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THE AGE

NORTH KOREA REACHES A MOMENT OF
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Am I “talking rubbish”? I asked myself. Have I sold out to the capitalist oppressors? Have I been taken in naively by “human scum” giving fake testimony? These are the questions that recent media comments on the UN report on human rights violations in North Korea have presented to my mind.

There have been many media stories since the UN report first went online on February 18, 2014. But two articles struck a jarring note.

The first report in question was an editorial in a newspaper called *The Guardian*. Its headline declared that the recent UN report was “Demonising the DPRK”. DPRK are the initials of the official title of North Korea. So I read the anguished opening words with concern. They declared that “from the day of its foundation” the DPRK “hasn’t had a moments rest from outside interference. Sabotage, invasion, mass destruction, germ warfare, nuclear threat, encirclement and crippling economic blockade have all been used in the US-led attempt to remove this impediment to regional domination...” The writer denounced my analogies to the Nazi atrocities stating they drew. Naturally the major capitalist powers subject such enemy or “rogue” states to an unrelieved campaign of vilification in order to enlist public opinion for aggression or at least neutralise opposition”. But he made no reference to the witness, quoted in the report, who complained of having to burn hundreds of bodies of prisoners who starved to death, and buried the ashes and remains in the nearby fields as fertiliser. Nor reference to other horrors recounted on virtually every page.

When I looked more closely, I found that this *Guardian* was published by the Communist Party of Australia. I thought that CPA had been wound up in 1990s, when the fall of the Berlin Wall put an end to defence of Stalinist oppression in the

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face of overwhelming evidence of gross wrongdoing. But not so. This was not, after all, the English *Guardian* newspaper: successor to the *Manchester Guardian*: a professional journal with a generally liberal tradition. What a relief.

Of greater concern was an article published in *The Age*, written by Nicholas Stuart. Under the headline “Whistling in the Wind on North Korea” (*Age*, Feb 22, 2014) Mr Stuart begins by asking: “What do you do when someone you respect begins talking rubbish?” It turned out that this was me he was referring to. He describes the recent presentation of the UN report, when it was launched online in Geneva a few days earlier as a moment “when intelligent people don’t know where to look”.

His complaints are that those writing, and supporting, the UN report on North Korea are “trapped in paper rules and theoretical legal paradigms”. They are displaying a monstrous sense of naiveté “that would be touching if it wasn’t so dangerous”. He suggests that the report effectively endorses a “strategic strike of missiles to target the regime’s leaders”. This, he suggests, invites another disaster like the invasion of Iraq. Or “a new blockade starving already emaciated people and adding to the misery they already have to bear”.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The Commission on North Korea made it clear that no new sanctions should be imposed that fell upon the suffering people of North Korea. That real progress on the Korean Peninsula would require many well-tuned “people to people” contacts. That these should include meetings of professional bodies. Apprenticeships and scholarships for the young. Unimpeded access to fully monitored food aid. Increased humanitarian aid. Sister city relationships. UN technical assistance. The final negotiation of a peaceful end to the Korean War that has blighted both of the Koreas for sixty long years.

Far from being locked into a formalistic approach, as Nicholas Stuart asserts, the UN Commission simply discharged obligations imposed on it by the international community. It made findings on the eight point mandate it was handed a year ago by the Human Rights Council. It is for politicians, diplomats and other officials to decide whether to take the findings further. The Commission was asked four clear questions by the Human Rights Council and now it has answered them. Is there

evidence of human rights violations? The evidence is overwhelming. Are there cases of crimes against humanity? Powerful evidence leads to one compelling and affirmative answer. Who is accountable for these crimes in international law? Many such offenders are identified in the report by office and circumstances. Some are known by name and already on the INTERPOL watch list. And because all control finishes with the Supreme Leader of North Korea, he too may be liable in international law for “aiding and abetting” such crimes. The first obligation to stop and to repair crimes against humanity rests on the nation concerned. But if its leaders do nothing, international law recognises an international duty to protect those people who are voiceless and who are suffering. Are we now to turn and look the other way?

It would have been a serious excess of the Commission’s brief for it to wander, as Mr Stuart seems to wish it had, into larger political and diplomatic questions. Then it might be guilty of the “dangerous dreams” that finally brought down Jang Song-thaek, summarily executed after a trial before a military court in Pyongyang although previously the second highest leader in the land.

But what if a permanent member of the Security Council were to use its veto? Would the whole UN inquiry have been a waste of time? I think not. Now in the one manageable document is a comprehensive examination of the horrors faced by human beings over many decades in North Korea. If vetos are used and no prosecutions ensue immediately, this does not mean that the effort has been in vain. Hundreds of victims of grave wrongs have been given a voice. Their testimony is online so all the world can see and hear them. We can all judge whether they are “human scum”, as North Korea claims. Or whether they are brave, people who have gone to hell and come back and are determined to right wrongs in their country.

The United Nations, which was built on a foundation of universal human rights, is doing its job for humanity. It is shining light into very dark corners in North Korea. History, including recent history, shows that doing this is not in vain. Who, even a few years back, would have expected the liberation of the Baltic States? Of East Timor? Of Ukraine which changes by the day? And even if accountability of those accused of crimes against humanity is not secured soon, the day may well come

when the testimony being gathered will be put to good use. Then oppressors will be made to answer to the oppressed. This is not a pipedream, as this commentator seems to think. It is not rubbish. It can happen. And it should happen.

Still what if it does not happen? Has the UN inquiry then truly been a waste of money? Certainly not. We now have a snapshot of North Korea as it is today and as it has been for decades. The Commission of Inquiry has borne witness. It has allowed the voices of the oppressed to be heard. The antidote to human rights violations is, ultimately, knowledge. Out of knowledge comes the resolve of good people to secure change. Already blogs in China and most other countries are demanding action. Even in State-controlled media in China detailed reports are appearing recounting the grave crimes against humanity of North Korea. Now there is nowhere for the oppressors to hide. Business as usual is not an option. Grave human rights abuses in North Korea have reached a moment of truth.