

2761

OP-ED GUARDIAN NEWSPAPER

21 JANUARY 2015

WESTERN MEDIA: UNWITTING ALLIES OF NORTH
KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSERS

OP-ED GUARDIAN NEWSPAPER
21 JANUARY 2015

WESTERN MEDIA: UNWITTING ALLIES OF NORTH
KOREAN HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSERS

Are elements in the Western media unwitting allies of North Korean propaganda? Does the way we do news and opinion in developed countries play into the hands of autocratic and totalitarian countries which are skilfully focused on hiding their human rights crimes and taking advantage of negative features of the 24-hour news cycle?

These are questions that are posed by the response to the news this week that a North Korean defector, Shin Dong-hyuk, has recanted parts of the dramatic story of his escape from a political detention camp in North Korea. The recantation came to light, after North Korea released a video in October 2014, showing a man who claimed to be Shin's father telling his son to repent false evidence he had given to the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on human rights in North Korea. That enquiry reported to the Human Rights Council in Geneva in March 2014 and called for strong United Nations action. Shin senior said that his son should return to the warm embrace of the Korean Workers Party and admit the falsehood of his claims.

Shin Dong-hyuk quickly admitted that the man was indeed his father, whom he had long believed to be dead. Seeing his father alive tormented the younger Shin. Eventually he told his co-author, an American writer Blaine Harden, that some of the details in their popular

book "Escape from Camp 14" needed to be revised. Understandably, Harden was in a panic. He insisted that the book be rewritten with full accuracy. Shin issued an emotional statement on social media last Sunday offering apologies to fellow refugees. He stated that he would cooperate in the rewriting and post blogs no more. But where did this leave his testimony before the United Nations Commission? Did it cast doubt on the accuracy of the fact-finding of that body? Did it require revision of its conclusions and recommendations? If Shin gave false evidence, did the whole inquiry collapse like a pack of cards? What could the United Nations do to prevent embarrassments of this kind in the future? Instead of reporting on human rights in North Korea, these were the questions that many journalists breathlessly asked. These were journalists not from North Korea, but from Western media.

Shin was only one of more than 200 witnesses who gave evidence to the UN commission. Of these, 80 witnesses were judged safe to give their evidence in public hearings. Gladly, they did so. Holding such hearings in public was something new for the United Nations inquiry procedures. The evidence was filmed. It is uploaded on the Internet and available worldwide. Anyone can view hour after hour of distressing testimony that affirms the shocking abuses of human rights found in the commission's conclusions. The evidence is believable and compelling. Everyone can reach their own conclusions upon it.

But this is where a number of features of modern media come in. They can be illustrated by the way in which global media has long covered the "hermit kingdom" of North Korea. Because free access to the country is prohibited and even the handful of tourists must be accompanied everywhere by government escorts, media cannot go about freely

investigating matters, as it can do in most other places. At the one time, international media is fascinated by this remote and peculiar country, apparently a leftover of the Stalinist regimes of the distant past. Yet media cannot get the hard news that will slake the international public's demand for information and opinion. The result has been, with some notable exceptions, an all too ready embrace of infotainment and trivialisation of the true picture of the abuse that was painstakingly described in the UN commission report. We had the bizarre spectacle of a minor former sporting notable, Dennis Rodman, travelling to Pyongyang to visit his "friend " Kim Jong-un, the current Supreme Leader of North Korea. Astonishingly, this was treated as important. On top of this, virtually any horror story will be published: such as the statement that the body of the uncle by marriage of the Supreme Leader, who had been executed in December 2013, was fed to wild dogs – a story still circulating. The story was quickly traced to a Chinese social media source; but still it is still distributed. The haircut of the North Korea leader becomes a matter of endless reportage and humour. On top of this, a few of the refugees who gave evidence of their suffering were selected for packaging as "poster children". Especially if they were young, attractive and had a link to the United States, as Shin was, they were built up by media as heroes. They were the "key witnesses". On their frail and often traumatised shoulders would seemingly rest the credibility of the entire refugee community.

That community numbers more than 23,000 in South Korea alone. They came forward in great numbers offering to give evidence to the UN enquiry which, for the first time, provided them with the opportunity of a public platform to tell of the wrongs that had been done to them and their families. But those whom the gods raise high, they also delight in

bringing down. And so, when Shin Dong- hyuk admitted that there were discrepancies in his original version of events, his predicament was suddenly presented as a potential fatal flaw in the testimony of refugees generally and for the conclusions of the United Nations inquiry.

The exact details of the inconsistencies that Shin now acknowledges need to be clarified, as they doubtless will in coming days. Was I surprised at his recantation? Not at all. Experience over 34 years as a judge repeatedly involved instances of such a kind. Human justice is fallible. But it is still essential. Trained decision-makers learn to look on all evidence with a degree of caution. Where grave crimes against humanity are asserted, there must be very strong evidence to support the conclusion that they are established. Testimony needs to be confirmed and, if possible, corroborated. In the case of North Korea, this is sometimes difficult. The difficulty arises from the extreme secrecy imposed by the regime. They will not let media, still less UN investigators, enter their country. So it is necessary to rely on outsiders because North Korea cannot ultimately prevent the world from getting to the bottom of the accusations.

Shin's evidence was special only in that he claimed to have escaped from the most severe detention camp where he and his parents had been held as political prisoners. This was the "total control zone" of Camp 14. It now seems that it may have been another camp. But in the large picture of the detention camps of North Korea, this is a trifle. His camp may have been 2 stars on the horror scale whereas Camp 14 is 3 stars. But any detention camp in North Korea is horrible enough. And there was plenty of other evidence of this, in the UN inquiry and beyond, from many witnesses. Until recently, North Korea denied the very

existence of these camps. Now, in the face of satellite images, they admit their existence and concede that washing and other facilities are poor. But they blame foreign sanctions on their country. Everyone is responsible, except themselves. The media's "poster boy" witness, Shin, now provides a convenient diversion. Some journalists breathlessly pick this up as if it were objectively important. It is not.

We need to return to the undoubted facts. Grave crimes against humanity in North Korea have been established by strong, credible evidence. They have been happening for decades. Ample support for that conclusion is available online for the whole world to see. Analysis is also provided in a careful UN report. This too is available online to everyone, except the citizens of North Korea. They have no access to the Internet. And we have no immediate access to them. Yet we now know what has been happening in their country. We should not be diverted from resolute action to demand accountability. In December 2014, the UN Security Council placed the issue of human rights in North Korea on its agenda. This was an unusual and a strong step. The international community needs to persist with calling North Korea to account. It should not be deflected from that course by the minor retractions of a single, highly traumatised person who remains just another of the tragic victims of the totalitarian regime in Pyongyang.

Michael Kirby*

*Chair of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea (2013-14). Justice of the High Court of Australia (1996-2009).