



UN's Universal Value of Human Rights – Navanethem Pillay

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was established by the United Nations in 1948. More than six decades have passed since then, yet human rights violations are still prevalent across the world. The recent Syrian refugee crisis in Europe has put human rights issues under the global spotlight, reminding people of the reality of such atrocities. Navanethem Pillay, who served as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights from 2008 to 2014, delivered her perspective on human rights issues, focusing on the current situation of North Korea, as well as the past, but unresolved, problem of Japan's wartime sexual slavery, at the World Knowledge Forum 2015, held at the Shilla Hotel in Seoul on October 22nd.

“International law, [as well as domestic law], is increasingly playing a role in shaping state policy to advance the protection of human rights,” said Ms. Pillay.

The increasingly connected and global nature of today's world has made it possible to expose and raise awareness of human rights issues across different nations. As such, Ms. Pillay believes that international human rights framework is fundamental for the collective interest of the world.

“Human rights are always essential to conflict prevention,” she asserted.

Ms. Pillay pointed out that with the necessary standards and regulations in place, it will be more likely that individual countries and the world as a whole can be alerted to any escalation of problems that could potentially lead to devastating outcomes.

“[Nations] need to take a broader view rather than act out in their own national interest,” she said.

As human rights issues often involve more than just one country, Ms. Pillay believes that the collective interest should also be the national interest of any country.

North Korea is undeniably one of the most problematic and pressing problems in terms of human rights violations. During her time as High Commissioner, Ms. Pillay called for international investigations for such crimes against humanity, resulting in the establishment of the UN Commission of Inquiry. However, the atrocities in the totalitarian state still persist.

“The crimes continue to take place,” she said, “because the policies, institutions, and patterns of impunity that lie at [North Korea's] heart remain in place.”

North Korean citizens are being oppressed and punished for harmless actions like watching TV shows from abroad, and suffering from starvation.

Recently, there have been more positive actions taken by South Korea and the United States, according to Ms. Pillay.

“Both these countries committed to this issue, to assist in ending the human rights violations in North Korea, and also to ensure accountability for the committing of these serious offences and know that reconciliation is a very important policy of this government.”

And more action needs to be taken, she said. Ms. Pillay believes that people around the world need to step up.

“It is the responsibility of the international community to act... and address and discourage human rights violations and the crimes against humanity in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.”

Ms. Pillay also discussed the problem of Japan, which has failed to address the events of wartime sexual slavery.

“The young women of Korea were forcibly transported by the aggressors... and subjected to sexual slavery,” she said. “So let’s not have euphemisms or pretend that these women consented to prostitution... This is a coercive situation where there was no place for consent.”

She believes that Japan needs to follow the lead of many other countries, such as Germany and Australia, and address the issue properly.

“An element of justice [needs to be] perceived by the victims,” said Ms Pillay. “It’s not a small issue at all.”

Ms. Pillay also believes that the international community has a responsibility to act, and that more awareness needs to be raised.

“The world... must act to stop [the problem].”

Although progress has been made since the past, there are still many things to be done. And in such a globalized world, as Ms. Pillay believes, it has become vital for people around the world to unite and act together to bring about change.

Reporter: Selina Lee