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Saturday, April 30, 2011

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## North Korea Political Prisoner Camps – An Interview with Tae Jin Kim

Javier Delgado Rivera - 4/29/2011

The unrelenting paranoid that nourishes a regime

Earlier this month, the US State Department released its 2010 Human Rights Report. It portrays the “systematic and severe human rights abuses occurred throughout the [North Korean] prison and detention system” as some of the grimmest violations against humanity anywhere in the world.

Coinciding with the launch of the report, Javier Delgado Rivera interviewed Mr Tae Jin Kim, president of Free the NK Gulag, a Seoul-based organisation raising awareness on the North Korean political prisoner camps (Kwan-Li-So in Korean). Mr Kim, a former prisoner himself, provides an illustrating picture of the dire realm of today’s Kwan-Li-So.

Javier Delgado Rivera (JDR) - What kind of crimes carries imprisonment in a political prisoner camp?

Tae Jin Kim (TJK) - The slightest of the slips could be depicted as hostile, anti-state or anti-revolutionary, what involves years of hard labour or life-long sentences in a political prison camp. Anything goes: getting caught listening to the South Korean radio, speaking out against the regime, or “degrading the dignity of the Party” is charged with confinement in one of the six North Korean Kwan-Li-So.

Being labelled as a subversive element has consequences well beyond the transgressor. Since 1972, Pyongyang is known to have been carrying out the dreadful practice of collective punishment. To make sure that the stray behaviour is entirely uprooted from society, three generations (parents, siblings and sons) of the offender’s lineage are incarcerated. Suspected like-minded friends and neighbours are routinely investigated as well. As a result, more than half of the 250,000 people thought to be languishing in the North’s political prison camps are imprisoned in the paranoid grounds of their blood connection with an enemy of the people.

JDR - Are detainees given any type of trial or judicial process?

TJK – Not at all. The agents who ring your doorbell at midnight tells the severity of the charges you are about to be incriminated with. If it turns out to be regular police, chances are you may only be persecuted for an ordinary offense. If those looking for you are officials from the National Security apparatus, you are likely to disappear and not to be seen again. Pyongyang’s security agency needs no authorization or warrant to apprehend any person it considers suspicious of undermining the Democratic Republic. The agency has carte blanche to take away anyone heard of or believed to have committed a political offense. No judicial process is conducted whatsoever.

JDR - It paints a picture of a society living in constant distress.

TJK – The complete lack of legal safeguards plays deep into people’s fears. To know that the tiniest of the infractions of the repressive and usually vague North Korean laws could easily throw you and your entire family into a labour camp for life is, for most, dramatically dissuasive. The whole Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) feels like a grotesque prison.

JDR- Given the ruinous state of Pyongyang’s coffins and the huge number of political prisoners it holds, such a giant toll of repression may come to a prohibitive economic cost to the regime.

TJK - Not quite. North Korea’s labour camps are designed to be self-sufficient. Prisoners carry out the whole spectrum of tasks required to run the camps’ vast compounds. The Kwan-Li-So excruciating hard labour serves a double function. First, extenuate prisoners so they have no strength left to hold escaping thoughts. Second, sustain the camps, where targets are met regardless the price on suffering or lives. The construction work is particularly hazardous. The building sites’ precarious conditions, the lack of construction training and the extreme cold often take a heavy human toll.

As a matter of fact, this represents an enormous workforce that, by working till the last breath, is able to cover far beyond the needs of the camps. Actually, the Kwan-Li-So play a central role in keeping the DPRK’s regime functional. This everlasting pool of fully-dedicated, free labour provides a great deal of the resources required to feed the ubiquitous state machinery. Hundreds of thousands of ordinary North Koreans are wearing their lives down to sustain Kim Jong-il’s rule.

JDR – What does terrify the most to prisoners, torture?

TJK – As long as the prisoners do not violate the camp’s grim regulations, inmates are not tortured in a regular basis. Most of the people locked up in the political prison camps will spend the rest of their lives subjected to a routine of unbearable physical labour under merciless living conditions. A sense of agonising desperation dominates each and every inch of the North Koreans confined into Pyongyang’s Gulag. That is the worse shape than torture can take.

JDR – So, what concerns you the most when thinking about the living conditions of your former fellow political prisoners?

TJK – Malnutrition, which is rampant in the camps. In times of poor crops, as it is the case today, ordinary North Koreans starve in their thousands. Therefore, you can get a rough idea of how a political prison camp’s diet is like. The few and far between rations (usually a bowl of Korean corn soup) are so meagre and insubstantial that eventually prisoners recourse to eat whatever edible plant or wild animals they find. When these also run out, inmates resort to stealing the livestock’s feedstuff to survive.

With such a below-subsistence intake, prisoners get sick for the smallest of the ailments. A minor wound or infection could easily become life-threatening. The almost total lack of proper medical care in the camps force prisoners to treat themselves, what often has lethal repercussions. When the condition is so critical that it requires surgery, doctors have little or no equipment to carry out their job. It leads to numerous cases of deaths at the dilapidated operating theatres.

Javier Delgado Rivera is a Brussels-based freelance research journalist writing about Asian politics and the region ties with the European Union. You can take a look at his work on <http://www.euasiainelligence.com/>

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