

## The Wrap



**ESCAPE:** North Korean asylum seekers leap to freedom. Photo: aapimage

# Don't say we didn't know

The world's conscience should be stirred by a people's suffering, says a federal MP.

**A** federal parliamentarian whose family members were killed in the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz has championed an international human rights conference held in Melbourne to help bring more attention to the plight of the many thousands of North Korean people held in labour camps.

Michael Danby, the Member for Melbourne Ports (Vic), who helped organise the 9th International Conference on North Korean Human Rights and Refugees, said his father, uncle and grandfather were all incarcerated in the Gross Rosen concentration camp in 1938.

"My grandfather and grandmother Bruno and Magarethe Danziger were murdered by the Nazis in Auschwitz death camp," Mr Danby said.

"One of the claims perpetually made at the time was that no-one

'knew'. With the terrible suffering in the North Korean camps it is ethically incumbent on me to say that I made every effort to expose the truth so that people can never say they 'didn't know'."

Mr Danby said the scale of human disaster in North Korea was brought home to him after attending the previous conference in London in 2008.

"Millions of innocent people in North Korea are suffering under a brutal regime that is hard-line, isolationist and backward," he said. "The London conference was a success in highlighting the plight of these people, who live in what is clearly a grave and deteriorating state. As a Western country in the Asia Pacific and with a very large Korean community, I felt Australia was an ideal setting for the 2009 conference and was gratified that it was attended by over

250 delegates, including MPs from the opposition in both Japan and Korea."

He wanted to draw the world's attention to the first-hand accounts of the terrible plight faced by many North Koreans, especially from those imprisoned in the country's infamous labour camps who have been lucky enough to escape. The conference allowed delegates and the media to hear the personal stories of some of those who have found their way to the West, often after years of hiding in China.

One such harrowing account was from Shin Dong-hyuk, who was born in Political Prisoners' Camp No. 14. He lived the first 23 years of his life in this North Korean labour camp until he escaped and eventually found his way to South Korea. Shin was kept at the prison camp for more than two decades simply because two of his father's brothers had allegedly collaborated with South Korea during the Korean War and then fled to the south.

His father was considered guilty by the regime because he was the brother of so-called traitors. Shin was also considered guilty simply because he was his father's son. Shin described the almost routine savagery of camp life including the rape of his cousin by prison guards and the beating to death of a young girl found with five grains of unauthorised wheat in her pocket.

Shin once found three kernels of corn in a pile of cow dung. Realising his supposed good fortune, he picked them out, cleaned them off on his sleeve and ate them.

One day in 1996 the guards let Shin out of his cell and brought him to a public square to watch the execution of his mother. His brother was shot to death on the same day too. In January 2005, Shin escaped with a fellow prisoner when they were collecting wood in a more mountainous corner of the camp compound. The two men tried scaling an electrified barbed-wire fence which killed Shin's friend allowing Shin to climb over his friend's body to get through.

Mr Danby was unapologetic about the recounting of these confronting stories and others.

"We decided to do it deliberately, to try and give people an insight into how ordinary North Koreans suffer under this terrible regime," he said.

With the assistance of a South Korean human rights organisation and the Australian Institute of

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International Affairs, the conference held film screenings as well as musical performances and art exhibitions by North Korean refugees to add a human dimension to discussions on human rights by experts, politicians, activists, aid donors and business leaders. A large contingent of South Koreans and North Korean refugees attended.

Conference participants heard how some North Koreans are offering some resistance to the heavy-handed Kim Jong-il regime.

Mr Danby hopes this conference can help pressure the Chinese government and also the United Nations into finding a workable solution for the nearly 500,000 displaced North Koreans now living in China.

“The problem is that China, although it’s a member of the treaty that says these people should be considered as refugees, just says a blanket no,” Mr Danby said.

“And we have a terrible situation of human trafficking of women, forced marriages, stateless children, North Koreans starving, trying to cross the border. You have the horrible prospect of them if they’re caught being returned forcibly straight back into the gulag, or North Korean labour camp system. There are very few that make it out, often with the help of some brave Chinese.”

The 10th International Conference on North Korean Human Rights and Refugees is planned for Toronto, Canada. •



Map: Republished with permission of the US Committee on North Korean Human Rights.

## Electronic voting costs too high

A hefty price tag may spell the end for some electronic voting options.

Federal parliament’s Electoral Matters Committee has recommended that electronically assisted voting for blind or vision impaired people and remote electronic voting for Australian Defence Force personnel serving overseas should not continue as these forms of electronic voting are costing well over \$1,000 per vote.

The committee was informed about these high costs during a review of electronic voting trialled during the 2007 federal election.

The trial of remote electronic voting for selected defence personnel serving overseas saw 2,012 personnel registered to participate in four areas of operation: Afghanistan, Iraq, the Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste. Of these, 1,511 personnel cast their votes electronically at an average cost of \$1,159 per vote.

“Defence force personnel should be provided with every possible opportunity to vote at federal elections, however remote electronic voting imposes a significant additional burden on personnel in operational areas,”

said committee chair Daryl Melham (Member for Banks, NSW).

“An alternative model, jointly endorsed by Defence and the Australian Electoral Commission, and involving AEC-trained defence personnel issuing pre-poll and postal votes, should instead be used at future federal elections.”

The trial of assisted electronic voting for electors who are blind or vision impaired saw a lower-than-expected 850 votes cast across 29 metropolitan and regional locations. The average cost per vote cast was \$2,597. This compares to an average cost per elector of \$8.97 at the 2007 federal election.

“The high cost of improving the quality of the voting experience for a limited number of voters is unsustainable given the low number of votes cast and limited opportunities to lift participation,” Mr Melham said.

“The committee is mindful that these electors will not be disenfranchised by discontinuing electronically assisted voting, with existing provisions in the Electoral Act facilitating assisted voting where required.”

Mr Melham said the Australian Electoral Commission and its partners should be recognised for their work in delivering the trials and for their sustained efforts to develop solutions to a range of technical, logistical, administrative and legislative issues.

Deputy chair Scott Morrison (Member for Cook, NSW) told parliament electronic voting should be viewed cautiously and a patient approach should be adopted for future implementation.

“We can sometimes think that electronic voting can in many ways solve all the issues that we may face in extending the franchise and democracy,” Mr Morrison said.

“But it is still a tool which is pretty much in its infancy and there are many real dangers that are associated with it. In many jurisdictions around the world where they have gone further down the path on these sorts of issues I think they could not necessarily claim to have greatly increased or even improved at all how they have been able to conduct their elections.”

Mr Morrison said that if evidence presented itself in the future, as technologies changed and news ways were found to do this more cost-effectively, then he hoped the committee could look at this matter again. •

### LINKS

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