

Question and Answer

"Promoting Religious Freedom in North Korea": Panel 1 Questions and Answers
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(left to right):
Soon-Ok Lee (with translator to her left), Sang-Chul Kim,
and Norbert Vollertsen

CHAIRMAN YOUNG:

As we turn to questions now of the panelists by our commissioners, allow me to introduce our commissioners who are sitting on the stand with me here today. To my far right is Dr. Richard Land, who's president and the chief officer of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Next

to him is Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh, a long-time professor of Russian history at Yale University and now a senior advisor to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States.

To

his left is Bishop William Francis Murphy who is bishop of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, New York. Next to Bishop Murphy is Felice Gaer, who's director of the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights of the American Jewish Committee.

To my immediate right is the executive director of our Commission, Mr. Steve McFarland.

To my left is Professor Leila Sadat, who's a professor at Washington University in St. Louis, their School of Law.

To her left is Ambassador Charles Stith, who is director of the African Presidential Archives and Research Center at Boston University and a former ambassador to Tanzania on behalf of the United States.

Next to him is Nina Shea, who's director of the Center for Religious Freedom of Freedom House.

Not with us today is Ambassador Shirin Takir-Kheli, who's director of the South Asian program of the Foreign Policy Institute of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.

So allow me to turn over to my fellow commissioners the opportunity to ask questions of our witnesses. Ambassador Stith?

AMBASSADOR STITH:

Let me first say that I found the testimony that you offered us to be particularly gripping and powerful testimony to the oppression and abuse which takes place in North Korea. But having given us a sense of the negative impact I would like you, if you could briefly, to talk about what it would mean from your perspective for your countrymen to live in a Korea with religious freedom, the positive consequences of some fundamental changes in the country.

DR. KIM: Is to me?

AMBASSADOR STITH: Yes, particularly, Dr. Kim, you and Mrs. Lee.

DR. KIM: So you have mentioned about the positive function.

AMBASSADOR STITH:

To say it another way, you've talked about the negative impact of the oppression and abuse and my question is what kind of country do you hope North Korea to become in terms of it being a place where religious freedom is a reality?

DR. KIM: So in North Korea nowadays no fundamental human rights at all. I hope North Korea must be a country of freedom and human rights. In North Korea now fundamentally no religious freedom exists at all. So from 1954 to 1970 all the religious people have been arrested and taken away from the normal society. And in 1974, the so-called Ten Fundamental Principles for Juche Ideology, no relief beliefs except Kim Il-Sung adoration is not permitted at all.

Can you think about any positive function about that?

DR. VOLLERTSEN:
You want to get some more answer? I want to become North Korea a country where such children would look a little bit happier is my only answer.

And you know about the German Nazi regime and I think the American people did a huge job when they freed Dachau concentration camps and they saw those children and to my experience, at the Chinese-North Korean border there are many, many people who suffer the same conditions like normally in German concentration camps. Therefore I would ask the international community to help those people because nobody knows. The first thing is to raise the interest about North Korea. Then get the information and then we can answer your question, what will be the future of North Korea. But first of all try to help those children.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: I wonder if I could ask a question that may be directed particularly to Dr. Vollertsen and to Mrs. Lee.

The government of North Korea has asserted on a number of occasions that in addition to the three approved churches there are as many as 400 house churches in North Korea. There's never been any independent corroboration of that. Have you seen any evidence at all in North Korea of the existence of house churches that are permitted to worship in any way?

DR. VOLLERTSEN: As I told you,

throughout my staying there in one and a half years and because of this and because of my state as an emergency doctor who took care for the patients and who was very close to some North Koreans and also to my staff because I gave some medicine, I gave some medical advice, I was not only something like a close friend because of the skin graft but also because of my position as a doctor. Throughout this one and a half years never, never any activity.

I spoke to so many North Korean students. I spoke to even some relatives of my translators, of my drivers, of the people who were surrounding me. Normally this is not possible but I got never any hint of any Christian activities, never.

MRS. LEE:

We have a lot of people in North Korea who are keepers of faith underground. There's a lot of people underground in North Korea who are keeping their faith and this is increasing in North Korea as the North Korean regime tries to suppress such movement.

So from that side, when you designate churches in North Korea as underground church, perhaps the definition should change. A church is not made up of three or more members but one member makes it a church in North Korea.

I have been incarcerated in a prison for seven years and this started in 1992 and even prior to that, I know there had been cases, numerous cases of people being brought into prison because of their faith and I understand that number ranges from tens to hundreds every year.

At the time I didn't understand what was going on but now I come to realize, now that I have been in South Korea and been to various other countries, that there are people outside, outside of North Korea, who are trying to help the Christians in North Korea. And the helping coming from outside of North Korea for North Koreans, I believe, although some do not reach, still do help the North Koreans.

So although it's hard to realize, there's a lot of Christians in North Korea that keep their faith in their hearts. So Kim Jung-II, whenever he comes across anybody that had any contact with Christians outside of North Korea, including escapees from North Korea who may have been in contact with missionaries in China, those people would be either executed or incarcerated.

Also, I'm here to implore you that as a last hope for the Christians in North Korea that certain conditions be put on North Korea in regards to religious freedom before you disengage them from your terrorist list. I believe that unless the religious persecution is stopped in North Korea, no reforms would be possible in North Korea.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: Thank you very much.

Let me just inform the audience, by the way, for those of you who are not familiar with hearings in this building, the buzzers that you hear are not actually controlled by us. We are not cutting anyone off in that sense. These are buzzers that signal to the members of Congress that votes are taking place, and so forth. So they occur during hearings and you may just politely ignore them.

Commissioner Sadat?

MS. SADAT:
Thank you so much to all of you who have come to testify. Your testimony is extremely helpful to us and it was, I'm sure, emotionally difficult to be in the conditions that you experienced and we really appreciate you sharing that with us and we empathize with what you've seen and what you feel.

I have a question for Dr. Kim and perhaps Mrs. Lee and Dr. Vollertsen could also respond to it.

Dr. Kim, you have suggested that one of the things you think might be helpful would be to permit humanitarian assistance to be provided directly by the members of religious organizations in North Korea and I think that's an excellent suggestion. My question is how likely is the government to permit such a thing to occur? And what might encourage the government to permit religious organizations to distribute humanitarian aid directly? Thank you.

DR. KIM:
So when one contacts a North Korean organization for humanitarian aid I think mostly the North Korean government requests that the name of the relief group not be printed on the packing. So if the request that the name must be on the packing not allowed, then one should refuse to give

any humanitarian aid but not yet realized.

So I suggest that one should request the name of the religious group must be printed on the packing because the most part of the humanitarian aid is made by the religious group nowadays.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: Thank you very much.

Commissioner Gaer?

Oh, I'm sorry, Mrs. Lee. Did you have a--Dr. Vollertsen? I'm sorry; I didn't mean to cut anyone off.

MRS. LEE:

When it comes to the religious persecution in North Korea, I believe that there have been no changes, including the '50s, '60s, and even into the 2000s. So in order for any changes to occur regarding religious persecution in North Korea, I believe there has to be pressures brought about from outside.

Currently there's much aid going to North Korea from international organizations so it is also my belief that there should be some labeling, such as "God's love" or the name of the organization, on the outside package when these packages are sent to North Korea.

So currently North Korean government sometimes would refuse to accept such items if they are labeled as such. However, I believe that we should be able to say and state what we want to say and also state that it is with God's love that we send these packages to North Korea.

And there are a lot of international aid organizations and NGOs that are sending medical supplies to North Korea and what is happening is that North Korea is refusing items such as items that are for kids who may be suffering from nutritional deficiency but they want more medicines for their military uses, such as antibiotics.

There is a Christian hospital that had been built in North Korea with the money sent by Christians in South Korea and in other countries and on the day of opening of this hospital there was a doctor from America who wanted to put a name up of the hospital saying that it is a Christian hospital. However, the North Korean regime did not approve of such effort to put up a name as a Christian hospital so they blocked us from sending our Christian love to our brothers in North Korea. So finally, the name of the hospital became Number 3 Pyongyang Hospital.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: Thank you very much.

Commissioner Gaer?

MS. GAER:
Thank you very much. I want to join my colleagues in thanking you for bringing forward your testimony. I have some questions in particular for Dr. Vollertsen and Mrs. Lee.

Doctor, in your written testimony you speak of many things that you have either witnessed or have learned of since the time that you have left North Korea from refugees. One of those things on page 3 is the charge you make of sexual violence against women and you say that they are used like modern comfort women. Now that is a very charged term in the context of Korea.

You also say that all the former prisoners were talking about a variety of kinds of abuses directed against them and among the things you mention there are rape, as well.

I wondered if you could clarify for us how you substantiate these reports, whether it was based on interviews with people outside the country, things you witnessed inside the country. As a doctor did you or other doctors you were in touch with attend such persons? If you could elaborate on whether this was a systematic practice.

My question to Dr. Lee also relates to an aspect of her testimony dealing with the issue of the forced termination of pregnancies, which she indicated she had witnessed. As I understand it, Dr. Lee, is it correct that this was a practice for the purpose of punishment or

discrimination against the women and that this was not a part of any population policy or other such practice, so that it was a punishment practice? And do I understand that these were people who were pregnant prior to or at the time of their detention? Was the same practice conducted against persons who became pregnant while confined? As I understand, whole families are confined for this.

And when these practices took place were they attended by doctor and nurses? Did they participate? And was the individual restrained, shackled or in other ways maltreated? I'd be very grateful for some clarification. Thank you.

DR. VOLLERTSEN: So to answer your question, your first question very briefly, if I was an eyewitness of all those, what's going on in North Korea, I can tell you yes, I was an eye and an ear witness of all those stories.

I know about the meaning of the comfort women in Korea. I use this word because it's so impressive.

I was shocked. When I came to North Korea I saw all those nice doctors in the hospitals, mainly woman doctors, and I was impressed about their knowledge. Most of them they were educated in former East Germany. They were quite good trained and they knew a lot about new medicine. But I was shocked about all the politicians and the elite. I thought I'm going to a communist country; I know about East Germany and socialist countries and about women's rights and whatever so I was shocked that there were no female politicians, nearly no female politicians.

And whenever I had any discussion with all those officials in the Foreign Ministry or in the FDRC there were only men and I wondered about this situation. Then when I got a little bit deeper knowledge about North Korea I wondered what's going on here? Well, every waiter in the hotels, every waiter in the restaurants, they were treated like slaves. They were treated like slaves from my own driver, from my own translator, from the whole staff.

And I got the knowledge because, as I told you, I was an eye and an ear witness what's going on there. They were used and abused like prostitutes. In every hotel, in every hospital there's a possibility for the high-ranking members of this elite, of all the officials, to get this woman. They even asked me. They even asked my colleagues. It's a sort of illegal official prostitution in North Korea. And I got the knowledge that those women in North Korea, there is no equality. There is no women's rights for

women in North Korea. They are used and abused like slaves and I can give you all the names. I can give you all the details. I can even show you some cases. I can give you the names of my colleagues who are still working in Pyongyang and they were offered those chances to get those women. It's ridiculous what's going on there. That was one simple glance.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: Mrs. Lee?

MRS.

LEE: The earlier testimony by me are the actual experiences of my life during the seven years of imprisonment in North Korea, so those are very real. In reality I'm a mother, also. I have children of my own and I was quite shocked when I was imprisoned to notice that there are so many people who had been pregnant from outside and were imprisoned afterwards.

In North Korea it is in their law that no birth should be given in a prison. So in North Korea there is an idea of collective penalty so that people with bad ideology in them should not give birth to another, who would have a bad ideology in him or her. So for people who are pregnant and who are in prison, they would be forced into having the fetus out using sodium solution.

In many cases people would be incarcerated at the point when they are about to give birth, so into the eighth month or ninth month of pregnancy these women would be pulled away from their houses and incarcerated. So when it comes to injection of such sodium solution, it would be carried out not by a doctor but by one of the inmates who may have served as a nurse outside.

So these former nurses who are now inmates would be working as sanitary assistants. So these pregnant inmates would be incarcerated with other two or three pregnant inmates in a room surrounded by concrete. So when the nurse injects sodium solution into the lower body of such pregnant person it requires about 24 hours before a fetus is forced out of her body. This is a forced abortion and when the fetus dies, because it is forced, the pain is immeasurable. I have personally witnessed these women, because of such pain and anguish that they were going through within those 24 hours, I've seen their fingernails torn because they were scratching against the concrete walls so hard. And even if these women reach out for help or cry out in agony, all that a jailkeeper would do is open the door, come inside and kick them with their military shoes.

I have also personally

witnessed a woman who was having a forced abortion but this baby was into the ninth month and the baby actually came out alive. And when the baby came out it was covered with blood and it was red all over and the baby was still moving and when that happened I saw that the jailkeeper came in and stepped on the neck of the baby. So the mother implored and also complained to the jailkeeper not to kill the baby.

And what has happened to the mother afterward is that they would say that she's being punished because she was complaining about the party's ideology and now she's doing it again so she should be punished accordingly, and afterward she was executed in public.

So this occurred in North Korea with much consistency. This is not something unusual. Such occurrence does not even invite an eyebrow to be lifted by one of the jailkeepers. That's how it is in North Korea.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG:

Mrs. Lee, thank you very much. There may be further elaboration of that answer that you can give to Commissioner Gaer during the break but I have at least four other commissioners at this point who would like to ask questions. So I'll ask both my fellow commissioners to keep the questions brief if we can and the answers succinct, as well.

Commissioner Shea?

MS. SHEA:

I want to thank all of you for your witness today and it was very powerful and there truly is a bamboo curtain on North Korea because we almost never hear of the situation inside of the country. Our papers rarely carry any news.

Dr. Vollertsen, I had the pleasure of meeting you almost a year ago, I think, and I was just as impressed then as I am today and I'd like to ask you a question about policy, about what you feel the single most important the United States could do. The other witnesses have given some ideas about the terrorist list, about the packaging of aid. Do you have any, from your time there, any suggestion about how the U.S. could help push for reform and change in this dire, dire situation?

DR. VOLLERTSEN:

Okay, in order to make it very brief, I believe in teamwork efforts. I

support engagement policy. I support anybody who's going to North Korea and helping. I gave my own skin even for the North Koreans. I wanted to be a friend and I believe in engagement policy. I believe in diplomacy. I believe in all those people who provide food. But I think it's also necessary that there is some pressure on the opposite.

You

remember East Germany. That was nearly the same. There was some engagement policy. Willy Brandt, Egon Bar, they shook hands and they opened something. But, at the same time, there was a strong opposition, which accused human rights violations and which accused anybody who was killed at the East German border. And I think now it's our turn, first of all, to inform the world because there could not be any pressure; there could not, to answer your question--how can we provide those food distribution to the Christians who are really needing these foods?--there will be no pressure on the North Korean authorities when there's no information, what's going on in North Korea.

And

Mr. Chuck Downs will elaborate on this negotiations on the North Korean side. They are perfect in hiding those secrets. Therefore there is no information and then there is no pressure, no international pressure.

So

first of all, I think we have to get the journalists involved and that's my private approach now. I'm going to the Chinese-North Korean border several times in the year, together with some French journalists, Japanese journalists, American journalists, in order to raise some interest, to make some documentation about those people. Nobody knows about those people who are suffering there.

So

I think in order to get the attention of the world that there's something going on maybe as cruel as the reality in German concentration camps, first of all, we have to raise the interest. Then we can make a combination of all those efforts, that we can give the food but together with some journalists. Why there is no CBS, CNN, whatever, Fox News or whatever allowed to get free access in North Korea? And, most shocking, nobody is arguing about this, that there's one country on earth there's no access for all the politicians, for all your diplomats. They are not allowed to travel free in this country. There are no journalists to travel free, allowed to travel free.

So first of all, ask for free access and ask the North Koreans to show their secrets. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: Thank you very much.

Bishop Murphy?

BISHOP MURPHY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mine

is a very simple question that I'll address to all three of you. Have you yourself met or have personal knowledge of any ordained Christian minister or priest in prison or out of prison currently living in North Korea?

MRS. LEE: Prior to my being incarcerated in a rehab center I have never met such person but once I had been incarcerated I have come across quite a few such persons.

DR. KIM:

In my written statement I have introduced the story of one couple of Christians. They have fled to China and have met Korean missionaries and come to North Korea. But a spy has monitored their activities in China and on the way back to North Korea they have been arrested and at that time they tried to begin prayer. One of the security police has struck them by the rifle and then pounded on them so severely that their legs and arms broken.

Therefore, they have been incarcerated, sent to the political prison camp. The man has been sentenced to 18 years and the woman 15 years but such a period is not meaningful because once in political prison camp, they can extend every time to longer and there is no real exit without death.

According

to very recently published Catacomb Connection of January 2002, very recently published, 17-year-old youth has become a Christian and he has tried to make Christian mission to other youngsters in marketplace, so illegal marketplace, and he has been arrested. Last November of 2001 he has been executed. About his story, another friend has monitored and has made a survey. The journal said that at the time of being executed the youth has not changed his belief, so one of the political security police has been very moving, so he has become a Christian. It was so reported in very recently published journal of a Christian group.

There

are many Christian volunteer missionaries who are trying to make Christian mission in northeast part of China. So I think when one supports the activities of the North Korean refugees in northeast part of China then the North Korean people would have more access to Christian religion or other religions. So it must be very helpful for improvement of religious freedom conditions in North Korea when one supports the North Korean refugees in China now.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: Dr. Vollertsen?

DR. VOLLERTSEN:

Additional remark, I spoke to nearly 250 defectors and North Korean refugees at the Chinese-North Korean border area. I spoke to many, many refugees in Seoul. I learned about all those people but the outside world does not know because so many Christian missionaries are doing a quite good job there in this area but they are not public relation managers. They do not have any network. Those testimonies are not published like this book.

So the next step would be to inform, to publish, to inform the journalists and get this material to you, to the politicians. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: Thank you very much.

Commissioner Kazemzadeh?

DR. KAZEMZADEH:

Presumably the Buddhist population of North Korea is even larger than the Christian population. I would like to know how the government acts toward the Buddhists, either believers or even the Buddhist priesthood.

DR. KIM:

May I answer? There is one official Buddhist temple open now in Pyongyang named the Tesson [ph] Temple. It was a kind of cultural heritage only but at the days of 1989 Pyongyang Festival, Pyongyang Youth Festival, Tesson Temple has been opened, alongside with two other Christian churches and one Catholic Church.

There is no other temple. There are some old temple remains or cultural heritage

temple buildings but no Buddhists. I think the Buddhists in North Korea not alive.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: Thank you.

Ambassador Stith, the last question.

AMBASSADOR STITH:

Give me your sense of the potential or prospect for change, the kind of change that would mean religious freedom under the present government in North Korea. I know it's probably a difficult second question but what would it take to make that change occur?

DR. KIM:

I think the number of Christians underground in North Korea is becoming larger and larger, especially through the Christian mission activities in Northeast Asia to the North Korean refugees there. And such Christian mission activity does not stop because the volunteer missionaries are dedicated for his mission, their mission.

So

I think if the international society supports the North Korean refugees, the North Korean refugees are exactly the refugees in the meaning of 1951 Convention on Refugees. Therefore, it's the duty or obligation of international society to protect such North Korean defectors or people as refugees.

If we support them and if we protect them or grant them refugee status then I think the religious freedom level of North Korea will be very higher than now. And such an activity support very much for North Korean people to know about the religion, including Christianity or other religions, and they will pay higher attention to the religion.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: Dr. Vollertsen?

DR. VOLLERTSEN:

I will follow the German example. You remember it started with several hundred German refugees from East Germany in the Hungarian Embassy and that created, in the end, the collapse of East Germany. And now we are trying to produce the same movement at the Chinese-North Korean border.

We're not only interviewing those refugees but we are helping them out of this country and going to other third countries--Mongolia, Bangkok, Vietnam even, and then back to Seoul.

And we are informing the world. We are doing this together with international journalists and you know about the World Soccer Cup in Seoul in South Korea and Japan in May and June and I think that would be a nice opportunity to raise some interest in the international community about the desperate situation of the Christians in North Korea.

We can start some activities in some outside embassies with some North Korean refugees, for example. I'm always working together with the journalists. Some will call me crazy because I like this crazy activities but sometimes I think we have to act crazy in order to raise the interest of the world. Thank you.

DR. KIM:

May I add only one point? Very recently we have supported 33 North Korean refugees to come inside Vietnam and the Korean Embassy in Vietnam will help them to come into South Korea.

So the Chinese government is not allowing North Korean refugees to go outside China but we could manage it in some ways. And Chinese government must be more generous about the human rights of North Korean people in China. Minimum until year 2008 Olympic Games they will be more generous.

So I think we can find a way to protect the North Korean refugees when we are trying very earnestly.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG:

Thank you very much to all of our panelists. We are sorry that the time has gone so quickly. Your insight and information about Korea has been enormously helpful and we invite you to supplement your comments for the record in any form that you'd like to. We'd be delighted to have more information and we do anticipate--I'm sure that we'll be in touch with all of you again, but thank you very much.

We'll now take a 10-minute break while we set up for our next panel. In the meantime, Dr. Vollertsen, if you'd like to show your video, I'm sure there are people who would be happy to see that. Thank you.

