

Practical Steps to Advance North Korean Human Rights

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Thank you Dean Suh for that introduction. It's an honor to be here in Seoul for North Korean Human Rights Week. I would like to acknowledge and thank everyone who made the events of this week possible.

I've been asked to speak about the North Korean Human Rights Act, which was just reauthorized by the U.S. Congress, and the practical steps we've taken as a result of this law. First, let me provide a brief background on our overall policy and perspective.

I. U.S. Commitment to Human Rights for North Koreans

Addressing the issue of North Korea last month in Bangkok, President Bush reiterated his Administration's goal: "a Korean Peninsula free of oppression and free of nuclear weapons." He also said "the United States will continue to insist that the regime in Pyongyang end its harsh rule and respect the dignity and human rights of the North Korean people."

Presidents Bush and Lee underscored this when they last met here in Seoul. They stated jointly that: "In the process of normalizing relations, meaningful progress should be made on improving North Korea's human rights record." Clearly, this is an issue that both presidents care about deeply, and it is something that must be part of any successful engagement with North Korea.

II. Rationale for Commitment

It's useful to remind ourselves why that is, before getting to the practical question of what we can do to help this dire situation. Early in the Bush Administration, the White House issued a formal National Security Strategy that explains our motives for caring about how a government treats its people. One of its key clauses states: "America will encourage the advancement of democracy and economic openness...because these are the best foundations for domestic stability and international order."

That remains today a profound and accurate statement about the relationship between how a government treats its own people and how it treats its neighbors. It is a view that is by no means new to America's foreign policy, but not one that is necessarily intuitive. It holds that human rights is an issue that is linked to others—namely peace and security for all of us.

North Korea's human rights abuses are infamous and well known to all us here today. Some of you have experienced this brutality first hand. We can also see in North Korea how abusive conduct by repressive governments is not confined to domestic applications. Indeed, history has shown repeatedly that government conduct at home influences conduct toward other nations. Dictators like Mao, Stalin and Hitler trampled the rights of their own countrymen as they prepared to trample their neighbors. For this reason, making the advancement of democracy and the rule of law part of our national security agenda is appropriate and necessary. Freedom is not only a moral issue—it is a practical one.

In regard to North Korea specifically, Congress and the President have recognized the importance of human rights. In 2004, Congress unanimously passed the North Korean Human Rights Act. It became law in October of that year when it was signed by President Bush. It was just reauthorized by Congress this week without a single dissenting vote. Clearly the American Congress and the President believe it is in the interest of the U.S. and the free world to encourage democracy and respect for human rights in North Korea.

III. Practical Steps

So then, where do we start with this difficult task? To put this in perspective, it is useful to recall that there was a time when some of the brightest, freest cities in the world today were as grim and repressive as Pyongyang. At times in the last century, in cities like Warsaw, Prague and Budapest, fear was pervasive and it was known that any sign of dissent or free expression could bring a dreaded knock on the door in the middle of the night. Today those cities are free and vibrant and prosperous. If they changed, so too can Pyongyang and all of the cities of North Korea.

Since the passage of our Human Rights Act in 2004, we have looked closely at how to support the yearning for freedom in North Korea. North Korea poses a somewhat unique challenge because it is essentially closed off from the outside world. We have yet even to engage in a formal dialogue on human rights issues with the government. The ability of ordinary or even elite citizens to access the outside world or the truth about their own government and country is limited. This precludes for the time being many of the traditional methods of encouraging support for human rights. Yet we believe we have taken steps that will make a difference over time.

Our view is that the key is appealing directly to the North Korean people. Perhaps the most significant step we can take is to help open up their minds to the outside world. This conclusion will come as no surprise to those of you here today, as many of you have contributed to this effort for some time.

Radios

Specifically, we have supported efforts that promote the free flow of accurate information into North Korea. Censorship in North Korea is

intense and comprehensive. The State Department's last human rights report noted that the government in Pyongyang seeks to control virtually all information, and completely suppresses free expression and independent media.

But despite a prohibition on listening to foreign broadcasts, and a ban on radios that can be tuned to receive these broadcasts, we know North Koreans are listening despite the risks. Research based on interviews of recent defectors from North Korea assessed whether people there are listening to radio broadcasts from abroad. Its findings are encouraging:

- More than 20% of survey respondents said that foreign radio broadcasts were a top source of information while inside of North Korea;
- More than 1/3 said they had modified their radios to be able to receive foreign broadcasts; and
- Almost 1/2 listened to some broadcasts other than North Korean official government broadcasts.

If North Koreans are taking the risk to listen, we in the free world must ensure that there is factual, helpful information available for them to receive. The Bush Administration has increased substantially America's support for independent media efforts. Over the past three years, funding for Radio Free Asia and similar Korean-language broadcasts has approximately doubled to a total of \$8.1 million. Modest amounts of funds appropriated by the Congress have also reached independent organizations that aid Koreans who want to reach out to their brethren north of the DMZ. But some of the hardest and most important work has been done here in Seoul—often by committed journalists and freedom advocates working long hours with little immediate reward.

Their commendable efforts can open minds in North Korea—minds that the regime in Pyongyang wants to keep shut and in a state of deception. To quote the Book of John: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Indeed, the truth can liberate and encourage. Media programs like these have played an important role in past freedom movements—and it plays a critical role in this one. North Koreans will know that they are not alone in their struggle.

Furthermore, the emerging model of independent broadcasters and media groups complementing or surpassing government broadcasting is somewhat unique and very promising. It may serve as a model for other human rights efforts around the globe.

Our governments and private organizations should continue to work together on projects like these. South Korea and Japan should facilitate radio transmissions from their territory, as we have from ours. Right now, this information effort is one of the most practical means of aiding change in North Korea—which must ultimately come from within.

International Support

Nonetheless, the impetus for internal change must be supported by strong international pressure if it is to prevail. Another practical step democracies can take to help the North Korean people is to pass special legislation.

The U.S. Congress has now done this twice. In 2004, it passed the North Korean Human Rights Act. Just this week, it reauthorized and strengthened the law. Legislation like this sends a strong signal on human rights. It can provide a helpful roadmap for officials to follow, and provide for appropriations that help groups seeking to help North Koreans.

We understand legislation like this is under consideration by the National Assembly here in Seoul. We hope the elected representatives of the Korean people use this opportunity to strengthen further their government's resolve on the human rights issue.

It is also important for governments to continue to use international forums to express their desire for improvements in the human rights situation. The UN General Assembly's human rights committee has condemned North Korea repeatedly and we hope it will do so again in this session. It is important that Pyongyang get a clear message that no respectable government endorses or forgives its treatment of its people. Certainly every democracy should support this and similar resolutions if they believe other people should have the same rights as their own citizens.

A final simple and practical step that can be taken to help North Koreans is for the Chinese government to cease its forcible repatriation of refugees to North Korea. Whether these people are fleeing hunger, oppression or both, they clearly have a very plausible fear of severe punishment upon being repatriated to North Korea. The Chinese government should live up to its obligations under the UN refugee convention it signed and protect these individuals pending their resettlement. Otherwise, this will continue to mar China's international reputation.

I have outlined some of the activities and methods we view as potentially effective for us in promoting North Korean human rights. When free people look at North Korea and its government's infamous human rights violations, it is understandable that they may be frustrated as to how to help the North Korean people change this situation.

We should remember that while our ability to influence is not unlimited, it is nonetheless quite considerable. Working together with determination, we can help North Koreans achieve their inalienable human rights.