

## North Korea: Human Rights Ground Zero: Reverend Isaac Prepared Testimony

January 27, 2004 Honored Commissioners, Ladies and Gentlemen, The United States has a long and honorable history in encouraging religious freedom in our nation of Korea. Koreans everywhere owe this great American nation an immense debt of gratitude for their continuous efforts to promote and defend democracy in our nation and the world. Korea's history with America is as long as our Protestant heritage. In August of 1866, as our hermit kingdom was first coming in contact with the Western world, the American trading vessel "General Sherman" entered the mouth of the Taitong River and advanced as far as Pyongyang. Aboard that ship, serving as translator, was Robert J. Thomas, a Welsh protestant missionary. On September 3, 1866 the "General Sherman" was attacked and burned. The entire crew was captured and executed, including Rev. Robert Thomas - who died offering a Chinese Bible to his executioner. In 1888 the United States became the first Western nation to make a treaty with Korea. Two years later, an American, Dr. Horace Allen, a medical missionary under the Presbyterian Board, became the first Protestant missionary to live in Korea. He was appointed as physician to the American Legation. Within three months of his arrival a Japanese coup was attempted. A foiled assassination attempt left Prince Min Yong Ik, nephew to the Queen of Korea, at death's door, beyond the help of Korean or Chinese court physicians. Dr. Allen faithfully cared for the prince day and night for three months, until the prince finally recovered. Dr. Allen's actions cemented the relationship between Korea and the United States. It also gave an opening for Christian missionary work that had long been forbidden in Korea. Great revivals in the early 1900s resulted in transformed lives and a changed society. To encourage the reading of the Bible, American missionaries developed nation-wide literacy campaigns. Christians from the United States of America, Canada and Great Britain provided the funds and personnel to establish western hospitals and a modern educational system, including many of our top universities. Their generosity launched Korea into the 20th Century. Korea is also in debt to America for our nation. In 1918, after the First World War, President Woodrow Wilson's 14 points included "the self-determination of small nations." His message gave Korea hope that the harsh yoke of Japanese repression might be lifted. Under the Japanese the Korean language was no longer taught and Japanese religious beliefs were forced upon the entire peninsula. The Japanese occupied Korea from 1910 until the United States of America and its allies liberated us on August 15, 1945. In 1950 the United States again offered the blood of its sons and daughters to insure the birth of a new day of democracy and religious freedom for South Korea. Even today it helps maintain our security guarding the DMZ. And we are so thankful. On the other side of the 38th parallel North Korea's millions entered a long, dark night of isolation, repression, and totalitarianism. Pyongyang, that once was called the Second Jerusalem because of its many Christians, became the capital of the world's last totalitarian regime. The past fifty years saw the destruction of all places of worship, the execution of Christians, and the establishment of Juche (self-reliance) as the sole ideology. Today, after 5 decades of brainwashing, the Juche ideology has become the religion of North Korea. The unseen Father, Kim Il Sung, watches everything from above and a lapel-pin with his image guards the heart of every North Korean. The son, Kim Jong Il, is venerated in life as the model of North Korean society. The revolutionary spirit, Juche or self-reliance, is the light guiding the path of every North Korean. The Korean Christian Federation, follows the patterns of state religious bureaus formed by the former Soviet nations and China. It exists merely to serve a godless state. Developed to attract international funding, the KCF has successfully raised over US\$10 million for the government. It is common knowledge that its showcase churches are opened only as needed, to impress foreign visitors. In fact a few years ago careful study of our photographs showed the same actors pretending to be members of both the Protestant and the Catholic Church in Pyongyang. The truth is that today Christians are still being actively sought out, imprisoned, tortured and killed in North Korea. Three years ago a North Korean working with us was caught after crossing the border with Bibles in his possession. He was beaten with an iron pipe and killed. Another was caught, interrogated, beaten and thrown out of the police station for dead. He survived and continues his work of encouraging the persecuted church in North Korea to this day. Just a few months ago one of our North Korean contacts was caught returning to his country. He was beaten and jailed. He began singing praises to God. One by one his fellow prisoners joined in. Of the 3 dozen men jailed with him, the majority were Christians. The existence of an underground church with over 100,000 members as well as the large concentration camps where Christians are separated for extermination are both part of the public record. Kim Jong Il's government, like his father's before him, has targeted Christians for extreme re-education or extermination. Christianity has emerged as a counter-ideological force. Worship of God alone and total dependence on Him is in direct opposition to the humanistic self-reliant Juche ideology and the veneration of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. Even without knowledge of the external world for comparison, Christians are aware of the false foundation North Korean society is built upon. It is impossible for them to conform to it. North Korean mentality has been shaped by a persistent propaganda machine that communicates bellicose messages shaped for all ages, from birth to death. It is common to hear young cadre members in Pyongyang singing lively popular songs praising Kim Jong Il as they show their loyalty by sweeping the monuments to the North Korean struggle. It is important to realize that North Koreans have never experienced democracy. The Japanese yoke in the first half of the 1900s was replaced by Kim Il Sung's yoke in the latter half of the century. Without a model of freedom, the North Koreans have settled for a totalitarian nationalism. Korea's long-established culture based on Confucian principles of respect towards authority and conformity to the norm, when coupled with the totalitarian nature of the regime and its control over external information resulted in the creation of a unique mindset. The North Korean popular worldview assumes the truth of the government's disinformation. North Koreans believe the government's stated position that the unequal distribution of food is caused by actions of the United States and their puppet South Korea. While there is widespread dissatisfaction with the situation at the grass roots level, it does not necessarily follow that there is a questioning of the guiding ideology or the established leadership. Still, the prolonged famine and survival-level living conditions in North Korea have driven an increasing number of people to illegally cross the border into China.

These days there are well over 400,000 economic refugees trying to survive in Manchuria. Unprotected by the United Nations, or by China, these refugees suffer exploitation and abuse. Many cases of slavery, forced prostitution, sexual abuse, torture, murder for the sale of their organs, and hunting for sport or bounty have been documented. These people have no rights in China. Many we have met live in holes in the mountains, like animals. But we are hoping that the United States will represent them before the United Nations and China so their status as refugees may be recognized and their human rights protected. Until then, God is answering their cries. We, along with many other Christian NGOs, are offering whatever relief is possible to these refugees. While it is illegal to help undocumented aliens in China, in obedience to God and to relieve the unbearable suffering, safe houses, orphanages and feeding centers have been developed by humanitarians, missionaries, and NGOs. These centers of hope on the border with North Korea have lately been targeted by the Chinese authorities. In countless raids held in the past six months, centers have been closed down, foreign workers assessed huge fines and deported, and North Koreans forcibly sent back to imprisonment or death. Still, we continue with our work of mercy and pray that the United States may intervene on behalf of these non-persons so that their suffering may cease. In working with these refugees we find that North Koreans are distanced culturally from their brothers in South Korea. The degree of cultural divergence can be measured by the experience of North Korean refugees entering South Korea. To date over 3,000 North Koreans have been allowed into South Korea. Though the government grants them housing and living stipends, and they share a common lingual core, the refugees have been unable to adapt to life in South Korea. They are unable to find an acceptable fit within South Korean society. Unable to compete on an equal footing, the refugees are forced to take menial positions and suffer daily discrimination. Some, because of their extensive military training, are forming organized crime syndicates. But most of them are giving up on living in South Korea and have dreams to emigrate to the United States and other western countries. North Koreans defectors and economic refugees are a people without a country. They no longer can return to North Korea and have great difficulty integrating with their blood brothers in the South. The challenge of preparing them and their host society for a smooth integration process must be taken up by the Christian church in South Korea and the world. In conclusion, religious freedom is anathema in North Korea. They can no more grant religious freedom than they can allow democratic elections. The state maintains complete control over its people. Any relaxing of this death-grip on people's minds, whether it is granting freedom of information, increasing freedom of religion, or encouraging cultural pluralism, will result in the erosion of the carefully crafted illusions that hold Kim Jong Il's tottering government together. The only hope for the granting of religious freedom in North Korea is a full transformation of its political scheme. Religious freedoms can only be allowed in democratic nations. So, until the regime of North Korea changes and becomes democratic, I encourage the honorable members of this commission to defend the rights of the 400,000 North Koreans struggling for survival in Manchuria by securing refugee status for them. I plead with you to work with the Chinese and South Korean governments to establish humane refugee centers to care for them. And I encourage you to mobilize the churches and religious institutions in South Korea to take responsibility for helping North Korean refugees to become accepted and valued members of South Korean society. Finally, I applaud the commission for keeping the pressure on Kim Jong Il's totalitarian regime and hope that as a result of the Commission's recommendations the United States will take an aggressive stance to mobilize the global political and NGO community in defense of human rights and religious freedoms in North Korea. I am thankful for the opportunity to address this commission and pray God's blessing on your ongoing deliberations.