

Human Rights Situation in North Korea

Jay Lefkowitz, Special Envoy for Human Rights in North Korea

Statement to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and the Global Environment
Washington, DC
March 1, 2007

I am pleased to appear once again before the Committee to discuss the North Korean human rights situation and our efforts to help the people of North Korea. Few would doubt that working to secure for all North Koreans the inalienable and fundamental rights that we possess is work toward a worthy and noble end. But the promotion of human rights is not just a noble end in and of itself. It is something much more. It is also a means to a broader foreign policy objective. Modern history has repeatedly demonstrated that the human rights is also a means to peace, and I believe this is true in regard to North Korea.

Since my testimony last April, the North Korean government regrettably has taken no significant steps to improve its abysmal human rights record. Its conduct stands as an affront to its citizens and also to the norms of the international community. The regime ignores the fundamental prerogatives laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which are recognized by the majority of the society of nations.

Many of the human rights abuses in North Korea are all too familiar to members of this Committee, but certain points bear repeating. There are an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 North Koreans in a vast network of political concentration camps. The rights of free speech, worship, assembly, press, fair trial and emigration are ignored. The regime conducts mandatory political indoctrination, attempts to control all information, and supports a cult of personality around Kim Jong Il that is reminiscent of the worst dictators of the 20th century. North Korea has been sanctioned under the International Religious Freedom Act since 2001.

The North Korean government also has grossly negligent policies that exact a shocking humanitarian toll and put its population at risk of mass starvation. The state's highly centralized economy fails each year to produce even enough food for the country to subsist. Nonetheless, we believe the regime could feed its population if it wanted, but instead squanders revenue and foreign assistance on a massive military, weapons development and a small but pampered elite.

In the mid-1990s, these policies resulted in a food shortage and famine that killed an estimated 1-2 million North Koreans, and sparked a refugee exodus. According to the World Food Program, the average 7-year-old North Korean boy is eight inches shorter, 20 pounds lighter and has a 10-year-shorter life expectancy than his 7-year-old counterpart in South Korea. While information is limited, we have indications that the food shortage this spring in North Korea could be more acute than it has been since the famine years of the 1990s. Our policy is to separate food aid from policy issues, and we would like to provide humanitarian assistance to the North Korean people, regardless of any political differences that exist between our governments. However, as with humanitarian assistance anywhere in the world, we must insist on minimum international standards for monitoring aid distribution, in order to ensure reasonably that it reaches those for whom it is intended. We suspect North Korea of diverting foreign assistance to its military, the elite, and the black market.

What has changed in the last year is the response by the U.S. and other countries to this human rights and humanitarian tragedy. Transforming the situation in North Korea will require pressure from within, but it will also need strong insistence on reform from the international community.

Our government has opened America's doors to North Korean refugees. When President Bush appointed me as his Special Envoy, he directed that this should be my highest priority. In May, 2006, the first group of 6 North Korean refugees was brought to the U.S. We have now resettled a total of 30 refugees, and we expect this rate to increase. While we expect that most North Korean refugees will continue to choose to resettle in South Korea, we impose no quota or limit on the number we are willing to accept. With the highest number of refugee resettlements worldwide, America continues to demonstrate its leadership as a refuge for the oppressed.

To encourage a peaceful, long-term transformation, we need to enhance significantly the quantity and quality of information going into North Korea that is not subject to censorship. Voices that are not part of the government's propaganda apparatus can open peoples' minds and provide encouragement to those who seek freedom. Through means such as radio broadcasting, North Koreans can learn that they do not live in a 'socialist paradise,' and that contrary to the claims of the regime, people who live in freedom can enjoy a remarkable degree of prosperity.

Last year, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) provided increased resources to the Korean services of Voice of America and Radio Free Asia. For the next fiscal year beginning this October, the Administration has requested a significant increase for these services, from \$4.6 to \$8 million. Along with many other improvements, this increase will allow Radio Free Asia to begin transmitting in medium wave, which we believe will be a highly effective supplement to its current shortwave broadcasting. I ask the Committee to support this important increase.

Appropriated funds have also contributed partially to broadcasts by independent groups. Some of the most persuasive voices are not those of U.S. government employees, but private citizens who can sympathize with those living under repression. These include the voices of Korean democracy activists, defectors from North Korea, and Korean-Americans. Some Japanese groups also have limited broadcasts that attempt to reach those abducted in Japan by the North Korean government.

For the first time, the President's budget requests funds directly for the promotion of North Korean human rights: specifically \$2 million the State Department's request. When combined with the aforementioned BBG programming, we are asking the Congress for a total of \$10 million in FY2008 to promote North Korean human rights. Additional funds will be provided from accounts related to refugees and victims of trafficking in persons. I believe we can deploy these funds effectively and I ask that you support this request.

Other changes in the last year include a greater focus on North Korean human rights abuses by the international community. In October, the UN General Assembly's human rights committee voted 91-21 in favor of a resolution on North Korean abuses. Most significantly, South Korea abandoned its past practice of abstaining from the vote on this resolution, and voted in favor. In addition, the European Parliament passed a resolution addressing North Korea's human rights abuses. We hope that Japan will take the lead in offering a resolution on North Korea at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, despite the weaknesses of that body.

A direct dialog with the North Korean government on human rights has been elusive in the past year. The governments of North and South Korea invited me to visit the Kaesong Industrial Complex, which is inside North Korea just above the demilitarized zone. I had planned to commence a human rights discussion in relation to that. However, this trip was postponed twice in response to North Korean ballistic missile and nuclear weapons testing.

In the coming months, I intend to seek a human rights dialog with North Korea. The February 13 agreement reached in the Six Party Talks creates five working groups, one of which will involve discussions on the normalization of our relations. As I have said repeatedly, if the North Korean government wants to be seen as legitimate by the international community, it will have to make progress on human rights. We believe a discussion on human rights should take place prior to a full normalization of relations.

The Administration remains committed to this cause. This is an issue of importance to President Bush. Last April, in a one-on-one meeting with Chinese leader Hu Jintao, the President expressed his concern about China's treatment of North Korean refugees. Just four weeks earlier, the White House expressed grave concern with China's treatment of a specific North Korean refugee, Kim Chun-Hee. Ms. Kim sought refuge in a Korean school in Beijing only to be returned forcibly to North Korea by the Chinese despite being implored by other governments and the UN to protect her. The week after President Hu's visit, President Bush met in the Oval Office with defectors from North Korea and a Japanese family whose daughter the North Koreans abducted.

We plan to continue our diplomacy and communications efforts, and to expand our support to NGOs and programs that we believe will have a positive effect. Our strategy is to support the aspirations of the North Korean people, attempt to alleviate their suffering, and build an international consensus that the North Korean government must begin to recognize the rights of its citizens.

For questions or press inquiries, please contact Christian Whiton (202-647-6338).