

North Korean defector recants prison camp claims

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22 January 2015

A prominent North Korean defector, who was a key witness for a United Nations panel on human rights, admitted last Friday that key parts of his story were not true. The admission sheds light on the political nature of the US-led campaign against North Korea.

Shin Dong-hyuk became famous for his accounts of North Korean prison life, detailing his experiences before the UN Commission of Inquiry in August 2013 and in a book written by former *Washington Post* reporter Blaine Harden, titled *Escape from Camp 14*. The UN commission's report, released last February, led to North Korea being referred to the International Criminal Court in December. The report detailed brutal treatment, including slave labor, forced starvation and rape.

However, Shin has now declared that crucial parts of his story were not true. He previously stated that before escaping in 2005, he had spent his whole life in North Korea's Camp 14, known as a "total-control zone," a far harsher prison complex than neighboring Camp 18, where Shin now claims he lived from the age of six.

Shin's story began to unravel when other defectors in South Korea began raising questions. At least one of these defectors had been in Camp 18 and known his father. They believed that Shin and his family had never served time at Camp 14 and pressured him to recant.

According to his new story, Shin was born in Camp 14 before moving to Camp 18 and failed to escape twice in 1999 and 2001. After being returned to prison following the second attempt, he was moved back to Camp 14 and escaped from there in 2005.

Even this account has been disputed. "He is still lying," one man, who said he also had been incarcerated at Camp 18, told the *New York Times*. Speaking on condition of anonymity, he continued:

"You just cannot escape a North Korean prison camp twice, as he said he did, and still be alive and manage to escape a third time, this time from the total-control zone."

North Korea released a statement on its *Uriminzokkiri* web site saying: "International organizations and major European countries must have faces reddened with humiliation for they were deceived by the likes of Shin Dong-hyuk." The Pyongyang regime is deeply concerned that charges may be leveled against its officials, including leader Kim Jong-un, in the International Criminal Court.

The issue is not whether the Stalinist regime in North Korea has carried out serious abuses against its own people. It undoubtedly has. Rather, Shin's revelations underscore the manner in which the US and its allies have cynically seized on those crimes, magnified them and used them to justify provocations and a military build-up in North East Asia.

This indifference to facts was made clear by Greg Scarlatoiu, the executive director of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, a Washington-based organization that has lined up behind the US agenda. "Camp 14, Camp 18, Auschwitz, Dachau, Birkenau—what difference does it make?" Scarlatoiu stated.

According to the *New York Times*, other human rights advocates have defended the UN commission report, saying that it did not rely only on Shin's account. Nevertheless, the glaring holes in Shin's story suggests that the commission accepted the testimony of North Korean defectors uncritically, and punctures its claims to independence and impartiality.

The US has not launched a campaign against North Korea on the basis of a genuine concern for human rights, but rather as part of the Obama administration's

“pivot to Asia.” Washington has repeatedly exploited the issue of “human rights” to pressure governments into line or as the pretext for military intervention. At the same time, it remains silent about the violation of basic democratic rights by allies such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and is itself responsible for torture, arbitrary detention, illegal drone killings and other abuses.

Many of the North Korean defectors are rabid anti-communists who have close ties to the state apparatus in South Korea. From the moment they arrive in South Korea they are under the close scrutiny of the National Intelligence Service (NIS). For one week to a month, they are interrogated before being moved to a resettlement center where they are forced to stay for three months, under the NIS’s watchful eye. Defectors have accused the intelligence agency of threats and maltreatment throughout this process.

Undoubtedly, the NIS exploits the opportunity for recruitment. Two supposed defectors were recently cited in a *New York Times* article supposedly proving North Korea’s involvement in a cyber attack on Sony Pictures last year. The article served as a propaganda piece for the Obama administration and, as the WSWs noted, the two men were clearly linked with the US and South Korean intelligence agencies.

Another prominent defector, Park Sang-hak, heads Fighters for a Free North Korea, a defector group that regularly sends balloons with leaflets over the border into the North. Last year, North Korea attempted to shoot down several such balloons with shells, which landed south of the border and generated return fire from the South, risking a larger conflict.

Park and his organization are tied to extreme right-wing groups like the Defense Forum Foundation (DFF), which was created in the 1980s and whose governing board is filled with former South Korean government and military officials. Park was also tipped off by the NIS to a supposed North Korean assassination attempt in 2011, suggesting close ties between the agency and himself.

Park’s group is preparing another provocation, threatening to send copies of *The Interview* into North Korea by balloon. The movie depicting the fictional assassination of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un was supposedly the reason for Pyongyang’s alleged hacking of Sony Corporation. “We will launch a large volume of the movie’s DVDs across the border unless

Pyongyang accepts Seoul’s dialogue offer,” Park warned on Tuesday. In fact, North Korea has already made its own counter-offer of a summit with South Korea.

Among these right-wing layers, half-truths, lies and fabrications, rather than facts, are marshaled in their propaganda war against North Korea. Yet the UN inquiry relied heavily not just on Shin, but on interviews with other such defectors, to make the case required by Washington to put the North Korean regime in the dock.



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