

Committee for Human Rights in North Korea

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The Honorable John Conyers, Jr.

The Honorable Charles Rangel

July 17, 2015

Dear Congressmen Conyers and Rangel,

We write to you on behalf of the 23 Board Members and staff of the Washington, D.C.-based Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK). We are aware of the sacrifices you both made on behalf of your country and also the people of South Korea during the Korean War. Your service enabled South Korea to become the country it is today: a liberal democracy and an economic powerhouse constituting a role model for other nations in Northeast Asia and beyond. It is our hope that North Korea will follow in this path as well.

HRNK was established in 2001 by a distinguished group of foreign policy and human rights specialists, among them former Congressman Stephen Solarz, to focus attention on the human rights situation in North Korea, which for decades was sorely neglected by the international community. Congressman Solarz and HRNK sought to bring attention to the plight of the North Korean people. Serving as HRNK's Co-Chair until his death in 2010, he was often reminded of the campaigns he supported against the apartheid regime in South Africa. He sometimes recalled apartheid when he looked at North Korea's *songbun* system, which categorizes North Koreans at birth on the basis of political loyalty, political opinion, religious beliefs, and ethnic or racial background.

For more than a decade, HRNK has investigated and reported on human rights conditions in North Korea. It is the only U.S.-based bipartisan organization tasked exclusively to do so. Our well-documented studies are widely quoted. They have established our reputation and leading role in the growing international network of organizations committed to opening up and revealing North Korea to the rest of the world.

We are writing today to urge your involvement in this endeavor, hoping that you will take steps to promote human rights in a regime that President Barack Obama has described as "probably the worst human rights violator in the world." Concurrently, a 400-page UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) report in 2014 described the human rights situation in North Korea as one "that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world."

We are concerned that groups and individuals have been coming forward with proposals for engagement with North Korea that discount and overlook North Korea's treatment of its own

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population. Such initiatives ignore resolutions of the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council. They overlook the findings of the UN Commission of Inquiry report that crimes against humanity have been and are being committed in North Korea due to policies established at the highest level of the state. Indeed, the UN Security Council responded to these findings by voting to include North Korean human rights on its permanent agenda in December 2014. The Council thereby established a link between regional and international peace and security on the Korean peninsula and the nature of the North Korean regime.

Up to 120,000 people are estimated to be imprisoned for political reasons without due process in North Korea's political prison camps under inhumane conditions. According to the COI report, hundreds of thousands have already perished in these camps. We strongly urge that members of Congress seek access to the camps for International Committee of the Red Cross inspection teams, request a list of those imprisoned, and ask for information regarding their sentences and their conditions. A special effort must also be made to seek the release of family members detained in the camps without charge under North Korea's policy of collective punishment.

Members of Congress should also intercede against the forced repatriation and punishment of North Koreans who flee their country to seek asylum abroad. In testimony before Congress, HRNK has recommended that those fleeing North Korea's political persecution must be recognized as political refugees and *refugees sur place* who must not be forcibly repatriated by China and other countries. UNHCR must be given access to North Koreans in the China-North Korea border areas. Furthermore, all foreign citizens abducted by the regime and held against their will must be allowed to return to their countries.

HRNK is fully supportive of efforts to open up North Korea, the world's most reclusive regime, to the outside world. But "engagement" efforts must be based on realistic recognition of the human rights situation in the country. It is critical to provide information to the North Korean people, especially via radio and other media, to end their forced isolation. Human rights organizations and independent media must be given full access to North Korea, thereby ending the information blockade that has impeded efforts to reveal to the world a true picture of conditions in North Korea.

HRNK is fully supportive of efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to those who need it most in North Korea. But it insists that both the distribution of and access to humanitarian relief be adequately and transparently monitored to verify that relief is reaching those most in need, mindful of the COI's findings that under North Korea's discriminatory *songbun* system, food supplies have been withheld from those that need it most and provided to those who are categorized as loyal or useful to the regime. Even international food assistance has been reported to be diverted on many occasions. As urged by the COI report, the use of food as a method of political retribution and coercion must stop.

We believe that standing in solidarity with the North Korean people means that governments, international organizations, non-governmental groups, and civil society must recognize the

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human rights abuses of North Korea's government and work to promote change in that society. Yet, we see that after participating in tours tightly controlled by the North Korean authorities, groups comprised of American citizens sometimes claim that the North Korean leadership is being unfairly "demonized," and call for the unconditional lifting of sanctions on North Korea as well as for an unconditional peace treaty. We are fully supportive of efforts to achieve the reunion of separated families and ultimately the peaceful reunification of South and North Korea, as we know you are. However, initiatives that ignore the gravity of the North Korean human rights situation will lend legitimacy to the abuses of the North Korean regime.

South Korea has made tremendous strides, and its democratic society is still evolving. However, claims that it is South Korea, rather than North Korea, that has a doubtful human rights record and blocks reconciliation between the two Koreas are false and misleading. So are efforts to divert attention away from North Korea's refusal to repatriate the remaining 500 South Korean POWs, all of them in their 80s or 90s, its recent aggressive military actions, and other violations of international humanitarian law.

We are confident that we can rely on your wisdom and leadership to ensure that the American public and its representatives in Congress are fully informed of the ongoing crimes against humanity and other egregious human rights violations in North Korea. We hope to have the honor and privilege of working with you to bring human rights, freedom, and justice to the oppressed people of North Korea.

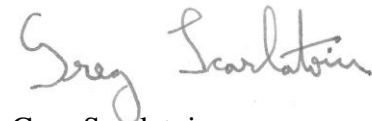
Respectfully yours,



Roberta Cohen
Co-chair



Andrew Natsios
Co-chair



Greg Scarlatoiu
Executive Director

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