

INTERVIEW

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Deputy Director General of Citizens' Alliance for
North Korean Human Rights**

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In this interview, Joanna Zenona Hosaniak, Deputy Director General of Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights and Adjunct Professor at the Yonsei Graduate School of International Studies, shares profound insights into the human rights landscape in North Korea. With a focus on the challenges and the crucial role of advocacy in addressing these issues, Ph.D. Joana Zenona Hosaniak's expertise provides a comprehensive understanding of the complex realities faced by the North Korean people. Through her lens, this interview aims to deepen awareness and foster a collective commitment to addressing pressing human rights concerns in North Korea.

YJIS: Could you delve into the human rights situation in North Korea, explaining to our readers some of the most critical issues and briefly informing them about some initiatives that the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights is taking to address these challenges?

JZH: Thank you very much for this opportunity. First, let me briefly introduce myself. I am the Deputy Director General at the Citizens Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, the oldest organization in South Korea devoted solely to addressing North Korean human rights issues. Back in the 90s, neither the international community nor the UN system was addressing the human rights issue in North Korea. We believe it is very important to internationalize and transnationalize the issue, especially during the mid-90s, so we have been working since then.

In North Korea, the biggest problem we observed is the Songbun system, which is similar to the caste systems that have operated in other countries. It was artificially created by the government, dividing the population based on allegiance to the state and on family history. Family history typically traces back three generations, but for high-level positions at the government, they screen people from between five to eight generations to ensure that only the most loyal people will be part of

the elites. Those who are classified under the lowest level of the system are usually subjected to all forms of discrimination. Such discrimination is not only in terms of access to education, as very often they cannot receive any secondary education; they also cannot choose jobs as they frequently inherit jobs from their parents. Moreover, this type of discrimination limits their right to food. That means the kind of food they eat also depends on the class they belong to.

That is why, when a huge wave of North Koreans fled to China in the mid-90s, the majority of them belonged to the lowest caste in North Korea. These were the most discriminated against and the most affected by famine. We suspect that at least one to two million people died of hunger at that time. Many of the victims started to flee to other countries as well, including South Korea. At that time, the civil society in South Korea organized itself and the Citizens' Alliance pioneered information gathering and documenting the situation in North Korea by interviewing those who escaped.

It is also important to advocate with the government to establish a support system for those coming here. We often say that this is one ethnic group, Koreans, who speak the same language; yet for 70 years, they have been living in a completely different system, so it is hard for them to resettle and adjust to life in a democratic and technologically advanced country like South Korea.

We not only encourage the government to create special policies for this population but also create different types of programs ourselves. Since the beginning, Citizens' Alliance has been providing special resettlement and education programs for North Korean children and youth. We also provide rescue operations in China for women who have been trafficked by Chinese criminal organizations. We help these women and children and offer them a safe place in South Korea.

YJIS: Would you say that the human rights situation in North Korea has become worse compared to the 1990s?

JZH: Yes, we suspect that. However, nobody really knows what the situation is right now because, for three years throughout the pandemic, North Korea has sealed off its borders. This action has essentially cut off the country, considering its closure of the northern borders, which previously facilitated various forms of trade and information exchange.

Many embassies were also expelled from North Korea; the UN was requested to leave, and so on. Nobody is sure what is happening in the country. There were not a lot of new escapees from North Korea either. Majority of the recent escapees were those who were already in China before the pandemic, or those in Russia as foreign workers. But they also couldn't come back to North Korea, so they couldn't describe the situation there during the pandemic. It is only recently that some of these escapees have heard from North Korea, so we will probably have more information about the situation in the country soon.

It is also important to take note that in the 1990s, when North Koreans were escaping, they did not know how the world was outside, but right now it is much different. Content, including South Korean pop music, soap operas, foreign movies, news, and information, is now being smuggled into the country via flash drives and other ways. That means North Koreans know much, much more. They also have access to their family members, who escaped earlier to South Korea. There is also a way to connect people in North Korea through Chinese mobile phones. It did not exist in the 1990s, but it is very common these days.

Also back then, we had information about widespread famine. Nowadays, many of those who have been contacting their families say that the situation is very difficult, but nobody reports widespread famine. Knowing how impoverished North Korea is, we do suspect that the situation has deteriorated to a very low point. Yet, since people do not report widespread famine, we wonder what the actual situation is like and how it varies across regions. We suspect that for those who are unable to provide for themselves, such as children, elderly or people with disabilities, the situation must have become more dramatic.

YJIS: Given the limited access to information in North Korea, how do you get access to information and what are the challenges you encounter in the process?

JZH: The best thing for any human rights organization is to have access to the country, but no human rights organization or UN human rights body has access to North Korea right now. Access to the country was mostly limited to those that were offering humanitarian assistance before. There was only once that the Special Rapporteur for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was admitted to the country, but with limited access to

various regions.

NGOs or international organizations cannot observe the situation or directly interview people on the ground. The only route through which we gather information is the same as what every other human rights organization takes. We talk to people, gather testimonies, and cross-check these testimonies with information from others. That is very important because sometimes people might exaggerate or simply misremember things, and very often trauma also affects how people remember things. So, it is very important to cross-check information. For example, if we have someone from one city or one detention center, we do not only interview that person, but ideally, we interview 40 people who came during the same time or around the same time from the detention center. They do not necessarily need to know each other, but we can corroborate whether they are reporting the same information.

The satellite system is also very helpful. We use a lot of technological advances to cross-check the testimonies. Also, when we interview someone who knows a lot of detailed information, we would also ask the person to mark certain locations in North Korea. Over time, we gather corroborated evidence—for example, places where violations usually occur, mass graves, etc.

Relative to the past, a lot of information flows out of North Korea nowadays. Those who have Chinese mobile phones in North Korea could access people who are in China or South Korea and provide them with information. There is also a system of informants inside the country that regularly updates their outside contacts regarding the current situation and new policies the government has announced. Sometimes, they also report on events such as public executions, and many have also been trained and have some technology to record some events. Some can also have access to recordings of public executions, situations on the black markets, and general life on the streets in different areas. Human rights organizations can glean what the situation is like inside the country from that information.

YJIS: Can you briefly explain the challenges defectors face during their escape and during resettlement and how your organization supports them throughout the process?

JZH: We mostly work with children and youth, and unfortunately most children were born to the generation of mothers most affected by famine. These mothers, unable to provide for food, often choose to escape to China, where they often end up being trafficked. Even though China is a party to the UN Convention on Refugees, the country does not allow either NGOs or the UN system to interview this refugee population about their circumstances. China has this blanket policy of deportation, which means that when a North Korean is deported from China, he will always be punished under the North Korean judiciary system. In the pretrial investigations, the refugees will go through many human rights abuses. However, they will also end up in political prison camps if it was discovered that they had contacts with religious workers in China, trying to escape several times or trying to flee to countries like South Korea or the United States. If it is a lighter punishment, it is, on average, five years in detention for women who cross the border. During that time, the family often cannot contact these family members. If the children don't have fathers or other relatives, they must fend for themselves. A lot of children like this become street children because it is easier for them to steal and survive on the streets. We have a lot of street children among our students. They survived like that in North Korea. Many of them reunited with their family members when they were adults, and some are still searching for their family members.

Because of the famine in North Korea, mothers often could not send their children to school. Schools in North Korea require students to provide various types of resources for the army, such as metals, money, or rabbit skins, which these poor families simply cannot afford. This is a kind of extortion or quota system imposed upon almost everyone in North Korea, and children are not excluded from it. The lack of access to education is the reason why a lot of these children have problems with reading and writing when they go to the South Korean school system. In fact, many North Korean students reported to us that even after being prepared for three months prior to joining the South Korean society, they couldn't understand 90% of what the teacher was saying to them in the schools.

The situation seems to be changing because a lot of the younger generation in North Korea are having access to South Korean music and soap operas that expose them to South Korean culture and vocabulary. However, no matter how hard they try, they have such a late start compared

to children and young generations in South Korea that it is hard to bridge the knowledge gap. That's why help from civil society is so important, and organizations like ours provide them with different programs. It could be in the form of career mentoring, interviews, and university screening processes. We also hire specialists who can evaluate their skills and can suggest good career paths for them.

Another big problem that affects how well they adjust to life in South Korea is loneliness and lack of family and friends. They didn't grow up here, most often lost some of their family members, and experienced torture, detention, separation, and sexual abuse, in North Korea and China. We found that the highest rate of suicide in South Korea is among North Korean defectors. After they struggled and risked their life to escape the country, they feel so lonely and so depressed here, and with the lack of support, they often choose to end their life. They also face a lot of discrimination and bullying in schools and workplaces.

YJIS: How do you see the current level of awareness among global leaders on the human rights issues in North Korea? Do you think there is (or will be) sufficient collective effort to hold perpetrators of these human rights violations accountable?

JZH: I would say that the awareness has changed exponentially. Before, most of the governments did not even want to listen to us about the situation inside North Korea. But because of the advocacy that organizations like ours have been doing, including a request to appoint a Special Rapporteur for the Situation of Human Rights in North Korea and the UN Commission of Inquiry for DPRK, the situation has changed dramatically in terms of awareness, especially after the Commission of Inquiry. Nobody could say that they don't know because it was such a big event at the international level, especially the Commission's documented crimes, which indicated crimes against humanity that were happening in nine categories they were investigating. They requested the international community for referral to an international criminal court or establishment of an ad hoc tribunal.

While there is no problem with awareness, there is a problem with adopting these recommendations. The international geopolitical situation has changed a lot, but even before the changes, we have issues such as China and Russia sitting on the UN Security Council. This

means that in terms of referral to the ICC because North Korea is not a party to the Rome Statute, the only referral that could happen is through the Security Council. However, China and Russia would block it before so that nothing can be established through that level.

We don't know if the General Assembly would be willing, in the future, to establish any other type of accountability system for North Korea. There has always been a problem of these perpetrators flying under the radar for almost 70 years since the beginning of North Korea. Even though there is an understanding among the international community that what is happening in North Korea indicates crimes against humanity, there is very little the international community can do to make the perpetrators accountable. This could only happen if, for example, these perpetrators were traveling to different countries. However, North Korean perpetrators are careful not to travel outside of the country as they know that they could be arrested.

In this regard, organizations and the civil society are looking for other ways to bring justice, like maybe adding some foreign courts. We saw certain trials that happened in France and Germany, for example, for perpetrators from Syria and other countries. So, this is possible based on the universal jurisdiction principle. There are avenues that are being explored by different types of organizations and victims' associations.

Also, an important thing is for these victims and family members to pass on the memory to the next generation. They are aging and the memory of what happened in North Korea and of the violations may be forgotten. But with the young generation that is interested, they know that this memory will pass on. One day, even though it won't be personal justice, they understand that at some point, both the South Korean society and maybe North Korea in the future, or the international community, will continue to remember the crimes that happened in North Korea and will continue to remember the victims. I think that's important for them.

YJIS: The impact of sanctions on North Korea is a topic of ongoing debate. From your perspective, how do these economic measures affect the human rights situation? What factors should be considered in shaping the international policies towards the country?

JZH: I have a very specific view of the sanctions system because my investigations have been following the supply chain of North Korea and

its link to crimes against humanity. It is an environment where large-scale human rights abuses happen in detention centers and in political prison camps. Women prisoners are forced to do labor in these camps, producing goods for export through China and Russia. At one point, coal was the top export commodity for North Korea and during that time, one of the political prison camps was enlarging, which suggested that more political prisoners were going to that camp, in the system of slavery, and were producing coal for export. How do we know that? Because we know that North Korea asked both South Korea, and especially the US, to lift the sanction on coal in its totality. They were expecting that this type of engagement and relations with other countries would enable them to export more of this type of produce. That means that the slavery system is being expanded in North Korea, and that part is left uninvestigated.

There are always discussions about how sanctions affect the community or society. However, nobody talks about how the lifting of sanctions is expanding the system of slavery in North Korea because it enables unmonitored trade, using crimes against humanity by the North Korean government. I think that we cannot discuss the lifting of sanctions unless this type of system is abolished. There has to be an expansion of individual kinds of sanctions, so-called Magnitsky sanctions, which will, for example, target the private bank accounts of those that are involved in these violations and crimes against humanity. Similar to what happened with Russia, I think this type of targeted sanctions against individuals and institutions involved in the crimes against humanity in North Korea needs to be worked on by the international community.

Moreover, international trade is a way to invest further in the military system in North Korea, taking into account how these military components are also used for exports. The news about exports to Russia and how North Korea's weapons contribute to crimes in Ukraine and Sudan, has been illustrated. Recently, there were reports that North Korean weapons went to Hamas in Palestine. Thus, we have to understand that North Korea is a country that will always look for means to export this type of produce, not because they don't want to export anything else; they just focus the whole of their trade and economy on this type of military-based economy that is investing a lot of profit into expansion of the military system and arms and weapons, which can be used against civilians in other countries. We must start to draw these links because it is not only about security, but it is also about contributing

to crimes that are happening, not only in North Korea, but elsewhere as well.

YJIS: Reflecting on your work, could you share a specific accomplishment or a success story that exemplifies the positive impact your organization has had on the lives of North Koreans?

JZH: I think the greatest success for every human rights organization is getting to meet people who were victims of the system in the past, but have grown, succeeded, and become finally happy. That is, I think, the biggest compensation for the work that we are doing. I have, over the years, met a lot of people who were street children in North Korea and were exposed to various types of abuses. Some of them have been in detention, with young girls trafficked in China, forcibly married to old men, raped, and beaten repeatedly. They came here, and over the years, they settled well with the support that they received. It gives me happiness when I hear these individual stories of people succeeding because they are given opportunities, their rights are respected, and they are free. Professionally, I am proud of contributing to an advocacy that led to the establishment of the UN Commission of Inquiry and the call for referral to ICC. But I will be prouder if I get to be an expert witness at one of the trials of human rights violations in the future.

YJIS: Is there any message that you would like to express to the global youth regarding their role and potential impact in promoting, protecting, and defending human rights for North Korean people?

JZH: Carry the light on! That is the most important message I would have for you. Keep yourself aware of human rights situations, spread that awareness, and be the light coming into the dark room. I find most international students to be engaged in this work, always helping our organization as volunteers, interns, or simply by doing research. However, I would like to see this more in South Korean society, especially among the young generation. Finally, I would like to express that abuses always happen in the darkness, which is why shining the light on darkness is very important. Wherever you find yourself, there will always be human rights abuses, so never close your eyes and always be vigilant. Remember that

it is our moral responsibility to do something.