

STATEMENT BY ROBERTA COHEN AT THE HRNK/ROK MINISTRY OF UNIFICATION MEETING ON 35 YEARS SINCE THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL: KOREAN UNIFICATION, PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS, WASHINGTON DC, NOVEMBER 13, 2024

In my remarks, I'm going to speak about the Soviet Union and some of the lessons I learned from dealing with human rights in that country that may be useful in the case of North Korea. My remarks will go back to the year 1970 when Leonid Brezhnev headed the Soviet Union and was building up its nuclear power in competition with the United States. That same year, the foremost thermonuclear weapons scientist in the Soviet Union, Academician Andrei Sakharov, announced the creation, together with two colleagues -- Valery Chalidze and Andrei Tverdokhlebov -- of a *non-governmental* human rights group, the Moscow Human Rights Committee.

What concerned Sakharov was the development of nuclear power unchecked by the observance of human rights. Does that sound familiar to North Korea? In Sakharov's view, the defense of human rights was the only sure foundation for lasting international cooperation and peace. When he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1975, he said: "I am convinced that international trust, mutual understanding, disarmament, and international security are inconceivable without an open society with freedom of information, freedom of conscience, the right to publish and the right to travel and choose the country in which one wishes to live." He also warned against the dangers of thermonuclear missile and ecological threats and called for public discussion of such issues. "Democracy," he said was "the only satisfactory road for a country's development."

Excerpts from Sakharov's Nobel lecture and other writings ought to be included in the information sent into or broadcast into North Korea today, hopefully reaching the elite, defense establishment and nuclear scientists. Although under the thumb of the regime, some would no doubt find the thinking of the Soviet Union's H bomb father refreshing and perhaps compelling.

Because of Sakharov's reputation, the Soviet response to the Moscow Human Rights Committee was initially cautious. The group for its part was also careful to do nothing that could be said to be outside of the law. Its members met at Sakharov's apartment and studied the Soviet Constitution and law as well as the provisions in UN human rights treaties which the Soviet Union had signed, in particular the International Covenants on civil and political rights. Committee members requested dialogue with government officials over individual cases and Chalidze wrote essays for *samizdat* or unofficial publications about the rights of Soviet citizens. To reinforce its standing, the committee requested affiliation with the International League for Human Rights, a New York based international human rights NGO in consultative status at the United Nations. I was the League's Executive Director and worked with the Committee.

What were the lessons learned that might prove useful for North Korea --

First, the significance of international human rights standards. Sometimes they may be the only way that human rights advocates in a country have to evaluate their government's practices

and try to hold them to account. Because of this potential, KGB agents in Moscow raided Chalidze's apartment and confiscated the texts of the Covenants and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. So we at the International League began to read out by phone – over the open lines -- to Chalidze and Sakharov each month the provisions of the Covenants that the Soviet Union had signed. Some of the calls got interrupted but enough got through and we found other ways too of getting the texts to them.

North Korea has acceded to 5 international human rights agreements (the Covenants, women's rights, children's rights, the rights of the disabled) and agreed in principle prior to the pandemic to the UN's training of its foreign ministry officials in UN procedures and the human rights provisions of treaties North Korea ratified. A few were trained in 2019 in Geneva but this has not continued. I would suggest that the groups that send information or broadcast into North Korea should highlight for people in the country – not just officials -- the commitments North Korea has made on women, children, disabled people, civil and political rights, the right to food and health care which just about no one in the country knows about. (One Soviet mathematician I remember memorized the Covenants and told me that their existence got him through being incarcerated in a psychiatric hospital.)

A second lesson is the importance of information access and exchange. The Moscow Committee and other groups in the Soviet Union were quite adept at developing ways to send information to the outside world and when the information reached the media, the UN, governments, scientific, lawyers, religious groups, trade unions and also Western communist parties -- there were results. The world outside also found ways to bring publications and information into the country to be circulated samizdat by the local groups.

In the case of North Korea, there is no comparable samizdat network although North Koreans do courageously get information out. Nor would anyone be able to set up a human rights NGO given the excessive controls over the population. But today's internet, advanced communication technology, satellite based technology and AI create opportunities for reaching North Koreans, especially the elite and North Koreans working, studying or doing business outside the country. A coordinated information strategy and campaign reinforced by resources and tech company skills is surely needed .

Third, a focus on individual Soviet political prisoners was effective in mobilizing world opinion and sometimes gaining reduced sentences and their release. Committee members collected names and why they were held and where. In his Nobel lecture, Sakharov set forth the names of at least 100 internally exiled or imprisoned people, and when he was released from internal exile, what did he give to President Mikhail Gorbachev? the names of people held on political grounds who should be released, and most if not all were. (Some were Moscow Committee members who were arrested or exiled; Chalidze we got out of the country.) And to preserve the memory of those who perished in Stalin's labor camps and prisons, Sakharov founded the NGO Memorial.

As regards North Korea, there's been progress on the part of the UN, NGOs, the South Korean government over the past two decades in bringing to light the atrocity of the camps by taking testimony from the victims who survived. But in my opinion, more attention needs to be focused on the *individuals* still in the prisons so they do not remain nameless and faceless. True, Soviet cases were often dissidents and well-known in their professional fields. That's not the case in North Korea where there is no space for dissidence. But I welcome civil society's and the Ministry of Unification's efforts to put a spotlight on individual cases (e.g. the 6 South Koreans in prison). Should diplomatic negotiations be held with North Korea in future, cases should be raised. The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in the DPRK in 2021 proposed an international conference on prisons in North Korea. Why not revisit this idea because as we speak, tens of thousands of people imprisoned on political and religious grounds are suffering from hunger, lack of medicines, forced labor and brutal treatment.

Fourth, I learned that it is important to counter the intimidation and harassment to which foreign human rights NGOs are subjected for publicizing the Soviet Union's and North Korea's human rights records. On the days of the League calls to the Moscow Committee in the 1970s, Russian visitors sometimes arrived at my office to intimidate. One KGB agent told me we were wasting our time. No one in the Soviet Union knew about Sakharov and Chalidze. They were nobodies, he said. Really, I answered, so why are you here? Other times Russian UN staff members who worked in the UN human rights office in NY would telephone to demand information that day about the League or tell me a UN official wanted to see me. Once I went over to the UN office to confront them but they pretended not to have called. North Korea today has its own modus operandi. It regularly tries to hack into our phones, our computers, sends us false messages, seeking to interfere with our work.

In addition, the Soviet Union -- and today North Korea through Russia and China -- interfered with NGO access to the United Nations. Beginning in 1969, the Soviet Union publicly warned NGOs that they could be expelled from consultative status at the UN if they engaged in unsubstantiated and politically motivated attacks against socialist countries. The Soviet Union was a member of the UN's NGO committee which decides on which NGOs are awarded status. I once had to appear before that committee to defend my organization and was questioned for two hours with the Soviet delegate banging his fist on the table and not being called to order by the chair. But I got the vote.

In more recent years, HRNK which exposes the human rights situation in North Korea was blocked by Russia and China and others from gaining consultative status in this same UN NGO committee. But with US help, the committee's parent body, the UN Economic and Social Council overrode the committee's rejection and awarded HRNK UN status. But, NGOs dedicated to the human rights situation in North Korea should not have to struggle to gain entry to the United Nations, especially when the UN Commission of Inquiry found that North Korea is regularly committing crimes against humanity against its population and the UN General Assembly affirmed this finding. A well-publicized expose of this committee's composition and political biases is in order.

A final point – When change does occur in a dictatorship, extensive planning is needed for the day after to assure that a more open and democratic society emerges. Beginning in 1989, with Gorbachev in power, Sakharov was released from exile, reinstated in the Academy of Sciences, elected to the First Congress of People's Deputies and became a member of the commission drafting a new constitution. But Sakharov warned at the time that despite *glasnost* and *perestroika*, guarantees were needed against unchecked concentration of power. And today we see Vladimir Putin stifling political opposition (including killing Alexei Navalny), recreating political prisons, closing down Memorial and weakening ties between human rights groups in Russia and overseas. Is there something to be learned pertinent to North Korea? Yes. The Kim family dictatorship will come to an end but efforts should be developed and strengthened now to bring defectors and escapees together to work out how best to create a democratic society in the North. As Andrei Sakharov said, "No exertions are too great, however long the road may seem."

