Advancing Human Rights and the Prospect for Democracy in North Korea

Remarks by Carl Gershman, President of the National Endowment for Democracy

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I want to thank Rev. Yoon and the Citizens' Alliance, and our of our NED grantees, for organizing this forum. I'm extremely happy and honored to be with you.

Our gathering today is an important opportunity for us to reflect together on how far we've come over the last decade-and-a-half – and how far we still have to go -- in the struggle to defend the dignity and human rights of the people of North Korea.

I want to begin by thanking Rev. Yoon for organizing a beautiful tribute to the late Czech President Vaclav Havel last January 6, which was the 35th anniversary of the Charter 77 movement that helped liberate Czechoslovakia from communism in 1989. Havel believed deeply in international democratic solidarity, and he had a strong interest in human rights in Asia. He led the campaign to gain the Nobel Peace Prize for Aung San Suu Kyi in 1991 and Liu Xiaobo in 2010, and he was a close friend of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who was both the first foreign visitor Havel received after becoming President of Czechoslovakia at the end of 1989 and the last visitor he saw before his death.

Havel became engaged in the issue of human rights in North Korea when the Citizens' Alliance held its 4th International Conference in Prague in 2003. He minced no words about Kim jong-il, whom he called "the world's worst totalitarian dictator, a man responsible for the loss of millions of lives." The fact that the news of Kim jong-il's death was announced the very day that Havel died led some people to say -- only half facetiously -- that Havel believed so strongly in human rights and democracy that when his time came to leave this world, he took a dictator with him.

I still vividly recall Rev. Yoon's closing speech to the Prague conference. Mentioning the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, who wrote that God had created everyone to do something different and special, Rev. Yoon said that he had come to realize that his own unique mission in life was to defend North Korean human rights -- "that I was born to do this," he said, "and that God blesses this work."

He told the Prague conference of the saying in the Orient that the hardest part of setting a vast plain on fire was lighting the first spark, after which the plain would burn fiercely. "What I have been able to do," he said, "was to light one match to that vast plain. Now, I have no doubt that those flames will spread widely across the world."

I can speak from personal experience in saying that in the case of my organization, this is exactly what happened. In 1996, when Rev. Yoon founded the Citizens' Alliance, the National Endowment for Democracy was like a stretch of very combustible dry land on that vast plain, ready to be ignited but lacking a spark. Two members of the NED Board had been insisting for years that we find a way to get involved in North Korea. One of them was Dr. Fred Ikle, a former under-secretary of defense in the Reagan Administration and one of America's leading strategic thinkers. The other was Stephen Solarz, a former Democratic Congressman who had made several visits to North Korea to meet with Kim Il-sung

and who was also Kim Dae-jung's best friend and most fervent supporter in the U.S. Congress. Both of them passed away recently and are fondly remembered by Americans of both of our political parties.

In response to this Board pressure, we were looking for a way to get started on North Korea. But since NED is a grant-making institution, and since we couldn't find a group working on this issue that could carry out a good project, we were stymied. Then one day I ran into our senior program officer for Asia, Louisa Greve, who was copying for me an article from a publication that had just arrived called "Life and Human Rights in North Korea." It was published by a new organization -- the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights. All of a sudden we had a potential grantee, a place to begin, and before long we were talking with Rev. Yoon about a project that turned out to be the first International Conference on North Korean Human Rights and Refugees. We were on our way, spreading the fire on that vast plain.

I attended that first conference, where I gave a talk called "Ending the Silence." I said that there were three reasons for the silence: The closed nature of the North Korean system, which made it hard for human rights groups to gather and verify information about human rights abuses; the fear some had that raising the issue would provoke conflict with North Korea; and finally the difficulty of separating the issue of human rights from what I called "the complex politics of the divided peninsula."

At the time I was not that familiar with these complexities. But as I became more involved on the issue, I realized something that seemed paradoxical, which was that some of the people who had fought hardest for human rights and democracy in South Korea did not want to align themselves with the cause of human rights in North Korea. The reason for this, I was told, was not just that they saw focusing on human rights as an obstacle to engagement and reconciliation with the North. They also associated the issue of human rights in North Korea with support for the former military dictatorship, which they felt had used the threat from the North and the totalitarian nature of the system there to justify its authoritarian rule.

This unfortunate legacy of the period of military rule in South Korea reminded me of a parallel political division that we had in the United States during the Cold War. Back then, the United States faced the moral dilemma that some of its allies against the Soviet Union were authoritarian governments. This was often called the problem of "friendly tyrants," and it led to very heated debates about our foreign policy. When the Carter Administration came into office in 1977, it took the view that the U.S. had to pressure such governments on human rights much more strongly than it had done before. But the fall of the Shah in Iran and Somoza in Nicaragua in 1979, and their replacement by regimes that were hostile to the United States as well as to democracy, led to a sharp counter-attack by conservatives, who argued that authoritarian allies were both less repressive and friendlier to the U.S. than the likely totalitarian alternatives and should not, therefore, be abandoned.

The NED came into existence when this debate was at its height, and our experience in dealing with the issue is instructive. We accepted the distinction that conservatives had drawn between authoritarian and totalitarian systems because it was real and obvious. As repressive as authoritarian systems were, they still had a level of pluralism in civil society and the economy that was greater than in closed communist systems. But rather than use this distinction to rationalize authoritarian repression – which, fairly or unfairly, some critics felt the U.S. had done with respect to "friendly tyrants" -- we said that our goal would be to advance democracy differently in each case. In authoritarian systems, where there was restricted but not negligible political space, our goal would be to expand political space and promote a political transition. In totalitarian systems, it would be to try to open a closed society.

In other words, working <u>for democracy</u> in both authoritarian and totalitarian countries was a point of consensus around which we could build support for NED's mission. It helped, of course, that what Professor Samuel Huntington was later to call "the third wave of democratization" was beginning to crest at the very moment NED was getting started. With transitions occurring in country after country, democracy was suddenly a realistic option, an objective that people could unite behind, as opposed to fighting over whether or not to support the lesser of two evils. As the spread of democracy swept away scores of dictatorships, it also healed some of the political divisions of the Cold War era.

Regrettably, though, the division did not disappear here on the Korean peninsula. It grew even sharper as South Korea achieved a momentous democratic breakthrough from military rule, while North Korea sunk ever more deeply into a dark night of totalitarian oppression, political isolation and even calamitous famine and loss of life.

I understand that North Korea remains an immensely complicated political and security problem for South Korea, and some believe that focusing on human rights abuses will only make it more difficult to achieve peace and reconciliation. But I believe that this view is very short-sighted. In the end, real peace and genuine people-to-people dialogue and exchange can only happen when the wall of totalitarianism is removed. And the starting point for removing this wall is defending North Korean human rights.

Let me make clear that NED is not a human rights organization. Its mission is to provide assistance to people who are trying to build a democratic society and political system. But we have always taken the view that a strategy to advance democracy in a totalitarian country must begin with support for human rights and the free flow of information. These are the logical and necessary first steps of a democracy strategy, and they will eventually lead to other steps as political space opens up and the isolation of the society begins to break down. Moreover, such steps need not complicate or conflict with diplomatic or security concerns, since they can be pursued on a separate track from official government policy. Indeed, NED was established as an arms-length, nongovernmental organization

precisely so that it could develop this second track of people-to-people engagement. Our grantees, the organizations we support, are also nongovernmental. Like NED, they seek to advance democratic goals, not to influence or carry out government policy. However the government policy may change, our purposes and goals – and those of our grantees – remain the same.

Since NED started working on North Korea more than a decade ago, there have been changes of great importance. North Korea remains a totalitarian country, but human rights organizations now routinely address the issue, as does the United Nations, which has established the position of special rapporteur for North Korean human rights. The people of North Korea are also less isolated today than they once were. There are now more than 23,000 defectors from North Korea, and they bring with them not just first-hand information about the country but also the desire to reach back and connect with the people they have left behind. There is also significant traffic across the border with China, which increases the porousness of North Korea and allows information to spread about the remarkable development China has achieved after discarding its Maoist ideological baggage. In addition, short-wave radio stations broadcast into North Korea, and groups like DailyNK gather real news from sources inside the country, where websites and journals have begun to emerge. The fact that there are now one million cell phones in North Korea is a statistic of stunning significance.

In short, new opportunities are developing as a result of more than a decade of change and hard work by NGOs, many of them NED grantees. Such groups inform the international community about what is going on in North Korea, reach the people there directly with news and information, and build the capacity of North Koreans both in the country and in South Korea to enlarge the very small areas of independent political and economic space that now exist.

It is possible that these opportunities may grow as a consequence of a precipitous and seemingly artificial leadership transition in North Korea that has resulted in the installation of a 28-year old "Supreme Leader" whom nobody had heard of just two years ago. There is some anecdotal evidence that popular discontent is growing – a crackdown on cell-phone use, for example, or a series of executions and unexplained deaths, including the murder of four public officials in North Hamgyung Province, with a note reading "Punished in the name of the people" found next to one of the bodies. We don't know, and we shouldn't pretend to know, the popular mood, since this cannot be accurately discerned. But it is not unreasonable to assume that the regime is feeling insecure, that it knows it has a severe legitimacy crisis, and that the appearance of stability is misleading. Despite all the uncertainty of this moment, I believe that it is now more important than ever for us to think about ways to expand support for an emerging civil society in North Korea.

I'd like to briefly discuss seven areas where such supported is needed. First, it's important to continue advocacy in defense of the fundamental human rights of the people of North Korea. Despite

the changes that have taken place in North Korea in recent years, the human rights situation has not improved. These changes amount to an erosion of the totalitarian system, not to its reform, and that system is still the most oppressive in the whole world. It remains a priority to document and expose the terrible abuses that take place every day in North Korea and to end the scandal of China's forcibly sending refugees back to North Korea, where they face prison, starvation, torture and execution. A special priority should be to shut down the system of political prison camps which constitute a crime against humanity.

Second, it's necessary to continue to break down the information blockade by expanding short-wave radio broadcasts into North Korea and securing transmission facilities in nearby countries that will make possible more easily accessed medium-wave programs. In addition, a number of groups are looking at developing more sophisticated methods of spreading information inside the country through cell-phone messaging systems and making Korean-language Wikipedia available on Compact Discs, USB flash drives, and MP4 players. While no one is predicting an Arab-Spring uprising in North Korea anytime soon, the growing presence of these data storage and messaging devices is raising the consciousness of people at the grassroots, thereby creating new possibilities for political networking.

The opportunity for such interaction is also increased by the rapid development of informal markets called *jangmadang* that have proliferated in North Korea as a result of the breakdown of the public distribution system. A study of the some fifty *jangmadang* conducted by NKNet and the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) shows them to be much more sophisticated than informal farmers markets. Some of the markets have as many as 100,000 daily visitors, and there is an informal banking system as well as trading in land-use rights. Even more important, these markets exist as zones of autonomy where people meet and exchange information, something that was never possible before. In their study *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea*, Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland write that participation in these markets is an "everyday form of resistance" that is associated with the following characteristics: "greater likelihood of arrest, more consumption of foreign news, more negative assessments of the regime, a greater willingness to communicate those views to one's peers, and a greater propensity to cite political motives for emigration." Among the possible new initiatives that support groups are now developing is one that would encourage the spread of these markets to parts of North Korea where they don't now exist, and another that would ensure the circulation inside the *jangmadang* of quality information about both market transactions and the outside world.

A fourth area of work is setting up programs just across the border in China that offer training about free market economies, human rights and democracy. The participants in these programs are mostly North Koreans who visit China regularly to pursue business opportunities. Most are university

educated and have respectable jobs in North Korea. The fact that they so readily take part in these programs may be explained by their familiarity with outside information, which more and more North Koreans are receiving from satellite television, radio, or relatives in South Korea. One of the programs has four levels of curricula --the current situation, Korean history, basic concepts of human rights, and globalization -- and participants eagerly return to take the next level. Some who have completed the program become trainers themselves in China so that they can gain the experience needed to carry out such trainings inside North Korea.

Other North Koreans that some NGOs are trying to reach are overseas workers, who are sent abroad to obtain capital for the destitute North Korean government. This is a fifth area of work that has great promise. The number of overseas laborers is now about 30,000, but it is expected to rise to 100,000 within the next two years. Most are in Siberia, but there are also North Korean workers in China, the Middle East and Africa. They work as bonded laborers, with the North Korean government confiscating most of their salary. Human rights groups will try to interview some of these workers and provide the information they obtain on labor conditions, the confiscation of wages, and worker rights violations to the ILO and groups like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Such a program could set the stage for a related labor initiative to apply international standards of workers' rights to the Kaesong Industrial Complex or to multinational companies that invest in North Korea.

The final two areas of work are taking place in South Korea. The first is something I've spoken about before and want to emphasize again -- the importance of assisting the defector community, which has now grown to more than 23,000 people. The defectors serve three vital purposes. The first is that they can inform South Korea and the world about conditions and attitudes in North Korea. The second is that they can connect with people in North Korea through radio broadcasts and through the various training and information initiatives I've just discussed. Finally, they represent a potential cadre of skilled professionals who are schooled in the South, familiar with how a modern political and economic system functions, and motivated to liberate and rebuild their homeland. When North Korea opens up, and it will, they could be a key part of a Korean volunteer service corps that will help North Koreans rebuild their society after generations of totalitarian isolation.

Finally, there is the need to strengthen the links between North Korean defectors and South Korean activists by supporting their efforts to work together to build a unified and democratic Korea. An example of this is a program now being carried out by the Center for Korean Women and Politics, a group committed to strengthening the participation of women in South Korean local and national governance. They are bringing together female defectors with South Korean women to exchange views, break down the stereotypes that North and South Korans have about each other, and think together

about how North Korea can democratize. They are building the kind of trust, mutual understanding, and respect that will be needed to make unification real and human.

In my view, the time to start preparing for unification is now, and the way to prepare is to become engaged in the effort to defend, connect with, and empower North Korean civil society. The democratic changes that have occurred in East Asia over the past quarter of a century have been historic – from the democratic revolutions that took place in this country and in the Philippines, to the unheralded triumph of democracy in Mongolia and the transition in Taiwan, to the stunning democratic success in Indonesia, which few people thought possible. The progress has been extraordinary, and it is not over. In the current issue of our *Journal of Democracy*, Larry Diamond writes that the next regional wave of democratic transitions will take place in East Asia – in Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, and even China, where the same pressures that brought democracy to this country and to Taiwan – dramatic economic expansion, a rising middle class and a "stubbornly independent civil society" – will propel a transition there. Most remarkably of all, Burma is beginning to open up, a country that until very recently seemed to be more comfortable colluding with North Korea than becoming part of the modern world. "In short," Diamond concludes, "within a generation or so, I think it is reasonable to expect that most of East Asia will be democratic."

North Korea, in my view, cannot resist this tide. We should not fear the coming change; we should prepare for it. We need to study the transitions that have already occurred in this region and others – successful and unsuccessful – to see what lessons can be learned for the great challenges that lie ahead. We should begin to develop the resources, the skills, and the governmental and nongovernmental institutions that will be needed to make unification work. South Korea has so much to give.

Aung San Suu Kyi said recently that she received a letter from Vaclav Havel that arrived just days after his death. He wrote of his friendship for her and his solidarity with Burma. He said that he was following the recent developments in Burma "with a very, very cautious optimism." And then he ended on a practical and modest note, saying that "if there is anything we can do to help, for example – and only if you wish – to share some of our transformational experience with you, we shall gladly do it."

South Korea has so much of that transformational experience to share with North Korea. It is a precious resource. I hope you will use it – I <u>know</u> you will use it – to give hope to the people of North Korea that their suffering soon shall end.