

Meeting the Challenge of North Korean Human Rights

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Good Morning. Ambassador Vershbow, Ambassador Lee In-ho, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. It is a pleasure to address you today under the auspices of Freedom House, an honorable veteran of many successful struggles on behalf of human rights around the world. I would like to commend the organization's leadership and staff for their vision and energy in hosting this conference to commemorate International Human Rights Day.

Over the last century, especially since the founding of the United Nations after the Second World War, the world has slowly awakened to a growing consensus that every person is entitled to certain fundamental and inalienable rights. Indeed, the quintessential measure of the quality of any society is the respect it affords to human rights.

We have come together today because we share a common concern that a member of the United Nations -- North Korea -- is not living up to these international obligations. We also share the common belief that peaceful change is possible, and we recognize that the crisis of human in rights in North Korea is not just an internal issue for North Korea or even a regional concern here in Asia. On the contrary, it is a global problem that concerns the entire world. As Andrei Sakharov, a dissident who witnessed firsthand the human rights abuses that took place in the former Soviet Union observed, "a country that does not respect the rights of its own people will not respect the rights of its neighbors."

My own background with human rights actually began with the Soviet Union, a situation with certain parallels to what we face in North Korea. By the mid-1970s, an increasing number of Jews were seeking to emigrate from the Soviet Union to escape repression. This was troublesome for an authoritarian regime that purported to have created a socialist paradise for its citizens. At that time, criticizing the regime and expressing a desire to leave were criminal acts, and the Soviets organized show trials against those brave men and women who became known as "refuseniks," because they had been refused exit visas. Many of these people were sent to prison camps in the gulags of the former Soviet Union.

As a young student, I joined in protests and demonstrations and even traveled to the former Soviet Union to meet with refuseniks and help them to escape from the Soviet Union. Just as the international effort to condemn South Africa for its Apartheid regime helped to change that government's policies, so too did the movement to free Soviet Jews help to chip away at the authoritarian regime in the U.S.S.R.

Throughout the Cold War, there were some who took the view that human rights were an internal matter and not the proper subject for international discourse. Fortunately, that view did not prevail. By the 1970s, human rights had become a key part of the international dialogue.

Today, the challenge for the international community is once again to take up the calling of human rights -- this time in North Korea. Although the plight of the North Koreans may be felt most directly by their neighbors and relatives here in South Korea, the danger posed by the North Korean regime should be a concern to all nations. As Natan Sharansky, the most prominent of the former Soviet refuseniks, has written, "Promoting peace and security is fundamentally connected to promoting freedom and democracy."

The United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and numerous other international instruments affirm that "all States who are Members of the United Nations have the obligation to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms and to implement the obligations they have assumed under international instruments." Among the most basic human rights are the right to life, the right to worship freely, the right to be free from persecution, the right to travel and return home to safety, and the right to choose whether to marry, and whom to marry. Sadly, even these most elemental human rights are often denied to the citizens of North Korea. When one looks at this list of basic human rights, and examines the two Koreas, the contrast could not be more stark. While South Korea has grown into a full and proud democracy with the rule of law, North Korea is a deeply repressive nation. It is a land where the rule of law is supplanted by the knock on the door in the middle of the night. Only a short distance from here, beyond a thicket of barbed wire, which I saw yesterday when I visited the DMZ, lies a hidden world of hopelessness and terror. It is populated by the same people, with the same heritage, same traditions, and same background as those who live here. But instead of living in freedom and prosperity, they live in desperation, fear and intimidation.

In the last decade, millions of North Koreans have been starved to death and countless others languish in political concentration camps. The state recognizes no individual worth. And religious faith is suppressed. Its people have one of the lowest standards of living in the world. Their lives are shorter on average, and infant mortality is more than three times that of the South. Shockingly, as a result of the policies inflicted by the government on its own people, the average North Korean male is now several inches shorter than his South Korean neighbor. In its assessment of political rights and civil liberties, Freedom House gives North Korea the lowest possible score on both counts.

This contrast between the two Koreas is not pre-ordained. At the time this peninsula was divided, North and South Korea were at roughly the same economic point, and both were gripped by strong-arm rule. To the extent that one side held an economic advantage, it was the more industrial North. It is democracy, and opportunity, and free markets, and the rule of law, that have made the difference for the two Koreas. Today, South Korea's economy has grown to about one trillion dollars—more than twenty times that of the North. It is the tenth largest economy in the world. On a per capita basis, South Korean national income has risen from \$100 in 1963 to more than \$19,000 in 2004.

Those whose concern is the preservation of peace on the Korean Peninsula must understand that the advance of freedom is the necessary means to those ends. I am aware that many in South Korea are wary that calling for greater human rights for North Koreans is a proxy for other aims, or an excuse to isolate and antagonize North Korea's government. But we do not seek conflict or confrontation. We seek only to ensure that North Korea lives up to its international commitments to human rights, for this is the best way to improve the lives of the North Korean people. But we cannot avert our eyes to the truth about what is taking place only a short distance from where we stand today.

Many of the estimated 5 million Koreans who fled the north just after World War II or during the Korean War -- and an equal number of relatives left behind -- have gone to their graves without ever hearing of their parents, brothers, sisters, or children again. Despite occasional reunification visits, families remain separated even today. These are your brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins who are suffering.

Speaking in Asia last month, President Bush laid out a vision that I believe is shared by many throughout this region and around the world. He said, "The 21st century will be freedom's century for all Koreans and one day every citizen of that peninsula will live in dignity and freedom and prosperity at home and in peace with their neighbors abroad."

Around the world, more and more attention is being focused on this issue. A growing number of governments, international bodies and private organizations are learning the truth about North Korea and joining the ranks of those willing to speak out. Last month, some eighty-four governments at the United Nations General Assembly joined in passing a resolution condemning the human rights violations of the North Korean government. History will note that at this turning point, thirty-six nations co-sponsored the resolution, including many from Europe that were called to action by their own recent memories of tyranny during the Cold War.

In the United States, Congress voiced its concern last year by unanimously passing the North Korean Human Rights Act. Foreign policy is often contentious, but on this issue, every Republican and every Democrat present stood in agreement. This Act of Congress established my position, authorized funds to assist North Korean refugees and trafficking victims, promote access to free information within North Korea, advance their human rights, and called for cooperative work with the United Nations to build international consensus to address the growing crisis in North Korean human rights. And we have recently seen that the plight of the North Koreans is of concern to other countries as well. Just this week, Japan took the welcome step of appointing its own Special Envoy on human rights, who will focus on North Korea.

Yet to begin to solve the problem of human rights in North Korea, we need look no further than its great neighbor to the South. South Korea is the best example of what is possible if North Korea undergoes a transformation. South Korea underwent a peaceful evolution from an undemocratic nation in economic ruin to a prosperous and free country with representative government. We do not challenge the peace by possessing this goal. Indeed, failing to follow this path and take steps toward liberalization is a far greater risk to long-term security and economic prosperity in the region.

But North Korea must be encouraged to take the first steps. Much of the free world's task involves demonstrating to Pyongyang that the only way it can obtain legitimacy and greater recognition throughout the world is through substantial progress on human rights.

To begin this process, North Korea must show the world that it lives up to commitments it has made to its people in its own constitution and to the international community through its U.N. obligations. It must begin to afford basic human rights to its citizens. It must allow humanitarian organizations access to monitor the delivery of humanitarian aid. And those who wish to emigrate must be allowed to leave.

Many nations, including the United States, are concerned with the material well being of the North Korean people in addition to their lack of liberty. We wish to help alleviate their suffering, which has been enormous since the onset of famine in the 1990s. America is a generous nation, and since 1995, we have provided more than two million tons of humanitarian food assistance to the people of North Korea. South Korea, Japan and China are among other nations that also provide assistance. While we seek nothing in return for this assistance, we know that North Korea has diverted some of this aid to serve other purposes and further tighten its grip on the people of North Korea. Only if the nations that provide assistance insist that aid verifiably reach those in need can we be sure that our activities have a positive effect on the helpless and do not further enable their captors.

Immediate action is also needed to protect North Korean refugees. Tens of thousands, possibly hundreds of thousands, of desperate, helpless and vulnerable North Koreans have fled to China and beyond since the mid-1990s. Some of these refugees have made it to freedom here in South Korea, but all too many others have not. They live in fear of being returned to the land they fled, where they face the likelihood of severe punishment. Nations where North Korean refugees are present have a clear moral obligation to protect them. China, where most of these refugees are located, has ratified an international agreement on refugees that requires it to do this -- the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. China should grant the U.N. High Commissioner on Refugees access to North Koreans who seek asylum in China and refrain from deporting asylum seekers against their will. We seek to work with all nations that have North Korean refugees on their soil to ensure and support their protection and resettlement.

The affront to the dignity of human life in North Korea cries out to the conscience of the world. But this challenge will not be overcome by governments alone. Private organizations, like the great number that are represented here, will prove to be decisive in this struggle. Religious organizations, dissident groups, unions and non-governmental organizations all have an important role to play. The ability to set all of these forces in motion to support this cause will be a key factor in its success.

As President Bush's special envoy, I wish to speak directly to the people of South Korea and of other free countries: We seek to work with you to address the shocking affront to human dignity that holds the North Korean people in bondage. Working together, we can help them to advance toward freedom. And by doing this, our own liberty and security will be enhanced. As President Bush has said, "America will lead by defending liberty and justice because they are right and true and unchanging for all people everywhere. No nation owns these aspirations, and no nation is exempt from them."

I also wish to speak directly to the people of North Korea: I want you to know that you are not forgotten. Those who live and languish in prison camps, those whose families are torn apart by the state, and those in hiding and in fear should know that there is a growing number of people who keep you in their thoughts and prayers and are working toward the day that you can walk upright in freedom. And as dark as the situation may seem today, there may be some light beginning to peer through: today we know that at least there is some information reaching you. We will do our best to increase the flow of information into North Korea. Because we know that once light begins to shine on authoritarian regimes, the march of democracy cannot be far behind.

I want to thank those of you who worked so hard to organize this conference, particularly Jae Ku and his dedicated staff at Freedom House. I would also like to acknowledge Ambassador Vershbow, who has been an anchor on the issue of human rights in North Korea. I look forward to visiting with some of you during the conference and to taking many more trips back to this great and proud nation. South Korea has demonstrated great leadership in expanding freedom and prosperity in Asia. With a concerted, peaceful, international effort we can do more. Our calling is to extend this freedom to the people of North Korea. And in this effort, you should know that you have the full support of the American people and their government.

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