

Remarks at the ICNK conference – “Advancing the Human Rights Movement and Adapting to Change in North Korea” – 31 May 2018

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great privilege and pleasure to be with you today, and to follow all the previous speakers, at this important conference to consider how we adapt to the changing circumstances on the Korean peninsula, and how we ensure that North Korea’s appalling crimes against humanity are not swept under the carpet or pushed to the margins as the international community responds to the thaw in inter-Korean relations. As an aside, a paper written by one of the previous speakers, David Hawk, some years ago, titled “Pursuing Peace While Advancing Rights: The Untried Approach to North Korea”, is essential reading. We meet today just over a month after the historic meeting between Kim Jong-Un and President Moon Jae-in at Panmunjom, and less than two weeks before the expected summit between Kim Jong-Un and President Trump in Singapore, so this conference is indeed much-needed and very timely.

But in addition to considering how we advance human rights in the current political circumstances, it is also essential to consider how we adapt to the changes taking place in North Korea itself. The nature of the regime itself – its repression, its absolute intolerance of dissent, its demand for total devotion to the ruling family from the people – has not changed. But the people have.

Just over ten years ago, Christian Solidarity Worldwide released a new report which was one of the first to call for a United Nations Commission of Inquiry. Titled *North Korea: A Case to Answer, A Call to Act*, this groundbreaking report helped pave the way for the formation of ICNK, the campaign for the Commission of Inquiry, and the call for justice, accountability and an end to impunity for the regime’s crimes against humanity.

That is why, ten years on, CSW decided to research and publish a new report, looking at what has changed in the past decade, in North Korea and in the international community’s approach to North Korea’s human rights crisis. Released in February, *Movies, Markets and Mass Surveillance: Human Rights in North Korea after a Decade of Change* (available online and to be published in Korean soon) is based on research including information provided to CSW by over 100 respondents, including North Korean escapees; the UN office in Seoul; South Korean officials and experts; academics; journalists; and human rights organisations. And our conclusion is that in the past decade, some changes, albeit very small – nothing more than flickers of hope – have begun to emerge – despite the regime, not because of it – in three ways: economic changes, to a much lesser extent more understanding of human rights among ordinary people, and an increased flow of information. And these three things are interconnected.

In the economy, the most-striking change in the lives of many North Koreans has been the shift from dependence on the state-run public distribution system to widespread reliance on private trading, in what has become a ‘grey’ area of semi-tolerated markets. Illegal market trading, including smuggling across the border with China, has provided North Koreans with a lifeline –

and a source of relative prosperity for a few. It has also led to an increasingly visible gap between rich and poor. And what this has meant is that dissent and dissatisfaction are growing, though rarely if ever voiced. People complain to themselves – though never vocally – about having to pay bribes to get medical care, education or a job. Let's be clear – if their complaints were made publicly, they could expect the most severe punishments. So the dissatisfaction isn't expressed openly – but our interviews indicate that it is there in people's hearts and minds. And poverty, malnutrition and related diseases are still widespread. According to Care International, 18 million people – seventy percent of the population – are in urgent need of food. But people are also no longer dependent on the regime. "During the 1990s," said one interviewee from North Hamgyong province, "in the Great Famine, everyone was dependent on food rations and people didn't know how to survive. Now, the people who learned to cope without the government were the ones who are able to survive."

In terms of information-flows, over the past decade through external radio broadcasts, smuggled USB sticks and DVDs, North Koreans have had an unprecedented access to knowledge of the outside world. They watch South Korean soap operas and dramas, and from these they see – even with the element of dramatization involved – that life south of the border is more affluent and more free. "When we watched dramas [from South Korea], we envied the people ... and then we wished we could go outside," one escapee said. "Then we might complain: why were we born here?"

As a result, the motivation for defection has changed. As one escapee told us, "in the beginning, people defected because they were starving. They went to China to find food. But it is different now. For example, I was doing ok in North Korea. I could live. But more and more people want freedom, opportunities and hope."

Thirdly, changes in understanding of human rights. It is absolutely vital that this is not over-stated or misunderstood. The starting point is that the human rights crisis in North Korea is widely recognised as among the very worst in the world. A previous UN special rapporteur described it as 'sui generis' – in a category of its own. The Commission of Inquiry concluded that the 'gravity, scale and nature' of the violations of human rights in North Korea 'reveal a State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world'. In North Korea, every single article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is violated in extremity.

However, some anecdotal evidence suggests that international pressure may have made some difference, however small. In 2009, the term 'human rights' was included in North Korea's constitution for the first time. Sunwoo Lee and Jihong Kim note in a research paper that this is "the result of North Korea's awareness of denunciations and demands for improvements by international forums such as UN organisations". A few recent escapees claim that when they were in prison they escaped beatings and torture, or endured less severe abuses, because prison guards told them an international inquiry was watching. Some claimed that cellmates who had been in the detention centre longer told them that they were "lucky" to arrive in the detention centre when they did, because an order had been received at the detention centre not to beat

inmates, as a result of a “human rights directive” – a claim that is anecdotal, impossible to verify and not necessarily widespread or permanent. “There has been some improvement,” said one escapee. “I heard about the UN noise and fuss. Without this, no one would know about human rights at all.” These are no more than tiny flickers of hope – and they apply only to detention centres, not to the prison camps (*kwanliso*), but even such tiny flickers in otherwise total darkness might provide something to build on.

The one area where there’s absolutely no change is in the basic right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief. Any divergence from utter loyalty to the Kim dynasty is punished severely. One interviewee told us that a person found to be a Christian “would be immediately shot”. Another said that when it comes to religion, North Koreans “just shudder because punishment is very severe”.

And of course overall North Korea continues to be ruled by a regime that brutally suppresses every form of dissent. “It is a society of total surveillance,” one interviewee told us. “Everyone is watching everyone else all the time”.

What does all this mean for international advocacy efforts? It means first we should go on making “noise and fuss” about North Korea’s crimes against humanity, because doing so makes a difference and is long overdue. It means we must increase the flow of information into North Korea, through new and creative means, to break the regime’s information blockade. It means we should indeed embrace the opportunities that the promise at Panmunjom to increase people-to-people exchanges might offer. And it means that we should increase engagement with the growing community of North Korean exiles – whom we can empower, equip, learn from and work with to develop a better future for the Korean Peninsula. We must learn from the changes in the country, and work together with the people – inside and in exile – to bring genuine change.

Finally, we must urge the international community, and especially the governments of South Korea and the United States, to ensure that human rights are on the table in their engagement with North Korea. A genuine peace for the Korean peninsula is not possible when crimes against humanity continue. Human rights and denuclearisation should both be equal priorities – for as long as anyone in North Korea is jailed, tortured or executed for holding a belief – political or religious – that differs from Kim Jong-Un’s, there cannot be peace on the Korean peninsula. We should note that the summit between President Trump and Kim Jong-Un, if it goes ahead, is expected to take place on 12 June, the 31<sup>st</sup> anniversary of President Ronald Reagan’s famous speech at the Berlin Wall, in which he urged the then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to “tear down this wall” and “open this gate”. Our message – and President Trump’s message – to Kim Jong-Un should echo President Reagan’s passionate defence of freedom, and its inherent link to security, by paraphrasing the Berlin Wall speech with these words: “Mr Kim, if you seek peace, come to the gates of the prison camps. Mr Kim, open the gates of the prison camps. Mr Kim, tear down the walls of the prison camps!” Once Kim Jong-Un takes clear steps towards freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom of religion or belief, an end to the gulags, then we will know he means business. Until then, we must continue our efforts, adapt our strategies and work

to advance the movement for human rights in the world's most closed and most repressed country. Only when the human dignity and rights of the people of North Korea are upheld, injustice is confronted and impunity ends can peace on the Korean peninsula prevail.