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The North Korean human rights issue stalking the Singapore summit

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FULL TEXT

When President Trump meets with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in Singapore on Tuesday, the main topic of discussion will be nuclear weapons. They may well discuss related subjects, too –perhaps North Korea's economy or its diplomatic isolation. Kim, who seems to have developed a wide-eyed view of American pop culture during his childhood at a Swiss boarding school, might bring up basketball.

One subject that is not likely to be touched on, however, is North Korea's atrocious human rights record. There have been mixed signals from U.S. officials about whether Trump will bring up this record with Kim. There are legitimate fears that addressing one of the gravest aspects of North Korean society could scupper a summit that is so far full of selfies and smiles.

But given the severity of the abuses attributed to North Korea, the human rights issue is unlikely to go away anytime soon.

What has North Korea been accused of?

The country has long been closed to most outside observers, but reports of disturbing practices have made their way out into the world for decades. Perhaps the most authoritative was a report released by the U.N. Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea in 2014.

After speaking to more than 320 people, including refugees from the country, over the course of a year, the report's authors concluded that North Korea was committing crimes against humanity. "These are not mere excesses of the State," they noted. "[T]hey are essential components of a political system that has moved far from the ideals on which it claims to be founded." The report compared the North Korean regime to a totalitarian state, noting that in terms of the scale of its human rights violations, North Korea "does not have any parallel in the contemporary world."

In its report, the commission said it had found evidence of "extermination, murder, enslavement, torture, imprisonment, rape, forced abortions and other sexual violence, persecution on political, religious, racial and gender grounds, the forcible transfer of populations, the enforced disappearance of persons and the inhumane act of knowingly causing prolonged starvation."

In particular, the report took aim at North Korea's political prison camp system. According to recent estimates, as many as 130,000 people were being held in four large camps for alleged "political crimes," which in some cases

may have been as minor as criticizing the Kim dynasty. In these camps, the prisoners are forced to do hard labor and suffer in abysmal conditions. The report's authors estimated that hundreds of thousands of political prisoners had died in the camps over the past five decades.

Separately, there is a different system of "reeducation camps" in which similar conditions prevail. Unlike the political camps, however, these offer the possibility of release.

The report also singled out North Korea's historic practice of abducting foreign nationals, including ethnic Koreans from South Korea and Japan, as well as non-Koreans. The report noted that because the vast majority of those abducted remain "disappeared," human rights violations continue. "The shock and pain caused by such actions is indescribable," the report stated.

How has North Korea responded?

The U.N. report sparked a flurry of angry responses from North Korea. Its state media said that the investigation was the result of a political "racket" and suggested that the report was flawed because it was led by a gay man, Michael Kirby, a former justice of the High Court of Australia. A few weeks after the U.N. report came out, North Korea released its own view of human rights in the United States, dubbing the country a "living hell" and a "tundra of a human being's rights to existence."

At the United Nations, North Korean diplomats staged a protest at a human rights panel hosted by Samantha Power, then the U.S. ambassador to the world body, and were escorted from the room by security guards. North Korean officials made indirect remarks that suggested they acknowledged at least some issues.

Despite the diplomatic detente that began earlier this year, it is unclear whether the country has undertaken serious attempts at reform. Satellite imagery suggests that the political prison camps are still open. Kim is alleged to have ordered the assassination of his half brother Kim Jong Nam in February 2017 using the powerful nerve agent VX. The death of American student Otto Warmbier just days after he was released from North Korean detention in a coma last June also raised questions about North Korea's treatment of its U.S. prisoners.

What action has the world taken?

The United Nations has imposed a number of sanctions on North Korea in recent years, but those measures bore on nonproliferation rather than human rights. Groups such as Human Rights Watch have called on the United Nations to implement human rights sanctions on North Korean officials, and some member states have expressed a desire to refer the case to the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

The United States implemented bilateral human rights-related sanctions on North Korean individuals, including Kim, in 2016 and 2017. A small number of foreign states, including South Korea and Japan, have expressed support for these sanctions.

The Trump administration has at points taken a hard line on human rights in North Korea —Vice President Pence attempted to highlight Pyongyang's abuses during a visit to South Korea for the Winter Olympics in February —and several key allies, including Japan, have pushed Trump not to forget these issues in his talks with Kim.

Some experts have warned that would be a risky gambit. Joseph Yun, who served as the United States' special representative for North Korea policy until March, told a Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee that it would be "a

mistake to overload the agenda" and said that the focus of the summit should be "denuclearization above all else." U.S. allies in South Korea have voiced similar warnings.

But concerns about human rights will hover over the talks, even if they are not directly addressed by Trump or Kim. Investigators have been collecting evidence of the Kim dynasty's involvement in human rights abuses for years, and a report released late last year by a group of legal scholars found that there was already enough evidence to charge the regime with 10 separate war crimes.

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DETAILS

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People:	Trump, Donald J Kim Jong Nam Kim Jong Un
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