

DPRK should release political prisoners ahead of summit with US – UN expert

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) should begin to release political prisoners ahead of denuclearization talks with the United States and engage with the United Nations on human rights, a UN expert on the country said on Thursday.

Tomas Ojea Quintana, the [Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK](#), made his comments after welcoming Pyongyang's release of three US nationals last month.

Speaking to journalists in Geneva, Mr. Quintana called for "a concrete gesture" from DPRK regarding those held under arbitrary arrest in the country.

"It might be a gradual process, it's not that I'm saying you should open up all these prisons and release the prisoners, because I am a reasonable expert. What I am saying is there is a need to follow up on the release of the US prisoners in a gradual process."

The exact number of political prisoners being held in DPRK is unclear, but the rights expert – who two years into his mandate has yet to be invited to visit DPRK – agreed that there may be more than 80,000.

As a former UN Special Rapporteur on Myanmar, Mr. Quintana noted that an amnesty there had resulted in the liberation of 2,000 detainees.

In a press conference at the UN, the expert insisted that human rights should play a role in upcoming denuclearization negotiations in Singapore, in light of previous failed attempts to negotiate with DPRK where people's economic, social and cultural rights were "left out."

He cited two previous disarmament agreements with DPRK – the 1994 Agreed Framework and the 2003 Six Party talks – which despite being "well intentioned, were not successful".

For the proposed 12 June US-DPRK summit to bear fruit between US President Donald Trump and DPRK's Kim Jong Un, the UN Special Rapporteur insisted that the human rights dialogue should be included, "because human rights and security and peace are interlinked."

Inside DPRK, Mr. Quintana expressed concern that 10 million people there are in need humanitarian assistance, amid concerns over access to food and malnutrition.

The UN is responsible for providing help, he said, before highlighting that a

\$12 million appeal is only one-third funded.

He also wondered about the impact of sanctions on DPRK, particularly outside the capital, Pyongyang, where he described their impact as “quite violent.”

And while Mr. Quintana made it clear that he was not calling for an end to the economic embargo, he raised the question as to whether the UN Security Council would decide to extend it.

Special Rapporteurs and independent experts are appointed by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council, on an honorary basis, to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or country situation.