

June 3, 2002: U.S. Must Press China to Uphold International Rights for North Korean Refugees

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 3, 2002 Contact:

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

WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent government agency advising the Administration and Congress, today called upon the U.S. government to press China to uphold its international treaty obligations and protect North Korean refugees who have fled there. The Commission's call follows the detention last week of six North Korean refugees on the Chinese-Lao border. China is reportedly transporting them north for deportation back to North Korea, where they face persecution or execution. China's action, said Commission Chair Michael K. Young, appears to violate both the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol to that convention. China is a party to both documents. Under these treaties, China has agreed not to expel or return refugees to a country where their life or freedom would be threatened on account of their religion or other status. The 1967 Protocol calls on China to cooperate with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). China's policy also appears to violate the 1984 Convention Against Torture, which provides that no state "shall expel, return, or extradite a person to another State where there are substantial grounds for believing he would be in danger of being subjected to torture." Between 30,000 and 300,000 North Koreans are now in China. Most have fled to escape the dire conditions in North Korea, including the denial of religious freedom and all other basic human rights in that country. Since 2000, however, many North Koreans who fled to China have been forcibly repatriated by the Chinese government. Several reports indicate that those who return to North Korea are harshly treated and sometimes killed following capture by North Korean authorities. The Chinese government does not grant refugee status to fleeing North Koreans, even though most if not all meet the international criteria for that status. In addition, the Chinese government does not allow the UNHCR to operate in the border region between China and North Korea, thus preventing that organization from interviewing those crossing the border and assessing their status as refugees. "It's high time China quit playing North Korea's game and joined the rest of the world," said Chairman Young. "China's obligations under international law clearly require it to protect fleeing North Koreans as refugees and allow the UNHCR to assist them. The U.S. government should raise this issue with the Chinese urgently and forcefully." In addition, Chairman Young said, the Commission recommends that the U.S. press China to allow more South Korean and international non-governmental organizations to provide humanitarian aid and relief to North Korean refugees who are in China.

Michael K. Young, Chair

- Felice D. Gaer Firuz Kazemzadeh Richard D. Land Bishop William Francis Murphy Leila Nadya Sadat Nina Shea The Hon. Charles R. Stith The Hon. Shirin Tahir-Kheli Tad Stahnke, Acting Executive Director