

Chuck Downs

"Promoting Religious Freedom in North Korea": Chuck Downs Oral Testimony

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MR. DOWNS:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing and thank you for inviting me to make comments. I'll make some very brief statements based on the written paper that I've given you.

First I'd like to mention to the Commission that there are, even as we sit here, very heroic efforts going on to try to get religious information into North Korea. I have undertaken an effort in the last year or so to try to find out just how much is being done to get to the public of North Korea and give them messages of hope and inspiration and compassion and I haven't learned, I'm sure, of all of them but there are some that the Commission should take note of and there are some interesting organized efforts.

I have in front of you a piece of paper that is essentially nonbiodegradable paper printed with indelible ink and contains parts of the Gospel and explanations of Christian theology on the back. These are taken to North Korea, dropped on the countryside, put in rivers so that they will float downstream. North Korea has a highly literate population and they see these things. The regime knows this stuff is doing on and they try to deal with it by cracking down on it but it's an effort that's undertaken by Christians to try to get the message to North Korea.

Here's another one. This is a balloon that is blown up helium and allowed to float over the mountains of North Korea where it will drop and also remain on the countryside with messages. This contains pretty large portions of the Gospel written in the Korean language.

There are efforts to smuggle people into North Korea and there are efforts to smuggle people out of North Korea. There are efforts to smuggle Bibles and Gospels into North Korea. I don't want to show you what I have seen and how they are packaged because it seems to me that these efforts need to be protected. But we should be conscious as we sit here that there are people who are proving that there is no religious freedom in North Korea by actually trying to get religious information to North Korea and being stymied by the regime at every turn, and they have come up with some creative ways to try to get around it.

Among the groups that have come up in recent years there is a very interesting one in Seoul that has taken on the mission of trying to monitor and catalogue reports of the treatment of prisoners in North Korea's prison camps, and we've heard from Soon-Ok Lee today so we know how bad these stories are, how terrible they are.

The Reverend Benjamin Yoon, a former Methodist minister who was himself imprisoned during some of the dark days of South Korean dictatorship, now heads up a very dedicated group of people in Seoul who interview defectors and try to come up with good solid information that we can use in understanding better how conditions are in North Korea.

I think that those efforts are commendable for a number of humanitarian reasons but I think they're also commendable for policy reasons because they show us something about the way the North Korean regime does its work. And I'd like to refer your attention to one quick story about a fellow named Kim Yong or identified as Kim Yong by the Yoon organization.

He was sent to the most notorious prison camp, number 18, on suspicion that he was a spy. In this camp you are not allowed to stand up straight. You must crawl on your legs at all times. You have to be extremely obedient to the guards. There are frequent beatings, brutal torture and killings on the spot of people who seem to show any interest in self-assertion.

This fellow was allowed to leave because a party member that knew him and identified him intervened on his behalf. He, of course, was very grateful to the party member and he was sent to another camp that was not quite so severe. He felt, in his own words, as though he had gone to paradise, being in the second camp.

After he was there a few weeks he discovered that his mother had been incarcerated and was in that camp. He was overjoyed to be reunited with the old woman until he found out a few weeks later that his task on behalf of the state was to administer punishment to his own mother for not working hard enough in this prison camp. So they punished both mother and son by forcing the son to punish the mother. He finally saw her being carried off on a pole by two guards, exhausted, and at that point decided that he must try everything possible to leave the situation and he managed to get himself out of the camp and he tells the story of how he did that.

But the point here is that this shows something that we see time and again. We've seen it for 50 years in the way the North Koreans conduct negotiations. They are manipulators of people's reactions. They do it internally and they do it externally. It is part and parcel of their foreign policy. When they meet with us they will always follow a pattern and the pattern has three basic elements. They will lead us to the conclusion that they are ready for change, that there is some new opening that they wish to pursue, that they are ready to change their behavior. When they get us at the negotiating table they will repeat the same old hard-line stance that is very familiar to us. And eventually they will break down the negotiations and blame it on us and blame it on the South Koreans.

This has happened time and time again. Yet they benefit from this process because when they do stage one, when they tell us that they are open and ready for change, we become exalted and exuberant and we want to give them all kinds of benefits, so that we encourage them to come to the negotiating table on the basis of any indication at all that they're willing to show some openness. We give them extra food, we give them release of sanctions, and this is a process that we have to be very careful of.

So my policy recommendation that I have to leave you with--I see my time has run out and I want to make sure Jack Rendler has a chance to get his full seven minutes--my policy recommendation is that we have to realize we have a limited ability to get through to the North Korean regime and focus instead on the people who are needy. Get the messages directly to the people of North Korea as much as we possibly can and, more importantly, get to the refugees. Let everyone in North Korea know that if they get out of that country they will be treated well, they will be given asylum, they will have housing, they will have food and there is hope for them.

That's all I have to say today. Thank you very much.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: Mr. Downs, thank you very much. We appreciate that. We will come back to all of you with questions; I think we'll have many.