

North Korea: Human Rights Ground Zero: Michael Young Opening Remarks

January 27, 2004 I would like to welcome all of you to this timely and important hearing-The North Korean Crisis: A Human Rights Ground Zero. First, thank you to the Dean of the UCLA law school and to our Commissioner Khalid About El-Fadl for reserving this room. Second, to the panelists, thank you for taking the time to be with us hear tonight. We express our heartfelt thanks to the Gilsu family, the artists of the drawings you see displayed in the hearing room this evening. We also express our thanks to the Korean-American community here in Los Angeles, especially to Mr. Jay Lee, President of the Korean Congress for North Korean Human Rights, that has helped to spread the word on this hearing and the Korea Studies Center at UCLA for their support among the students and faculty interested in this subject. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was established by Congress to monitor the conditions of religious freedom around the world and second, to make recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress as to how U.S. policy can most effectively advance religious freedom. The Commission is an independence advisory body appointed by the President and Congress but separate from them. The Commission first recommended North Korea for designation as a country of particular concern for particularly severe violations of religious freedom in 2001. The Commission has continued to speak out about the abysmal conditions in North Korea and the need for U.S. policy to address those conditions. The Commission has testified before Congress and raised these issues directly with senior administration officials. Members of the Commission have traveled to the region to speak to refugees and to organizations that assist them. In January 2002, the Commission held its first public hearing on North Korea, bringing together experts, activists and refugees to bear witness to the egregious acts of the Kim Jong Il regime. Up to 300,000 North Koreans have fled their country in search of refuge and asylum during the past several years. The refugee crisis is a terrible humanitarian crisis-but it is only the tip of a much larger humanitarian iceberg. North Koreans live in unspeakable conditions--suffering hunger, disease, and brutal oppression by a cruel, totalitarian regime that pursues military might and a program of developing weapons of mass destruction. Let us make no mistake, the North Korean refugee crisis reflects the profound human rights disaster inside that country, as well as the intense disregard by the regime for the dignity and needs of the North Korean People. That's where it all begins. In January, 2002, President Bush included North Korea, along with Iran and Iraq, in his designation of the "axis of evil." Within one year from this announcement, North Korean leaders stepped up their nuclear weapons program and publicly withdrew from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. Thus, U.S. policy on North Korea focuses primarily on the issues of nuclear proliferation and security. While these issues are of critical importance, nonetheless security, human rights and humanitarian concerns are closely related issues. Indeed, the nuclear ambitions and reckless behavior of the North Korean leadership stems from the same disregard and non-responsiveness of the regime to the needs of its people, producing the humanitarian disaster and perpetuating such severe abuses of human rights. But we cannot allow the unpredictable nature of the North Korean regime to divert us from the need to remain focused on the humanitarian catastrophe that is occurring in that region. It is important that human rights remain a prominent objective of U.S. policy. In the past two years administration officials have raised the issue of human rights in North Korea and the crisis of North Korean refugees in China. In March, 2003, the United States co-sponsored a resolution at the UN Commission on Human Rights holding North Korea to international accountability for their miserable human rights record. We hope that tonight's event will be the start of a series of hearings that we intend to hold on North Korea to raise the profile of the issues of human rights, freedom of religion, thought, conscience and belief and the refugee crisis. North Koreans have suffered through five decades of failed social, economic and political policies and human rights abuses. Since 2001, North Korea has been designated as a country of particular concern for serious and egregious abuses of the right to religious freedom. Just to give some context, I recently learned that the North Koreans have lowered height requirements for adult male military conscripts from 4 feet, 11 inches to 4 feet, 2 inches due to widespread stunted growth in the population. You will also hear about the system of concentration camps in North Korea where the government imprisons political prisoners and their families, including anyone who attempts to flee the country, or anyone associating with religious organizations. Conditions are so bad that in some prisons 20-25% of the prisoners die each year. In short, life is cheap to the North Korean government. Tragically, the North Koreans who risk their lives to enter China find that they face continued persecution. China has labeled the Korean refugees as economic migrants and, as a matter of policy, repatriates those who are caught. Any alleged contact with foreigners makes a North Korean a traitor to the regime and leads almost inevitably to a long prison term or summary execution. At the hands of local police, North Korean refugees are subject to extortion, and female refugees are often sold and trafficked as wives or as prostitutes. Men are often used for low-paid or unpaid labor in Chinese factories and children are sold into debt bondage. The Chinese government has also perpetrated a crackdown on non-government organizations who attempt to assist North Korean refugees. Chinese authorities have arrested, charged and tried members of these organizations who have been caught assisting refugees. It's time for Chinese authorities to give serious attention to this human rights disaster and take affirmative steps to work with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other NGO groups in developing a process for helping the refugees. The U.S. government has responded to the humanitarian concerns of North Korea. As you will hear today, the US Agency for International Development remains engaged in attempts to provide food aid to North Korean citizens who need it most. Senator Sam Brownback, a champion of human rights in North Korea, has led the push to place pressure on China to cease their repatriation of North Korean refugees. He has also sponsored the North Korea Freedom Act, a bill that is now pending in both houses of Congress. This legislation reflects several of the recommendations of the Commission from its designation of North Korea as a country of particular concern. Senator Brownback's bill includes provisions calling for 24 hours a day of radio broadcasts into North Korea. We hope that both houses of Congress will approve the necessary appropriations so the effort to expand broadcasting can go forward. We also hope that the United States will see more

willingness from other nations to facilitate this effort through allowing Radio Free Asia and Voice of America to transmit signals from their nations. But this Commission also believes that U.S. government should do more. We believe the U.S. should immediately bring together the nations of the region to address this growing humanitarian crisis. The United States has taken the lead in forging the 6-Party Talks on nuclear disarmament of the Korean peninsula—we should also take the lead in spearheading the effort to address refugees, famine, and human rights, including religious freedom in such a forum. We thank all of you for your attendance at this evening's hearing and we look forward to hearing from all our distinguished panelists.