

Welcome and Introductory Remarks

"Promoting Religious Freedom in North Korea": Michael J. Young Opening Remarks

Jan. 24. 2002 Chairman

CHAIRMAN YOUNG:

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Michael Young and I serve as chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. I would like to welcome you to today's hearing on religious freedom and U.S. policy in North Korea. We have a very full program this morning so I'll keep my opening remarks very brief.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was established by Congress with two purposes: first, 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 both houses of Congress but separate from them.

By all counts, there are no personal freedoms of any kind in North Korea and no protection for human rights. The humanitarian situation is also extremely grim, as failed economic policies and natural disasters have reportedly led to the deaths of some 1 million or more North Koreans from starvation and disease in the past 10 years.

I had the opportunity of visiting South Korea recently and spent considerable time talking with individuals in government, nongovernmental organizations, religious organizations, who had familiarity with the situation in North Korea. Grim I think hardly begins to describe how bad the situation is. From every indication I was able to glean, starvation and deprivation are rampant, leaving millions dead and countless millions more, particularly children, stunted in both their mental and their physical growth--humanitarian disaster of unimaginable proportions.

But as bad as that is, the deprivation of the human spirit in North Korea seems even greater. So today the

opportunity to hold these hearings and invite witnesses familiar with this situation, as well as witnesses familiar with U.S. policy towards North Korea is a great opportunity for us as a Commission and an important event, we think, for foreign policy in the United States.

In October of 2001 the State Department issued its third Annual Report on International Religious Freedom. The report on North Korea detailed serious and systematic abuses by the North Korean government and concluded that, and I quote, "Genuine religious freedom does not exist," a simple categorical statement. These conditions concern the Commission and, in addition to turning our attention to them, we have for the last two years urged the Department of State to name North Korea as a so-called "country of particular concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act; in other words, to designate it as one of the world's most egregious violators of religious freedom, which it certainly is.

In October the Secretary of State followed our recommended action, designating North Korea as a country of particular concern and we welcome that designation and the enhanced attention it brings to the problem in North Korea.

Turning to U.S. policy, in the past two years there have been developments in the region and in U.S. policy towards North Korea but none of them seem to have borne any particular noticeable fruit. The summit of the two Koreas in June of 2000 left many with high hopes, hopes that have failed to materialize in the year and a half since that historic event. The Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited Pyongyang in October of 2000. Positive results of that visit also seem absent.

Following a comprehensive policy review early last year, the Bush Administration announced that it is pursuing dialogue with the North Koreans on a broad range of issues. However, no high-level talks have taken place. Indeed, the State Department has even named, as I mentioned, North Korea as an egregious religious freedom violator.

Therefore, the question still remains: how can the United States promote religious freedom, alongside other human rights, in that country? It's a difficult question, to be sure, but also a very important one, given the magnitude of the problem. It's also a timely question as the President is going to that region of the world next month and part of his agenda is reportedly to discuss how the United States, along with the South Koreans and the Japanese, should approach relations with North Korea.

I should note that the Commission issued several policy recommendations in that regard on North Korea in its 2001 annual report. We intend to expand on that work in the coming months, aided significantly by today's hearings.

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bends every effort to control foreign contacts and limit the amount of information available on conditions inside the country. The reasons for holding this hearing today are to try to shed some light on those conditions and explore how U.S. foreign policy can improve them. Given the limited time that we have available for a public hearing, we can only hear from a few of those who have insight into what is going on inside the country. We have spoken with others who are not with us today but we do recognize and appreciate the willingness of today's witnesses to appear before us. The Commission and its staff will continue to consult with others in the upcoming months, as well.

Finally, the Commission would like to express its appreciation to all those who were consulted in preparation for this hearing. Their assistance has contributed significantly to this hearing and to the Commission's work on North Korea. We look forward to their continuing cooperation and appreciate their advice.

Now a few words about the structure of the proceedings this morning. There will be two panels this morning. The first panel will focus on the religious freedom situation in North Korea and the second on how U.S. policy might promote religious freedom there. Each set of presentations will be followed by questions from the commissioners and, as we have indicated to each of the witnesses, we ask that you keep your formal statements to no more than seven minutes. We'd be delighted to have you submit for the record any longer statement that you'd care to share with us. And in order to keep things moving along we will indicate when you have one minute left and then the light there will indicate when your time has expired.

With that said, I'd like to welcome our distinguished panelists today and we very much look forward to your testimony. We start today with first Dr. Norbert Vollertsen, who is a medical doctor formally affiliated with a German medical group in North Korea. He has had a really unprecedented access to North Korea in 2000, as even I think a formally declared friend of North Korea and has spent considerable time there--great insights. Dr. Vollertsen, please.