

Chuck Downs - Prepared Testimony

"Promoting Religious Freedom in North Korea": Chuck Down Prepared Testimony

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Mr. Chairman, I appreciate your invitation to appear before the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom today to discuss our nation's policy towards North Korea. I am honored to have been asked to speak today, and to appear with this distinguished panel.

The people whom the Commission would probably be most interested in hearing from are those people who risk their lives every day to bring religious freedom to the people of North Korea. Since they cannot be here, I would like to take a moment to tell what I have heard they are doing.

As we meet today, there are people whose names must go unmentioned and whose efforts must be undertaken in the most guarded secrecy. I am most familiar with the work of Christians, but I have heard that individuals who identify themselves as Buddhists, Baha'is, and Muslims have used opportunities to send messages of hope, compassion, and inspiration to North Korea, where, as the Commission has noted, these are very scarce commodities.

In towns across Asia, Europe and North America, there are people who meet with small communities of believers to tell about their efforts and raise funds to purchase and distribute religious texts in North Korea. From places where the winds can reach North Korea's mountains, some Christians launch helium-filled balloons covered with words from the gospels. There are Christian groups that print leaflets with indelible ink on paper that will not dissolve in North Korea's harsh elements. These are taken into North Korea to be dropped in rivers and streams where they can be picked up and read by North Korea's highly literate population.

Bibles and Buddhist texts are smuggled into North Korea. There are organizations that smuggle radios as well. The subjects of Kim Jong-il are required to purchase radios tuned only to the state's news agency, but many have found ways to tune these radios to outside stations

without leaving tell-tale marks on the outside of the radios.

There is an underground railroad at work in Northeast Asia helping North Korean refugees to escape. People active in this issue tell me that three weeks ago, a major figure in this dangerous operation was arrested during an attempt to cross the border. Along with a freelance video producer, a North Korean-born South Korean citizen and an ethnic Korean Chinese assistant, he is being held in a prison in the People's Republic of China. The 15 North Koreans he was trying to bring to freedom are believed to have been repatriated. As such well-motivated efforts continue, democratic governments will not be able to look away from such incidents and simply assert that border-crossings of this nature are illegal. The punishments meted out are too severe for what can hardly be called a crime, and this will cause as much attention to be devoted to the problem as similar mass escapes from failed societies have caused in the past.

There is an extensive, well-organized, dedicated, and in my view, underfunded, effort on the borders of North Korea to address the needs of people who do escape. A man named Tim Peters, based in Seoul, has organized a grass-roots organization designed to assist as many as possible of the huge number of homeless North Korean children and teenagers. These young people are able to cross the border from North Korea more easily than their parents and, in many instances, are sent across the border by caring parents who want them to have a better life. Peters' organization tries to find them food and shelter in the third countries to which they have fled.

Missionaries on the border provide food and sustenance and are often the first to learn how bad conditions are in the society that serves Kim Jong-il's interests above all others.

There are also efforts to persuade Christians from North Korea to return to North Korea to give support to the clandestine church that I am told is growing there. The people who engage in this dangerous activity do so with tremendous courage and skill.

These courageous people cannot be here today, but it is important for us to recall that they are hard at work, dealing directly with the problem that we are discussing more abstractly in this session: the lack of religious freedom in North Korea.

Depending on how you look at it, North Korea is a state where there is no religion, or a state where there is but one religion adhered to

by all. The oppressed subjects of Kim Jong Il's regime adhere to a creed that they recite every day. In it, "they absolutize, defend, and safeguard the Leader ideologically, they carry out the Leader's teachings unconditionally to the last, and they dedicate their entire being to the Leader to ease the worries of the Leader."¹ Belief in anything but the supremacy of the state is a violation of that creed, and as the other witnesses have said, there are severe penalties for those who express their faith.

Thomas J. Belke has written a comprehensive book on the nature of the state ideology of Juche as a religion. In *Juche: A Christian Study of North Korea's State Religion*, he describes its basic tenets, shrines, and practices.

Belke quotes extensively from the well-informed analysis of Hwang Jang Yeop, North Korea's highest-ranking defector and an architect of Kim Il-Sung's unique form of Communist philosophy. Hwang describes the terrible conditions that afflicted North Korea at the time of his defection, and says, "Despite this reality, North Korean broadcasts and newspapers never cease to boast that the North is a paradise on earth and a model socialist society which people all over the world envy, and that the Leader is the savior. The people are shouting, "Hurrah! Great General!" in order to survive in this miserable land of darkness where all we can see is merciless oppression and deception."²

The willingness of people of faith to risk imprisonment and death is documented in Soon-Ok Lee's eyewitness accounts of her experiences in North Korea's prison camps. She says, "since the North Korean government was established, the leaders have tried to eliminate all religions through intense persecution. People who will not deny their faith are sent to concentration camps or prisons."³ She observed that prison guards were promoted if they could get a prisoner to deny God, and as a result, "believers received less food and clothing rations, and were isolated from the other prisoners." They were beaten and given the most dangerous work. She tells of two horrid accounts in which one believer fell into a rolling press for rubber manufacture and the guard refused to stop the machine. In another example she witnessed, when a group of iron smelters refused to answer a guard who demanded they disavow their belief in God, hot molten iron was poured on the kneeling prisoners.

In addition to these particularly gruesome methods of making examples out of people who merely resist the State's proscription against religion, Soon-ok Lee also describes a method of punishment that is a familiar feature in accounts from survivors of North Korea's prison camps. Obedience to the regime is enforced by a policy of communal retribution. Soon-ok Lee described how prison guards force other prisoners to kill a Christian by walking over him and stomping on him. The prisoners become the unwilling instrument of the regime's terrible persecution against those who refuse to deny their beliefs.

But

we should not conclude that the State's control over the minds of its subjects is indomitable. Hwang Jang Yeop says that when ideological offenders are on their way to be executed they no longer succumb to pressure to renounce their beliefs. He concludes "the minds of the general public are slowly deserting the system in favor of reform."⁴ There are numerous examples of public statues of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jon-il being defaced.⁵

Despite appearances, neither the regime nor the West can assume that the population of North Korea is docile, loyal, or patient.

The testimony of former prisoners casts important light on how North Korea pursues its objectives, and I commend Rev. Benjamin Yoon of the Citizens Alliance to Help North Korean Political Prisoners and others who have undertaken a systematic effort to collect and analyze this information. As a result of this organization, we know the story of a man named Kim Yong, who was sent to a prison camp on the suspicion that his father was a spy. The first camp he was sent to was North Korea's most notorious, where inmates are not allowed to stand, and torture is brutal. He was relieved and grateful to a party member who intervened to have him assigned to a second camp. He was shocked when he discovered his mother was incarcerated in that camp, but he was elated to be with her again. Weeks later his elation turned to horror when the guards ordered him to force his mother to work harder. His duty to the state was to punish his mother. After a few months, when he saw two guards carry her off, forcing the exhausted woman to straddle a pole, Kim Yong decided that he would risk everything to escape. I have met Mr. Kim and my short rendition of his story does not adequately describe what he has been forced to live through. But my point is that it says something important about the regime and the way it conducts its business.

As you mentioned, Mr. Chairman, I have written a book about North Korea's negotiating behavior that tracks their negotiating strategy over the five decades. I think there are very clear patterns that emerge from this study that can inform our discussions of how to proceed with North Korea, and I appreciate the opportunity to share some of my conclusions with the Commission.

First, we need to recognize that North Korea's leaders have more intimate familiarity with the failures of their own system than we do. They are unenviably aware of the conditions witnesses have described to us today. We talk of the regime's impending collapse, but they have been burdened with a failing system for fifty years. Their behavior at the negotiating table reveals their lack of faith in their own system. The negotiating record shows that the North Korean regime has been overwhelmingly preoccupied with three principal concerns: its tenuous hold on its people's loyalty, the dismal performance of its disastrous national economic policy, and the need to enhance the regime's survival by maintaining military capabilities that can threaten foreign rivals. Coming to the negotiating table has always been a means for addressing these severe systemic problems that plague the regime.

North Korea therefore manages negotiations to accomplish three

objectives: (1) to give esteem and power to the regime, thereby strengthening its oppressive control over its people; (2) to obtain economic benefits that the regime's Socialist economy is unable to produce; and (3) to buy time and obtain resources to develop threatening military capabilities. The North's military capabilities can then be used as a means of internal control and international extortion.

Because North Korea has little to bring to the negotiating table, it adopts negotiating stances that perpetually increase its leverage for subsequent negotiations. In *How Nations Negotiate*, Dr. Fred Iklé observed negotiations are not merely a question of reaching an agreement or not reaching an agreement. There are always at least three options at play, and one of the most important is developing the prospects for future bargaining. This is where North Korea excels. Even when no agreement is reached at the negotiating table, North Korea generally ends up in a stronger position than when it started the negotiations. In fact, it quite often extracts benefits from the other side merely for participating in the negotiation itself. The United States should be very careful when it seeks to lure North Korea to the negotiating table. North Korea will always take whatever concessions it is offered, but always retains the ability to avoid making an agreement.

North Korea has repeatedly initiated negotiation by appearing to be open to fundamental changes in its policies, used its willingness to participate in talks to demand pre-conditions, benefits and concessions, and terminated discussions when it has gained maximum advantage, blaming the lack of agreement on the other side of the table.

It manages negotiations so that its adversaries experience stages of optimism, disillusionment, and disappointment. Adversaries' disappointment, in turn, paves the way for North Korea to create an illusion of fresh cooperation in the initial stage of the next negotiation. It's all about increasing North Korea's leverage in the next round of talks.

It is worth recalling that not long ago, the United States and South Korea tried to cajole North Korea to attend talks by offering to give North Korea humanitarian aid—primarily food. Now, North Korea complains that the Bush administration is dragging its feet on proceeding with talks. Little, if anything, has changed in North Korea's position. It certainly is no less committed to driving a hard bargain; but it knows that complaining about some perceived slight enhances its leverage by increasing pressure on the Bush administration. North Korea benefits when a stream of western analysts pressure the Bush administration to resume negotiations, even though the Bush administration has consistently been willing to negotiate and North Korea has not.

It is common for analysts of North Korea to discuss the gestures

that North Korea made during the summit between Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jon-il as though they indicated fundamental changes in North Korea's character. The hospitality, even charm, of Kim Jong-II has been viewed as evidence that North Korea wishes to change its offensive behavior. Kim Jong-II's facility in handling policy discussions, the joint North-South appearance at the Olympics, the exchange of visits between Pyongyang and Washington, and the January 2001 visit of Kim Jong II to Shanghai have all been applauded. Pictures of smiling faces from Pyongyang accompany news of increased diplomatic ties between North Korea and Italy, Australia, the Philippines, Canada, Germany, Belgium, the UK, Netherlands, Spain, New Zealand, and Turkey. Many hope these developments signal a reversal of years of tension on the Korean peninsula.

At the same time, North Korea's gestures could be inspired by the opposite purpose-to strengthen the regime, increase its oppressive control over its own people, and purchase time and resources for the North's expanding military machine. Although there was briefly a different tone in the regime's approach to other nations, there has not been a commensurate change in North Korea's internal or international policies or actions. North Korea's actions since September 11, 2001, including heightened anti-American rhetoric and two fire-fights on the DMZ, show that North Korea concluded it has already obtained the maximum benefit from a friendly approach and decided it was time to be obstructionist.

North Korea's management of similar periods of "opening" in the past also showed that North Korea reverses its approach whenever it concludes it has gained the maximum benefit for its show of charm. There were two earlier promising periods surrounding agreements in which North Korea was believed to be "opening up" toward the outside world: the South-North Communiqué of July 4, 1972 and the agreements signed in 1992, one on denuclearization and another called the basic agreement on North-South relations. Both produced tremendous euphoria but no lasting benefit.

Advocates of a conciliatory approach to North Korea suggest that times have changed, and North Korea's economic worries require North Korea to take a more accommodating approach to the outside world. Logic seems to suggest that the pressure from economic and political collapse would naturally bring about change in North Korea. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said the prospects for peace on the Korean peninsula depended "basically on how much the North Koreans are hurting."

But while the Clinton administration believed North Korea's difficulties would bring about reform, at the same time, they supported efforts to mitigate the difficulties that presumably spurred reform. They contributed food and economic assistance to North Korea that made the Stalinist country the largest recipient of American aid in Asia. U.S. aid to North Korea went from zero before the Clinton

administration to more than \$270 million annually, a total of almost \$1 billion over President Clinton's two terms. As a result, North Korea emerged strengthened in the past few years.

The aid was meant as a humanitarian gesture that would lure North Korea out of isolation, but when the regime controls the means of distribution, any benefit received from the outside can actually enhance the regime's oppressive control. The regime itself determined that food supplies, health services, and commercial investments were provided to those who are loyal and withheld from those who were not. On September 29, 1998, the charitable organization Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF--Doctors Without Borders) withdrew its aid workers from North Korea because it observed the regime "feeding children from families loyal to the regime while neglecting others."

As former General Secretary of the Korean Workers Party Hwang Jang Yeop explained, "North Korea controls the entire country and people with food distribution. In other words, food distribution is a means of control." External assistance also permits the regime to redirect its people's labor and resources from addressing desperate economic problems to strengthening military capabilities.

Just as the North Korean regime can subvert the world's humanitarian impulses to reinforce its oppressive domestic policies, it can also take advantage of the world's confidence in security arrangements to gain time and resources to develop new military technology. As deplorable as it may seem, North Korea's national objective is not to ensure its people's survival, it is to ensure the regime's survival. In this regard, weaponry is a more important investment than agriculture.

North Korea sees the benefits of outside assistance more clearly than American policymakers do. It has learned through more than fifty years of negotiations to accept any concession from friend or foe. It certainly has no problem with replacing a subsidy from Moscow with one from Washington. Having very effectively maintained its political independence while extracting support from the world's most merciless Communist dictatorships, it can confidently accept aid from humane Western democracies.

While some analysts believe collapse is inevitable, the policy of intervening to cushion collapse may yet prove it is not. The danger in providing aid to North Korea is that the United States will bear responsibility for prolonging the regime's survival. In economic, political, security, and moral terms, shouldering the burden of helping the North Korean regime survive is a dubious objective for American foreign policy.

The principal focus of United States policy toward North Korea has always been on the need for deterrence, to protect our ally South Korea from attack, and guarantee that freedom can continue to be cherished there. In addition to that, the Commission's recommendations from last year recognize the value of working with our democratic allies to increase international moral pressure on the regime in North Korea.

Beyond these elements of sound policy, however, our focus should also be on serving the needs of the people who escape from North Korea. There was a very valuable provision in the "North Korean Threat Reduction Act" (HR 1838, 105th Congress) introduced by the former Chairman of the International Relations Committee, Benjamin Gilman (R-NY). It would have authorized some \$30 million in assistance to countries that granted asylum to North Korean refugees. Feeding and housing refugees has the potential to bring about substantial change in Northeast Asia, and I applaud Kim Sung-chul for his efforts on these matters.

History has repeatedly shown that refugee policy is one of the West's most decisive tools in bringing down or reforming Communist regimes. When there is undeniable evidence that massive numbers of people wish to escape, no government can pretend that they have achieved a workers' paradise. This was shown dramatically in the 1989 East German exodus to Hungary, and the 1979 Vietnamese exodus across Southeast Asia.

In such events of mass out-migration, the failure of the ideological underpinnings is so obvious that all of the theories of class warfare and historical determinism fail to persuade even the elites. Ultimately, the pressure to leave Communist societies forces the regimes to make difficult choices about dealing with their disaffected people. North Korea believes that ever increasing levels of repression can solve the problem, but that has failed for other societies. When guards are ordered to fire on large numbers of innocent, fleeing countrymen who wish for nothing more than to get away, even the most hardened ideologues question their own views. This is the point at which we have seen regimes based on unchallenged lies dissolve.

It is quite possible that we cannot avoid such a collapse in North Korea even if we try to. We should prepare for the eventual North Korean exodus, encourage those who seek freedom, and provide care for those who escape.

If the recommendations the Commission has considered today are heard in North Korea they will do much to extend hope, inspiration, and compassion to those who suffer there, and I thank the Commission for an opportunity to participate in this hearing.

1 December 31, 1988 edition of *White Paper on South-North Dialogue in Korea* (Seoul: National Unification Board, 1988), p. 23, quoting North Korean Workers Party documents.

2 Thomas J. Belke, *Juche: A Christian Study of North Korea's State Religion*, (Living Sacrifice Book Company, Bartlesville, Oklahoma, 1999), p. 261.

3 Soon-ok Lee, *Eyes of the Tailless Animals: Prison Memoirs of a North Korean Woman*, (Living Sacrifice Book Company, Bartlesville, Oklahoma, 1999), p. 113-119.

4 "Defector Says Conditions in North Could Spark Revolt," *Korea Herald*, Seoul, November 14, 1997; and Seoul, "2,000 North Engineers Starve to Death: Hwang Jang Yeop," Digital version of the *Chosun Ilbo*, November 12, 1997.

5 Belke, pp. 339-340, and "Leg of Kim Il-Sung Bronze Statue Found Sawed Off," *Korea Times* digital edition, April 15, 1997.