua New Guinea most recently. So I've worked mainly in Asia and in peacekeeping. Before joining the UN, I was involved with international human rights organizations and civil society organizations like Amnesty International and International Commission of Jurists.

**Y: How is that previous work informing what you are doing now?**

I think it's really important to look at human rights situations in their contexts—each context is unique and has its own challenges and own complexities. It's important to, of course, be knowledgeable about those, and the cultural, political, historical, economic contexts, but also by having been in different contexts, hopefully to be able to take a step back and say as human beings, what's similar and what lessons can we learn from each other. Things like justice and accountability, yes victims experience these in different ways but in the end, in many different contexts, you hear victims wanting recognition of their suffering. I don't think that necessarily matters whether you are in East Timor or Papua New Guinea or the DPRK or the ROK for that matter. That's just one example. What matters to them may be different to different people and that's not for us to dictate; meaningful justice is also victim-centered. But I hope that's one of the things I can bring.

**Y: The Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK (COI) published in February 2014 a report of their findings, including reports of crimes against humanity. What influence has this report had on the human rights situation in the DPRK and discussions about the issue?**

Civil society and others have known about and documented the serious violations of human rights in the DPRK for a long time. But what the COI report did was to bring this information to a different level, to put that information together in one place. It verified some of the information that had been col-

lected by different sources and put them together in one report, and then managed to get the UN backing for that report through resolutions and adoptions. I think that really has highlighted the DPRK issue not as a Korean peninsula issue but as a global human rights issue. Because once we have crimes against humanity, it's a concern to all of us, and that, I think, is perhaps the greatest contribution that the COI made, rather than individual facts that may have come out, because I think those are well-documented by many different sources. Perhaps particularly here in the ROK, but even beyond.

**Y: The current UN Special Rapporteur, Marzuki Darusman, was appointed by UN General Secretary Ban Ki-Moon in 2010. What are some of the initiatives that he has undertaken during his tenure as the UN representative for this issue?**

He was on the Commission of Inquiry so that is one major achievement. But there are many issues that he's brought out as human rights issues. One of that is the issue of separated families, and that's very topical now with the "reunions" going on, a very positive step, something even the Secretary-General has welcomed in a statement, welcoming these from the UN. The other issues he's raised is that of international abductees, also very important in that it highlights the international nature and impact of the system. And I think during his most recent visit last month, he was looking into highlighting things like accountability and how that might play out in the future.

**Y: What are some ways that the UNHR office monitors and documents the situation of human rights in North Korea?**

It's difficult. Ideally we would have access and then it would be much easier to verify our information. We do talk to people who have come from the DPRK and who are now living in the ROK, and there are lots of them. But also when we travel we try to take the opportunity to speak to people who have left the DPRK and are living in other places. And we try to get information from all sources we can and then triangulate it so that at least we have some verification that the stories are not just made up but actually are true. That can be very difficult and painstaking work, but it has to be done.

**Y: And some of those stories were included in the Commission of Inquiry report.**

Yes. I mean we're not repeating what the report did, but we are following up and trying to broaden the knowledge in there.

**Y: Pyongyang has occasionally sponsored events intended to attract large groups of foreigners for short periods of time, such as the Pyongyang Marathon, the last of which was just held in April of this year. What influence do such events have on public perceptions of North Korea?**

I don't know what they do to public perception, but maybe more broadly what I would say is interactions between peoples builds trust, and it's a bit like family reunions. Will it bring some positive credit to the DPRK? Yes, but those interactions are incredibly important. And so I think it has to be carefully thought about. However, in terms of person-to-person interactions, sporting events, all of those things, I think they can be very important in fostering trust and reconciliation and understanding, and also understanding within the DPRK about what the rest of the world is actually like. Because that's what we really want people to know. Whether that's propaganda, I don't know.

**Y: What are some of the challenges of doing human rights work? What are some areas for improvement that you see in the way a large organization like the United Nations investigates human rights abuses?**

No country is perfect when it comes to human rights. One of the issues is to keep that balance. I think things like accuracy, cooperation, and collaboration, to make countries understand why human rights compliance is helpful to them and not just difficult is one of the challenges. In terms of collecting information, of course we try to be as careful and as meticulous as we can, but it can be challenging because in the end, like in the case of the DPRK we are relying on individual statements a lot of the time, not only, but much of the time. So not having access is a big challenge.

But what I'm thinking is that working the way we do is such a luxury. When we talk about challenges, there are people at the grassroots level in many countries who get on and do the human rights work without a salary or computer or electricity. Those individuals probably exist within the DPRK too, and they may not be calling it human rights, they may be assisting people in their local communities. So I think those are the people who really have the frontline challenges. Our challenge is how to support those people. **Y**