

## Donald Oberdorfer - Prepared Testimony

"Promoting Religious Freedom in North Korea": Donald Oberdorfer Prepared Testimony

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Starting with my days as a lieutenant in the U.S. Army at the end of the Korean War and as a correspondent for The Washington Post,

I have spent considerable time in South Korea since 1953 and visited North Korea twice, in 1991 and 1995. I wrote a book on the North-South situation in Korea and the role of the outside powers, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (Addison-Wesley, 1997), the most recent edition of which was published last December with a new chapter on the interaction of North and South Korea with each other and the United States from 1998 to the end of the Clinton administration.

Having said that, I am not an expert on the religious situation in North Korea, and have no first hand information about it. The State Department report of last October contains more information in one place, even though much of it is necessarily unconfirmed, than I have previously encountered. Of the countries of the world which are important to the United States in one way or another, we know less about North Korea than any other. It is a closed society which seeks to follow its own way in the world.

I believe the United States should always promote the observance of human rights, including the ability to practice religion as a person sees fit, and should raise the issue of human rights with North Korea and other nations whenever it seems pertinent and appropriate. This is part of our heritage, our way of life and our way in the world.

I do not, however, believe the United States should make this issue the touchstone or a precondition for diplomatic discussions, diplomatic relations or other contacts with North Korea. We have a great many interests in relations with that country in the political, security, diplomatic, humanitarian and other realms as well as interests in North Korea's relations with South Korea. Although temporarily eclipsed by situations in Afghanistan, South Asia and the Middle East, the DMZ in Korea remains one of the most heavily fortified and most threatening places on earth. Moreover, it is one place where United States military forces would be immediately and deeply engaged in case of war. Human rights should be one of a number of policies and values the United States seeks to support in North Korea, but not one that prevents dialogue and progress toward accord in other areas.

When I was a Washington Post correspondent in South Korea in the early 1970s, repression was rife in that country. Many people, including prominent Christian clergy and lay people, were jailed by the then-military led regime. There were proposals at the time to threaten withdrawal of U.S. assistance, and if necessary actually withdraw U.S. assistance, as a means of forcing the South Korean government to change its human rights policies. Much as I deplored some of the policies of the Seoul government, I believed this would be the wrong way for the United States to proceed, counterproductive as well as dangerous to U.S. interests. U.S. engagement and encouragement, rather than threats, helped South Korea make a turn toward the democratic country it is today.

Currently, I believe U.S. engagement with North Korea in positive and multi-dimensional fashion is important to peace and progress in Northeast Asia. This policy has been urged on the United States by our South Korean allies, who have chosen to engage the North constructively in recent years, even though there are many differences between the two systems and there is much in the North that most South Koreans deplore. Such an engagement policy is backed by Japan, China, Russia and virtually all other powers in the area. Moreover, there is evidence in recent years, especially the remarkable year of 2000, that engagement can bring about important changes in North Korean foreign policy, although significant shifts in the regime's domestic policy remain less evident.

In short, my hope is that the United States and North Korea will go back to talking and working with one another as soon as possible, and that this dialogue will promote peace and security, lessening the danger on the Korean peninsula. Human rights, including the rights of religious observance and freedom, deserves a place in the dialogue but not as an issue to prevent, reduce or cut off official contacts and relations between our two countries.