

U.N. Panel to Investigate Human Rights Abuses in North Korea
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By Steven Erlanger

PARIS — The United Nations Human Rights Council voted on Thursday in Geneva to create a three-person commission to look into allegations of human rights violations in North Korea, including food deprivation, labor camps for political prisoners and torture.

The 47-member council was unanimous in adopting a resolution sponsored by the European Union and Japan and backed by the United States. With no Chinese or Russian vote on the current council, North Korea lacked an ally willing to oppose the inquiry.

The commission, to run for a year, will include Marzuki Darusman, an Indonesian lawyer and special rapporteur for the council who wrote a report identifying various human rights violations, including the kidnapping of foreigners and a system of labor camps that hold an estimated 200,000 prisoners. He said the situation had worsened since Kim Jong-un took over after his father's death in December 2011.

The North Korean ambassador to the United Nations, So Se Pyong, rejected the commission as "an instrument that serves the political purposes of the hostile forces in their attempt to discredit the image" of North Korea, and denied that any human rights abuses existed in his country. A week ago, he told the council that the proposed commission was a United Nations plot and denounced the report as "fake material."

North Korea is being watched especially closely these days for saber rattling and threats of warfare. In February, Pyongyang carried out a nuclear test despite warnings by the United States and China, and this month, after the United Nations Security Council voted to impose new economic sanctions, it issued threats against South Korea and the United States. A computer virus attack this week against South Korea is believed to have originated in the North.

The United Nations human rights commissioner, Navi Pillay, called the human rights situation in North Korea "the worst in the whole world" in an interview with the news agency Reuters.

Kenneth Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch, said the new inquiry raised the pressure on North Korea beyond the usual "routine condemnations." He told Radio Australia that the commission would have a better-staffed investigative body to collect evidence to use in a potential prosecution, perhaps before the International Criminal Court.

At the moment, "there is no international tribunal that has jurisdiction over North Korea," Mr. Roth said. "Theoretically, the International Criminal Court could be brought in with a resolution from the U.N. Security Council, yet China would probably veto that at this stage. But collecting the evidence is the first step toward putting pressure on the international community, and whoever North Korea's defenders are, to ultimately acquiesce in prosecution is one way to deter the terrible atrocities that are routinely committed in North Korea."

The Human Rights Council also urged Sri Lanka on Thursday to carry out more credible investigations into killings and disappearances during its long civil war, especially in the conflict's last stages in 2009, when tens of thousands of people were killed. The resolution, which was sponsored by the United States, is not binding, and is the second in two years. It also expressed concern over reports of continuing violations of human rights.