

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact:

Lawrence J. Goodrich, Communications Director, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27

WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent federal agency advising the Administration and Congress, yesterday urged President Bush to make clear in U.S. talks with North Korea that significant progress on human rights and religious freedom is necessary for improved bilateral relations. The Commission's recommendation was one of several forwarded on the eve of Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly's visit to Pyongyang urging him to press the North Korean authorities for results.

North Korea was cited by the Bush Administration in 2001 as a "country of particular concern" for religious freedom. The Commission urged Administration action that would "give meaning to that designation."

"The U.S. should not abandon human rights - and be seen to legitimize the horrific abuses of the North Korean regime - for promises on military issues," wrote Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer.

The complete text of the letter follows:

October 2, 2002

Dear Mr. President:

Pursuant to its advisory responsibilities under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom respectfully urges you to ensure that renewed high-level discussions with officials of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) advance an agenda that gives a prominent place to the protection of human rights, including the freedom of religion and belief, the provision of humanitarian assistance, the protection of North Korean refugees, and the reuniting of Korean Americans with their family members in the DPRK.

In the past, discussions with North Korea have centered on nuclear weapons development and missile proliferation. But U.S. interests go beyond these issues. As you said in Seoul in February 2002: "I'm deeply concerned about the people of North Korea. And I believe that it is important for those of us who love freedom to stand strong for freedom and make . . . clear the benefits of freedom." In this spirit, the Commission recommends 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 improvement of relations between our two countries. The U.S. should not abandon human rights - and be seen to legitimize the horrific abuses of the North Korean regime - for promises on military issues.

The people of North Korea are perhaps the least free on earth, barely surviving under a regime that denies human rights and lets them starve while its leaders pursue military might and weapons of mass destruction. By all accounts, there are no personal freedoms of any kind and no protection for human rights. Religious freedom does not exist as the state severely represses public and private religious activities, including arresting and imprisoning - and in some cases torturing and executing - persons engaged in such activities. In addition, the state actively discriminates against religious adherents in all aspects of political, economic, and social life.

North Korea is also a humanitarian disaster of unimaginable proportions. Failed economic policies and natural disasters have reportedly left more than 1 million North Koreans dead from starvation and disease in the last 10 years. Tens of thousands of refugees have fled to China to escape the dire economic and political conditions in North Korea and many have been forcibly repatriated by the Chinese government. Those who return - voluntarily or otherwise - face imprisonment, or even death, at the hands of DPRK officials.

As recommended by this Commission, the Secretary of State has designated North Korea as a "country of particular concern" for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. We now urge the U.S. government to give meaning to that designation by pressing the North Korean authorities for results. In particular, the United States should urge the North Korean government:

1.

To stop seeking forced repatriation of North Koreans who have fled the country and to cease the harsh and sometimes lethal treatment of returnees;

2.

To abide by its international human rights commitments by, at a minimum:

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addressing the concerns and implementing the recommendations of the UN Human Rights Committee's recent review of North Korea's compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, including concerns regarding religious freedom;

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permitting the monitoring of human rights conditions by UN human rights mechanisms and extending an invitation to the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief and others;

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To allow immediate expansion of both the amount of humanitarian assistance to the North Korean people and the number of providers - which should include non-governmental organizations - and to permit all assistance to be adequately monitored and not misrepresented through false claims that the aid is being provided by the North Korean government;

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To lift restrictions on the freedom of movement by foreign diplomats, independent journalists, humanitarian organizations, and others, and to invite the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and the Commission to visit the country; and

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To negotiate and enter into a binding agreement with the United States, as authorized under

IRFA, to cease violations of religious freedom.

Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations.

Respectfully,

Felice Gaer

Chair

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Felice D. Gaer
- Michael K. Young