Although shocking to ordinary sensibilities, Kim Jong-Un’s execution of his uncle Jang Song Thaek on Dec. 12 fits squarely within the commonplace brutality and cruelty of North Korea.

Even without the execution carried out by the North Korean leader, the country has already earned the dubious distinction as the worst human rights regime on the planet. Massive and horrific crimes against humanity have become banal in North Korea. Extermination, torture, crimes by association and collective retribution are some of the particularly inhumane reports increasingly coming into broader awareness.

Although the Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea has officially signed four international human rights treaties, North Korea has not abided by any of these legal obligations.

Those treaties are the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In addition, North Korea’s constitution includes nominal rights protections (although override provisions subsume all rights beneath the will of the party and supreme ruler).

The security concerns in the region are legitimate and substantial, but they should not overshadow the worst human rights crisis
in the world today. North Korea must be held accountable under the various human rights treaties it has ratified. Accountability may require external intervention—possibly through the continuing investigation by the International Criminal Court, the formation of a hybrid tribunal or the work of the existing commission of inquiry deputized by the United Nations Human Rights Council.

The North Korean people have no due process of law, no freedom of speech, no religious freedom, and are forced to bow to the iron will of their leader's personality cult, lest they find themselves in a prison or concentration camp. Human rights groups now estimate that as many as 200,000 people are being held in North Korean concentration camps in a Stalin-Hitler-Mao-like attempt to crush all political dissent. Those incarcerated often work 14 to 18 hours each day without adequate food and hygiene on top of unremitting physical, emotional and mental abuse. The severity of the horrendous living conditions kills many of the inmates long before their sentences are complete.

Suffocating levels of governmental surveillance make it difficult and dangerous to act outside of the state’s control. Countless testimonies by defectors confirm that North Korea’s system of kangaroo courts and political-prisoner camps are notorious for even the most basic human rights violations. A North Korean can be publicly executed simply for asking “Why is the great leader not giving us rations?”

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Due to the unbearable living conditions in North Korea, which itself has become a prison, thousands of its people are attempting to flee the country every year—most crossing the northern border into China. This escape route in particular is fraught with peril as human traffickers exploit the desperate refugees, often forcing them into the sex trade.

When in China, the Chinese authorities consider the North Koreans to be illegal economic migrants (rather than refugees) subject to repatriation if caught, in violation of China’s obligations under the 1951 Convention Related to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. Defectors forcibly returned to North Korea face the predictable plight of imprisonment, torture and/or execution.

Even those North Koreans who somehow avoid detection in China suffer due to inadequate protection of their rights there. The women are often sold into arranged marriages with Chinese men, which are considered one of the less egregious outcomes. If these women are caught and returned to North Korea, their offspring are genocidally destroyed.

Religious persecution is perhaps the gravest of human rights violations in North Korea. Christians are especially vulnerable and “offenders” have been subjected to fanatical retribution in the name of the supreme leader, who is falsely elevated as a deity along with his deceased father Kim Jong-Il and grandfather Kim Il-Sung.

Multitudes of Christians have opted for martyrdom instead of renouncing their faith in Jesus.

The human rights crisis in North Korea has been persistently pervasive. Increasing awareness of the more than 60 years of this tyrannical trampling on human rights must fan the flames of change. We can no longer rightfully claim ignorance. As an international community, a legal community or simply a community of human beings, we must not hide from the horrific injustices befalling the North Korean people.

Impunity and oppression should not be allowed to reign unchecked. The healing of the land of the Morning Calm, the stability of the region and the sizeable ramifications around our deeply interconnected world all hang in the balance. The injustices in North Korea, this nation of “rightlessness,” simply demand redress.

To better understand the crises of North Korea, and to keep abreast of efforts to uphold the human rights of the Korean people, go to nkdb.org and thebearandthetiger.com.

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