

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) sent the following letter on December 27, 2011:

The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Madam Secretary:

Pursuant to its advisory responsibilities under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom respectfully urges you to ensure that U.S. diplomacy regarding the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) advances an agenda that gives a prominent place to the protection of human rights, including the freedom of religion and belief, as well as the provision of humanitarian assistance and the protection of North Korean refugees.

We urge that the United States make clear to the North Korean government that measurable, significant progress on religious freedom and other human rights is a central component of relations between our two countries. The United States should speak publicly and consistently about religious freedom, refugee, and humanitarian concerns within the context of regional peace and stability, and work with regional allies to address these goals. We urge the U.S. government to devote added resources to ensuring that the North Korean people know that the United States and the international community are concerned about their rights and freedoms.

The death of Kim Jong Il provides an important opening for clear U.S. leadership. Survivors of North Korea's infamous prison camps have testified to our Commission about the brutal conditions they and their fellow detainees have experienced, including malnutrition, hard labor, beatings, forced abortions, and summary executions. Moreover, these and other sources estimate that 150,000 to 200,000 people are imprisoned in North Korean gulags, including whole families and many religious believers, some for decades without trial or due process.

Furthermore, the situation for North Korean refugees in China remains dire. The North Korean government interrogates asylum-seekers repatriated from China about their religious beliefs and affiliation, and abuses and imprisons those suspected of distributing religious literature or having ongoing connections with South Korean religious groups. According to testimony from former North Korean refugees, clandestine religious activity in North Korea is increasing, as are the regime's attempts to halt its spread. In recent years, police and security agency officers have reportedly infiltrated Protestant churches in China, trained police and soldiers about the dangers of religion, and set up sham prayer meetings to apprehend worshippers.

The growth of religion in North Korea continues to be a perceived threat to the legitimacy of the North Korean ruling family, including the chosen successor Kim Jong Un. Anyone discovered engaging in clandestine religious activity is subject to discrimination, arrest, arbitrary detention, disappearance, torture, and public execution. At least three public executions have occurred during the past year.

Our Commission has long maintained that any negotiations with North Korea should be rooted in a broader security framework that includes human rights and humanitarian concerns within

negotiations on nuclear non-proliferation. In planning future negotiations with North Korea's new leaders, the United States should not postpone discussions on human rights issues until nuclear security agreements are reached. North Korea continues to be a regional security concern whether or not it possesses nuclear weapons.

We urge the Administration to clearly signal to North Korea that future political, diplomatic, or economic inducements will require improvements in both human rights and nuclear security issues. The United States should work with its democratic allies in the region to put such a plan into action. In addition, because of the real danger of large refugee movement, the United States should strongly urge China, both publicly and privately, not to forcibly repatriate North Korea asylum-seekers because of the threat they face upon return, and the international obligations China has to prevent the risk of torture on return. During this time of transition, there is an opportunity to work on a durable solution to North Korean refugee issues.

Finally, the Commission has urged that public diplomacy resources should target technologies that can be accessed by the North Korean people. Though North Korea remains one of the most closed societies in the world, at this time, we believe it is urgent to articulate publicly the message that the United States and the international community will work on behalf of the North Korean people's desire for security, peace, and freedom.

We look forward to working with the Administration on this important task and hope that the Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, the Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues, the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, and other U.S. government experts will be fully engaged in setting U.S. policy containing strategies that promote measurable progress on the protection of human rights in the DPRK.

Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations.

Sincerely,

[Leonard Leo](#)

Chair

cc: Michael Posner, Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor
Kurt M. Campbell, Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs
Suzan Johnson Cook, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom
Robert R. King, Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director at tcarter@uscirf.gov, or (202) 523-3257.

