

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact:

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) wrote to Ambassador Richard S. Williamson recommending that the United States strongly advocate for a resolution at the current session of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva condemning the grave human rights violations committed by the North Korean government and establishing a mandate for a Special Rapporteur to monitor and report on those violations. The USCIRF also recommends that the U.S. Delegation take full advantage of the current session in Geneva to build international support for raising concerns regarding human rights and refugees as part of the current six-party talks on North Korea.

“Details of the abysmal human rights record of the North Korean government continue to emerge despite the regime's efforts to maintain a tight grip on information regarding conditions in the country. The United States has designated North Korea as a “country of particular concern” for particularly severe violations of religious freedom,” said USCIRF Chair Michael K. Young. “Given the lack of cooperation by the North Korean government with the mechanisms contained in last year's resolution by the Commission on Human Rights, the resolution this year should appoint a Special Rapporteur to monitor and report on human rights in North Korea. Failure to do so may be interpreted by the North Korean regime as indifference by the international community to the government's flouting the requirements of last year's resolution.”

The text of the letter follows:

The Honorable Richard S. Williamson

Head Delegate

US Mission to the United Nations Office

& Other International Organizations in Geneva

Route de Pregny 11

CH 1232 Chambassy

Switzerland

Dear Ambassador Williamson:

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom respectfully recommends that, at the current session of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, the United States should strongly advocate for a resolution condemning grave human rights violations committed by the North Korean government. To be effective in upholding international scrutiny, the resolution should also establish a mandate for a Special Rapporteur to monitor and report on those violations. Assigning the mandate for follow-up to the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights is an inadequate response considering the gravity of the situation and the extent of abuses. Simply put, it is a soft option that does not provide a focus for advocacy or accountability for human rights violations in North Korea.

North Koreans are among the least free people in the world, and up to 300,000 have fled the country. Details of the abysmal human rights record of the North Korean government continue to emerge despite the regime's efforts to maintain a tight grip on information regarding conditions in the country. The United States, as you know, designated North Korea as a "country of particular concern" for particularly severe violations of religious freedom.

With U.S. leadership last year, the UN Commission on Human Rights for the first time passed a resolution critical of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. That resolution called on the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to engage the North Korean government on ways to improve its human rights practices. It also called on the North Korean authorities to ratify certain human rights treaties and cooperate with other UN human rights officials. The High Commissioner's office will report back to the Commission that the government has been non-responsive and uncooperative in these matters.

Given the lack of cooperation by the North Korean government with last year's resolution, the resolution this year should appoint a Special Rapporteur to monitor and report on human rights in North Korea. Failure to do so may be interpreted by the North Korean regime as indifference by the international community to the government's flouting the requirements of last year's resolution. A Special Rapporteur can provide an international focal point for the growing body of evidence on North Korean human rights practices and ensure regular reporting of that information to the UN Commission on Human Rights and the General Assembly. In the past, Special Rapporteurs have been effective in their work despite non-cooperation by the government of the country concerned.

While the Commission on Human Rights has many thematic Special Rapporteurs, it has dramatically reduced the number of Special Rapporteurs assigned to monitor particular countries, yet it is the latter who can focus international scrutiny in a way that cannot be casually ignored. According to press reports, last year's Commission Chair, Libya, has called for country resolutions - and the mechanisms that are established by them - to be eliminated altogether. This would be precisely the wrong direction to take if the goal is to hold governments accountable for human rights violations.

We urge that the United States again exert leadership this year and advocate strongly a resolution by the UN Commission on Human Rights appointing a Special Rapporteur for North Korea. We also recommend that the U.S. Delegation take full advantage of the current session of the Commission as an opportunity to build international support for raising concerns regarding human rights and refugees as part of the current six-party talks on North Korea.

Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations.

Sincerely,

Michael K. Young

Chairman

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.

Dean Michael K. Young
- Felice D. Gaer