

# ***Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l***

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## **Human Rights Advocacy**

### **A case study: Human rights in North Korea**

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In 1989, ten months before the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union, a number of human rights defenders who had an Amnesty International background, founded an NGO called “Bruxelles-Droits de l’Homme/ Brussels-Human Rights/ Brüssel-Menschenrechte” which during the first years published a monthly magazine in French called “Droits de l’Homme sans Frontières”. Later, the organization was renamed “Droits de l’Homme sans Frontières/ Human Rights Without Frontiers” and published its material in both languages.

The organization has gradually expanded into “Human Rights Without Frontiers International” to embrace its branch offices in Belgium, China, Nepal and the United States (Women’s Rights Without Frontiers) as well as its associate members in Armenia (Pro-Democracy Association), Azerbaijan (The Institute of Peace and Democracy), Democratic Republic of Congo (Ligue des Sacrifices Volontaires pour les Droits de l’Homme), Georgia (Human Rights Information and Documentation Center), Iraq (Assyrian Aid Society), Japan (Life Fund for North Korean Refugees), Russia (Sova-Center), South Korea: Korean Rehabilitation Center for Torture Victims and Families (KRCT), South Korea (Justice for North Korea).

Crucial to the success of any advocacy activities is the strength of NGOs to mobilize enough political energy and will and their ability to link up with other organizations in cohesive networks, which have sufficient credibility and power to spur action on particular issues. This was a two-pronged strategy: adhering to international transnational networks and creating our own transnational networks on specific countries and issues.

## **Data collection**

Our work on North Korean human rights and refugees is one case among many that can best illustrate our advocacy philosophy and approach:

HRWF Int'l launched its project on North Korean Human Rights and Refugees in 2001, in the wake of the publishing of the "Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten years in the North Korean Gulag" by Pierre Rigoulot, director of the "Institut d'Histoire Sociale" in Paris and one of the members of the board of directors of HRWF Int'l. It was originally published in French and then translated in several languages. The book describes the life of Kang Chol-Hwan who spent ten years in Yodok camp and is considered one of the first published works bringing life to the fact that there are concentration camps in existence in North Korea.

HRWF Int'l created a specific electronic newsletter called "Human Rights in North Korea" reproducing news from various Asian media sources and distributed it to major actors already working on this issue and to the European Union institutions. Invitations to international conferences organized in South Korea and Japan provided the opportunity to explain what the EU was doing on North Korea and to start networking with local NGOs, domestic and international media.

Throughout these events, HRWF Int'l identified reliable partners and organizations in the region working on this particular subject and expanded its network for obtaining trustworthy information. The collection of personal interviews in the field<sup>i</sup> and testimonies of people in Seoul who have suffered in camps or have witnessed the suffering of other people provided a solid basis of information and helped us articulate specific issues at stake, which allowed us to move on to the next stage of our advocacy cycle – the communication.

## **Communication, raising awareness and mainstreaming human rights**

At the time of the World Football Cup in South Korea, the publication of an article in the New York Times in June 2002 by an American journalist met during a conference in Seoul, reprinted in the International Herald Tribune a few days later<sup>ii</sup>, about the results of HRWF Int'l fact-finding mission on practices of infanticide and forced abortions in North Korean camps, provided a strong impetus to this stage of our project, as the interest in North Korean human rights grew quickly and attracted much attention on the side of international media, NGOs and intergovernmental organisations.

Meetings, interviews and small-scale hearings organized by HRWF Int'l for Members of the European Parliament in Brussels, members of national parliaments as well as officials of UN agencies, the EU institutions and other intergovernmental organisations opened up new channels for communication on issues related to North Korean human rights and refugees that have previously not existed.

In March 2006, the communication stage of our project was brought to a higher level of success when a wide-scale public hearing was organised for the first time at the European Parliament under the aegis of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). In the aftermath of that event, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on human rights in North Korea<sup>iii</sup> introduced by MEP Istvan Szent-Ivanyi (ALDE) who had chaired the hearing. The attention given to North Korean human rights and refugees spurred action on the policy level. In two successive years, at sessions of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva in 2003 and 2004, the European Union acted as the main initiator and sponsor of two resolutions dealing with North Korean human rights. These resolutions were adopted, as a result of which the position of Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was established in 2004 and has been maintained since then. Prof. Vitit Muntarbhorn from Thailand was first appointed Special Rapporteur to study the human rights situation in North Korea and to report his findings and analysis to respective UN bodies and institutions. In November 2005, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, urging its government to fully respect human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Between 2006 and 2011, HRWF Int'l kept organizing conferences and meetings about human rights in North Korea at the European Parliament and sponsored the screening of the movie *Kimjongilia* which won the 2010 One World Human Rights Documentary Film Festival in Brussels. This led to the adoption of one more resolution on North Korea by the European Parliament two months after the award was granted to the film-maker Nancy Heikin<sup>iv</sup>.

On 9 February 2009, China took part in the Universal Periodic Review at the U.N. in Geneva. During the ten days preceding the event, HRWF Int'l visited nine embassies in Geneva to ask their delegations to the U.N. to raise the issue of the refoulement of the North Korean defectors from China to their country of origin although it is known that they face imprisonment, torture and sometimes death penalty. Canada and The Netherlands raised this question during the interactive session.

Thus far, the project can be considered successful on several stages: agenda-setting, changes in the discourse of international organizations and changes in institutional procedures. Human rights in North Korea and the plight of North Koreans fleeing their country have generated enough interest to be an issue of public debates.

The flow of information providing testimonies and personal accounts of those who have been affected by the violation of human rights has created a certain momentum leading to changes in the discourse of international organisations such as the European Union and the United Nations. The UN General Assembly resolution and the two resolutions of the UN Commission on Human Rights, which were drafted, tabled and sponsored by the European Union, are a clear demonstration of these changes. The establishment of the position of Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is representative of

changes in institutional procedures, which are needed as mechanisms for flow of information and leverage. Tangible changes in state's behaviour towards full respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in conformity with international norms and standards are slow to come. Nevertheless, the small steps along the way are representative of the cohesion of transnational advocacy networks, which we are part of, and of their ability to mobilise their strength and energy around issues that threaten to undermine the validity of international human rights norms.

### **A strategy for human rights advocacy**

From the inception of HRWF Int'l, the main focus of our activities has been monitoring, research, and analysis in the field of human rights as well as promotion of democracy and the rule of law on national and international level. In these endeavors, we have been guided by the understanding that it is not sufficient for international norms and standards in the field of human rights to be approved and adopted by governments. States enjoy different levels of approximation to democratic development and the rule of law and human rights norms do not always have a "taken-for-granted" quality. In many cases, they still need to undergo a long, and sometimes painful, process of socialisation in order to become integrated into state policies. The success of this process would be predicated, among other things, on the strength of non-governmental human rights networks to instigate changes towards human rights promotion.

We also work on the assumption that ideas, and not only state interests and positions, matter in international relations. In this respect, international human rights instruments can be seen as representing the ultimate expression of collective ideas of social justice. As such, we consider their implementation to be of utmost importance as an overarching framework for the ideas of liberty, democracy, the rule of law.

Within this context, HRWF Int'l has adopted an approach to human rights promotion, which is wider in scope than advocacy on a specific human right. Our emphasis is on human rights advocacy, which we understand as a process, through which we bring new ideas, norms and discourses into policy debates and promote norm implementation by pressuring target actors to adopt new policies and by monitoring compliance with international standards. In pursuit of this overarching objective, the HRWF Int'l has been using three main strategies: information, communication, and leverage.

Gathering trustworthy information of situations of human rights violations is essential in constructing a solid case which merits attention and advocacy. Our strength is in having access to diverse sources of information being part of wider advocacy networks with assured flow of information bringing in not only facts but also testimonies of people whose lives have been affected. On the level of communication, we try to generate attention to issues at stake, alert policy makers to long-term implications of specific human rights abuses and open up channels of communication on the international arena as means of gaining attention. New issues can be brought up for public debate through various advocacy techniques: media attention, debates,

hearings, and larger conferences. Though information gathering and communication are an important part of our advocacy campaigns, the crucial strategic step is to gain enough influence to induce changes in state positions and policies. In this respect, we seek to bring the human rights record of targeted countries to the light of international scrutiny using moral leverage, which some observers have called the “mobilization of shame”. Exploring different avenues of communication with international organisations or individual countries, we seek to put forward solid arguments on the link between human rights issues on one side and economic aid or other forms of cooperation, on the other.

Part of our advocacy cycle is devoted to formulating issues and identifying possible “target” loci of advocacy, which are primarily in the domain of international organisations. The United Nations, the European Union institutions, the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)<sup>v</sup> are usually the main venues for targeted and structured human rights advocacy activities.

The European Union is an important international actor and human rights have become an integral and important part of its external relations. The principles of liberty, democracy, the rule of law and the respect for human rights are goals of the foreign and security policy of the European Union and underpin its co-operation with third countries. In this respect, the EU institutions – the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Council of the European Union – are crucial to human rights promotion worldwide.

The effectiveness of our advocacy activities is difficult to assess due to the long period over which real changes may occur. Instead, we try to measure relative success on different stages of the advocacy cycle: 1) agenda setting, i.e. whether a specific issue has generated enough interest to be publicly debated; 2) changes in the discourse of states and international organisations; 3) changes in institutional procedures; 4) changes in policies; 5) changes in behaviour of states in conformity with human rights norms and standards.

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<sup>i</sup> In 2008, the author and Pierre Rigoulot joined one of their South Korean partners in Vientiane (Laos) to meet and interview 15 North Korean defectors living underground after travelling through China before organizing their surprise ex-filtration through the local South Korean and Japanese embassies.

<sup>ii</sup> International Herald Tribune, article by James Brooke (re-printed from New York Times), “In prisons, swift death of babies”, pp. 2, 12 June 2002

<sup>iii</sup> Resolution dated 15 June 2006

<sup>iv</sup> Resolutionj adopted on 8 July 2010

<sup>v</sup> See our research work « Human rights advocacy at the OSCE » at <http://www.hrwf.net>