

## North Korea: Human Rights Ground Zero: Roger Winter Prepared Testimony

January 27, 2004 Madam Chairperson, Members of the Commission, and fellow witnesses: It is an honor to be here today to discuss the humanitarian and human rights conditions in North Korea. As you may know, the real expert on this issue is Andrew Natsios, the Administrator of USAID. Since he could not be here today, he has asked that I convey his thanks to the Commission for its important work and give you some background on our understanding of life inside North Korea. First, let me be clear that the United States Government makes every effort to separate its humanitarian and human rights activities from its broader strategic and political initiatives. The United States has demonstrated its commitment to the people of North Korea through our extensive provision of humanitarian assistance. Since 1995, the U.S. has provided over two million tons of food aid valued at almost \$700 million. In fact, the United States has provided the World Food Program (WFP) with more than 50 percent of the food aid it has received to date for its program in North Korea. Even today, with the North Korea nuclear issue still looming, the United States continues to provide food assistance to the country. Our most recent contribution of 60,000 metric tons of food was announced on December 24th of last year. The willingness of the U.S. to provide humanitarian assistance to North Korea does not imply that we are blind to either the constraints the regime places on humanitarian organizations in the country or to the egregious human rights abuses the regime inflicts on its people. Administrator Natsios has spoken out regularly about the severe restrictions the North Korean government has placed on the ability of humanitarian organizations to identify vulnerable areas and monitor the distribution of assistance. The State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor issues an annual human rights report on North Korea which details the horrific human rights conditions in the country. Every Aspect of Life Controlled The regime subjects its citizens to rigid controls over nearly every aspect of their lives, denying them freedom of religion, speech, the press, assembly and association, and the right to petition or peacefully change their government. Buddhism and Christianity have been brutally repressed in the country - largely replaced by the cult-like worship of the "Great Leader," Kim Il Sung and the "Dear Leader," Kim Jong Il. Notwithstanding the fact that no government in the world is more reclusive, more suspicious of contact with the outside world, more isolated, and more devoted to absolute control and secrecy than North Korea, we now have more information on life in North Korea than at any time in the recent past. Extensive reporting is available, from a wide variety of reputable sources, which paints a consistent and all too clear picture of the Orwellian society that exists in North Korea today. Human Rights Watch, Jasper Becker's research and reporting on the famine, Good Friends (a South Korean Buddhist nongovernmental organization), Amnesty International, Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, Doctors Without Borders, and Action Contre la Faim, among others, have reported extensively on their direct experiences in the country and on the results of interviews with North Korean refugees and defectors. Additional evidence exists in professional journals and an increasing number of private books which describes in great detail the lives of specific individuals who have lived in North Korea. In North Korea, all aspects of the media are controlled completely by the regime. Newspaper, radio, and television reporting are all centrally managed and convey only the messages that the regime condones. Radios and televisions in the country are built to receive only State-approved stations, and any attempt to modify a set to receive foreign broadcasts is a criminal offense. The North Korean people do not enjoy freedom of movement. A system of travel permits modeled after Stalinist Russia restricts the movement of people outside their villages. Even travel between counties and provinces by individuals is severely restricted to prevent the transfer of information between different groups in the country. As an example of how restricted the travel of North Koreans within their own country can be, the United Nations World Food Program staff have reported that, on many of their monitoring visits throughout North Korea, their handlers reveal that the trip is their first visit outside the county where they were born. Another means through which the government of North Korea enforces its control is its network of several concentration or "re-education" camps for political prisoners. The Far Eastern Economic Review has published satellite photographs of one camp that is estimated to hold as many as 50,000 people. The camps are estimated to hold between 200,000 and 250,000 prisoners in total. The regime uses the camps to punish anyone who fails to adhere strictly and completely to every "law," but arrest and confinement can come at any time with no explanation. Punishment is politically motivated. In some reports, people have been arrested and detained for years for failing to show appropriate respect to the "Great Leader" or the "Dear Leader." In other cases, entire families have been arrested because flaws have been found in their family history. The camps differ in that each serves a specific type of prisoner ranging from those considered "redeemable" to those who are "expendable." Those who are redeemable are often released after a number of years of hard labor and re-education. Expendable prisoners are never expected to leave the camp and usually die of malnutrition, exhaustion, and abuse. Torture is widespread. Two recent books provide graphic explanations of deplorable conditions in the more "lenient" re-education camps: *Aquariums of Pyongyang* by Kang Chol-Hwan and *Eyes of Tailless Animals* by Soon Ok Lee. The Humanitarian Crisis would now like to provide some background on the humanitarian crisis in North Korea. In past years, a "public distribution system," or PDS, was developed to provide food and material needs to the majority of the population. Based on their perceived loyalty to the regime, the Government divided North Korean society into three major classes: "core," "wavering," and "hostile." The "core" group comprises less than 25 percent of the population and includes only those individuals considered completely loyal and trustworthy, who are given preferred status. The "wavering" class is considered to have a suspect background, which may go back three generations. This group accounts for 55 percent of the population. The remainder comprise the "hostile" group and are discriminated against in terms of housing, employment, food, higher education, and medical care. Food distribution is politically based, with those considered to be most loyal being favorably considered. The PDS promoted loyalty to the regime, as any misconduct, real or perceived, could result in demotion to a lower rank of the scale and thus less food for the individual. The system also hampered the ability of citizens to move around the country, as the beneficiaries needed to be present at their local

PDS station to receive rations. The PDS proved unsustainable. North Korean citizens now must supplement what they get from the PDS with what they can grow themselves or purchase in markets. The central government acknowledged PDS shortcomings in 2001 when it announced that its citizens would be responsible for feeding themselves. For a more detailed report on how the North Korean regime uses food as a tool for control, I recommend the recent report issued by Amnesty International entitled: *Starved of Rights: Human Rights and the Food Crisis in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*. The international community, led by the United States, began providing food assistance to North Korea in 1995. The results of our aid have been mixed. On one hand, we have saved untold thousands of North Koreans from death by starvation. We take great pride and comfort in that accomplishment. However, the government of North Korea has continually hampered our efforts to deliver aid where it is most needed, to the great detriment of its own people. First, the good news. UNICEF and the World Food Program sponsored a nutrition survey in North Korea that was completed in November of 2002. The report shows that, while food security issues remain a serious concern, there are no longer famine conditions across large portions of the country. However, while the nutritional situation has improved in the country in the aggregate, the report indicates that the improvements are uneven and focused predominantly around Pyongyang and Nampo. Both of these areas have malnutrition rates about half as high as some of the northern provinces. As a result, future food aid activities will require greater access and monitoring capabilities to ensure proper targeting and delivery of food assistance to vulnerable groups in more remote areas. And therein lies some bad news. The North Korean regime shows very little willingness to permit the international aid agencies the increased access they need. "Military security" is the regime's excuse of record for not allowing such access. In fact, the actual motivation for these restrictions lies in the fact that the regime would lack the means to control the flow of information that the expansion of these systems would entail. North Korea is very concerned about "informational contamination." The flow of international food assistance has been accompanied by international staff that insists on following the food for monitoring purposes. This external "contamination" can result in the spreading of news and opinions from the outside world - information that would otherwise be suppressed. Let me offer an example. The regime has worked tirelessly to paint the United States as thoroughly corrupt and evil, not a benevolent donor of assistance. To counter this propaganda, the United States insisted on labeling each bag of U.S. food donated to North Korea with the phrase "gift of the people of the United States," printed in Korean. By some estimates, there are over 30 million such bags circulating around North Korea. Each food bag represents informational contamination that requires an explanation by the regime. Refugees have reported that the U.S. food aid is explained by the government as reparations for damages caused during the Korean War. The denial of humanitarian access which results from these oppressive motivations has had disastrous consequences. In their recent report, Amnesty International states that the North Korean government has at times cut-off food deliveries to and related outside contacts with the northeastern portions of the country. This may explain why so many North Koreans have been trying to find food and other resources in China. Some aid providers have even pulled out of the country in response to the denial of access. On March 9, 2000, the nongovernmental organization Action Contre la Faim (ACF) issued a statement in which it decided to withdraw from North Korea. ACF had been working in North Korea since January of 1998, attempting to provide humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable in the country. One major justification that the organization cited for closing its program was the regime's denial of access. ACF stated: "By confining humanitarian organizations to the support of these state structures that we know are not representative of the real situation of malnutrition in the country the authorities are deliberately depriving hundreds of thousands of truly needy Koreans of assistance. As a consequence any humanitarian assistance provided is only helping the populations which the regime has chosen to favour and support, and which are certainly not the most deprived." The North Korean regime does not appear to care about such withdrawals. It is concerned first and foremost with its own survival. But even if the North Korean regime lacks concern for its own people, the government of the United States stands behind them, both in word and deed. Today, the United States is leading the international community in its efforts to address the programmatic deficiencies that undermine the credibility and effectiveness of the international food aid activities in North Korea. For the past three years, the U.S. has called upon the North Korean regime to significantly expand access and improve monitoring for humanitarian programs. USAID staff have met four times with representatives from North Korea over the same period in an effort to encourage improvements in humanitarian monitoring and access conditions. We have also raised these concerns with the World Food Program and other donors. To date, the North Koreans have not been responsive, but this will not stop us from working tirelessly to gain the access that is so desperately needed. The United States is asking the North Korean government to adhere to the same humanitarian principles that apply to all recipients of international assistance. Specifically, The international community should be allowed to assess the needs of all vulnerable populations in the country. Currently, the North Korean government will not permit access into 42 of 206 counties. The international community should be allowed to monitor the distribution of assistance without unnecessary controls. Currently, a six-day notice is required to visit a distribution site. International groups providing assistance should be allowed to bring in Korean-speaking monitors. This would allow them to directly interview beneficiaries to better understand and monitor their food security situation without depending on an interpreter supplied by the DPRK government.

**Final Thoughts** The President has reversed the relative international silence on the true nature of the North Korean regime in his many comments on North Korea, and through the aggressive reporting of the State Department. At the UN Commission on Human Rights last year, the U.S. successfully lobbied for passage of an EU-sponsored resolution critical of North Korea's human rights record. We will continue our efforts at every opportunity to publicize the character of the North Korean government and, through our humanitarian programs, to address the most urgent needs of the people as effectively and transparently as possible.