

Freedom For All Koreans

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The famous former Soviet dissident, Andrei Sakharov, said it well: "A country that does not respect the rights of its own people will not respect the rights of its neighbors." North Korea is a prime example of a regime that doesn't respect either. It would probably come as no surprise to Sakharov that a government that inflicts on its citizens repression reminiscent of the most cruel totalitarian rulers of the 20th century is today counterfeiting American currency, trafficking in narcotics, building a nuclear arsenal, and threatening other nations.

Under the iron hand of Kim Jong Il, individual rights do not exist in North Korea. Millions have perished from a famine caused by government policies. Hundreds of thousands of North Koreans are held captive and brutalized in concentration camps. The regime traffics human beings, prohibits free expression of faith, holds its workforce in servitude, and has admitted to abducting foreign citizens.

As Sakharov reminds us, until the North Korean government respects the rights of its own people, the full blessings of peace and prosperity will elude Northeast Asia. So what can be done? First, we should force a ray of light through the veil of darkness and secrecy Kim Jong Il has drawn over North Korea. One defector recently told me that he first learned he was not living in a Socialist paradise when, as a soldier in the North Korean army, he listened clandestinely to South Korean radio. By increasing radio broadcasts from abroad, we can help North Koreans learn about the world outside. Defectors could play a major role, as they can speak with authority to those still in the North. The North Korean people would learn that less than 100 miles away, millions of Koreans who only 20 years ago also lived under an authoritarian regime now boast a vibrant democracy and the world's 12th largest economy. The deceit Kim Jong Il uses to help suppress his people can only be countered by a constant flow of information about the rest of the world. A policy to promote such broadcasts should be supported by America and all free nations.

We must also do more for those North Koreans who have braved great odds and escaped in search of freedom. The United States has long been a haven for vulnerable people fleeing despotic regimes, and North Korean refugees are welcome in the U.S. -- just as Jews fleeing the former Soviet Union and Cambodians fleeing Pol Pot were welcomed a generation ago. Many North Korean refugees have risked their lives to cross into China. Regrettably, they are often forcibly sent back to certain punishment in North Korea in clear violation of China's international obligations under a refugee treaty that it and 143 nations signed. Those refugees deserve better.

Certainly, Kim Chun-hee did. She is a defenseless North Korean woman who sought refuge at a school in Beijing last December, only to be sent back to her tormentors in North Korea. This happened despite the pleas of governments and the United Nations that she be treated humanely. It is not known if Ms. Kim is still alive. Nor do we know the fate of thousands of other refugees China has returned to North Korea.

Just as there are steps free nations can take to help the North Korean people, there are also policies we should avoid. One example of well-intentioned, but counterproductive, assistance is in the area of humanitarian aid. While the U.S. and other democracies stand ready to provide humanitarian assistance to the North Korean people, we properly insist on monitoring that aid to ensure it is not diverted to the military or sold on the black market where the cash can be used for other unintended purposes. By channeling large amounts of unmonitored aid to North Korea, some governments may actually worsen matters and unwittingly help prop up the regime.

America's friends in Asia must be careful not to squander whatever influence they may have to bring about change in North Korea. Near Kaesong, a city just north of the Demilitarized Zone, 15 South Korean companies recently opened an industrial park using North Korean labor. So far, the consortium has pumped hundreds of millions of dollars into the North with more to come. A South Korean official enthusiastically described it as, "a cooperative project benefiting both the South and the North, and at the same time, a peace project overcoming the wall of the Cold War through economic cooperation."

But the world knows little about what actually goes on at Kaesong, and given North Korea's track record, there is ample cause for concern about worker exploitation. The South Korean companies apparently pay less than \$2 a day per worker, and there is no guarantee that the workers see even this small amount. The North Korean government deducts a "social fee" from their wages and empowers "labor brokers" to control the rest. Moreover, the site is fenced in, and the North Korean workers must come and go through a single entrance manned by armed soldiers. While the conditions at Kaesong may be marginally better than elsewhere in the North, substantial economic assistance to North Korea should be linked to human-rights progress for all North Koreans. At a minimum, North Korea should allow an independent party, such as the International Labor Organization, to inspect and assess Kaesong and report its findings to the UN.

The U.S. will strive to give hope to the people of North Korea and to help them claim their inalienable rights. As U.S. President George W. Bush said last November when he went to Asia, "The 21st century will be freedom's century for all Koreans." But the challenge to expand freedom across the entire Korean peninsula is one the U.S. cannot meet on its own. Those around the world who cherish freedom, and especially America's friends in Asia who stand to benefit most from a peaceful and productive peninsula, must also commit themselves to this goal.

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