

Jack Rendler - Prepared Testimony

"Promoting Religious Freedom in North Korea": Jack Rendler Prepared Testimony

Jan. 24. 2002

I am here in my capacity as Vice-chair of the US Committee for Human Rights in North Korea. It may be of interest to you that this Committee is the US manifestation of the International Campaign for Human Rights in North Korea. There are similar committee structures in Canada, France, Germany and Japan, as well as networks and individual actors throughout Europe and Asia. The campaign began in December of 1999, at a conference held in Seoul by the Citizens Alliance for Human Rights in North Korea.

In my written submission, I have provided the Commission with the following:

A summary of what is known or can be reliably surmised about human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

A set of detailed recommendations for policy and practice.

The founding declaration for the US Committee for Human Rights in North Korea.

Today, I will concentrate on policy and action recommendations which address the questions and concerns raised by the Commission for this hearing. I will begin by briefly summarizing what we know about human rights in North Korea.

- Human Rights in North Korea

For over 40 years the people of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), have been denied even the most basic of their human rights, denied any contact with the rest of the world, and isolated from each other. Human rights violations and abuses affect a

large majority of the 23 million North Korean people. There is precious little specific information available about human rights in North Korea, since the government refuses entry to international human rights groups. This in itself is cause for profound concern.

- Political prisoners, prisons and labor camps (Kwalliso).

It is estimated that the DPRK is holding over 200,000 political prisoners. The government detains and imprisons people at will. Political prisoners in North Korea may be held in any one of a variety of facilities: detention centers, 'labor rehabilitation' centers, juvenile centers, maximum-security prisons, relocation areas, and sanatoriums. 'Reeducation' means forced labor, usually logging or mining, under brutal conditions. Entire families, including children, are detained because of supposed political deviation by one relative. Judicial review does not exist and the criminal justice system operates at the behest of the government.

- Torture, ill-treatment and executions.

DPRK laws do not prohibit torture and it appears to be used routinely on political prisoners. Methods of torture include: whipping; humiliations such as public nakedness; severe beatings; electric shock; prolonged periods standing on ice outside in winter. 'Punishment cells,' constructed so that a prisoner cannot stand up or lie down, are used as a consequence for breaking prison rules. It is estimated that about 400,000 prisoners have died in the camps since they were established by Kim Il-Sung in 1972. There are more than 47 provisions in the Penal Code which call for the death penalty, including 'crimes against state sovereignty,' and 'crimes against the state administration.' Prisoners are executed in public, sometimes for offenses as trivial as petty theft, occasionally in front of large crowds which include young children.

- Religious and social control.

The population is subjected to a constant barrage of propaganda by government-controlled media--the only source of information. The opinions of North Koreans are monitored by government security organizations through electronic surveillance, neighborhood and work-place committees, and information extracted from acquaintances; children are encouraged to inform on their parents. Independent public gatherings are not allowed, and all organizations are created and controlled by the government. The government forcibly resettles politically suspect families. Private property does not exist. North Korean citizens do not have the right to propose or affect a change of government.

Religious freedom does not exist. The 'religious' activity that is allowed appears to have one of two purposes: to deify the founder of

the DPRK, Kim Il Sung, and by extension his son the current leader, Kim Jong Il; or to demonstrate to faith-based aid groups that some traditional religious activity is tolerated.

'Classes to study Kim Il Sung's Revolutionary Ideology' are held throughout the country. There are tens of thousands of statues of Kim, and thousands of 'towers of eternal life' are dedicated to him. Kim Il Sung badges are meant to be worn by everyone, and his picture to be hung in every home. To mark the 100-day memorial service for Kim Il Sung, an enormous sculpture was erected on a hill in Pyongyang called 'The Figure of the Sun.' At the end of a three-year period of mourning in 1997, the DPRK decided to move from an A.D. calendar to a 'Juche' calendar, with the year of Kim's birth as the 'first year of Juche,' and the day of his birth as the 'Day of the Sun.'

- Access to food and health care.

The government of the DPRK divides the entire society into three classes: 'core,' 'wavering,' and 'hostile;' there are further subdivisions based on an assessment of loyalty to the regime. As a result, as many as 18 million people may be denied equal access to decent education, employment, housing, medical care and food. Children are denied adequate education and are punished because of the loyalty classification of members of their families.

Between 1995 and 1998, North Korea lost one million of its 24 million people to famine, food shortages, and related disease; several thousand children died each month. The DPRK has refused to allow humanitarian aid organizations to assess the full extent of the crisis; reports persist that food is being distributed on the basis of loyalty to the state, effectively leaving out those most in need.

- North Korean refugees in China, Russia and Mongolia

Leaving the DPRK is considered treason, punishable by long prison terms or execution. With the onset of famine in the early 1990's, tens of thousands of North Koreans-the majority undernourished women and children-have fled their country, most crossing into China's northeastern provinces. There are an estimated 140,000 to 150,000 North Korean refugees currently in China, living in fear of arrest, many women forced into prostitution or abusive marriages. Refugees are pursued by agents of the North Korean Public Security Service, and many are forcibly returned to the DPRK. China, though a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, refuses to grant them refugee status and denies the UN High Commission for Refugees access to the border areas.

- US Policy Goals on North Korea

-

It is a legitimate, indeed a necessary, goal of US foreign policy to protect, promote and restore the human rights of the North Korean people. There is nothing about this goal that should conflict with the other main aim of US policy: peace and security on the Korean peninsula and in northeast Asia.

-

These goals require increased engagement with the people of North Korea. The central question at the heart of the debate on North Korea (for many nations as well as the US) is engagement vs. isolation. Historical examples, particularly recent ones, have taught us that isolation tends to aggravate the behavior we are trying to correct; engagement tends to limit or soften such behavior. Isolation will not punish the governing elite of the DPRK nearly as much as it will do further damage to the 23 million people of North Korea.

-

The real question then becomes the nature of the engagement. I would urge that US policy toward North Korea be guided by these principles:

Engagement should serve to promote and protect the human rights of all the people of North Korea.

Engagement should serve to open the society as a whole to new ideas, influences and experiences.

Engagement should serve to prevent mass hunger and starvation.

Engagement, whenever possible, should be with the Korean people directly.

- Action Recommendations

Here are some concrete steps that I would recommend to achieve the policy objectives, in accord with those principles.

-

Take the opportunity presented by President Bush's upcoming travel to Japan, South Korea and China to reassert US willingness to negotiate with the DPRK. The President could express his concern for the plight of the North Korean people and his commitment to assisting in the restoration of their rights and well-being.

-

Pyongyang has shown itself to be sensitive to criticism at UN venues. Follow the lead of western European countries in using these venues to press the DPRK to reform. A session of the UN Human Rights Subcommission will be held in March. Encourage the UN Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance to report on North Korea.

-

Find new ways to provide information to the people of North Korea. Develop multiple channels of exchange and contact. An undetermined number of radios in North Korea can receive foreign broadcasts at certain times. Use television broadcasts where possible to reach leadership elite. Establish exchange programs, beginning with university students and health-care professionals.

-

Call for the formation of an informal Congressional caucus to participate in a multi-national parliamentary network on human rights in North Korea.

-

Provide as much humanitarian aid as North Korea can absorb, on condition that: distribution of such aid is monitored by independent international relief organizations; concrete progress is made on human rights performance. Make clear to Pyongyang that significant amounts of aid from churches and faith-based organizations is available, delivery depending on a greater degree of religious freedom.

-

Encourage corporations planning to do business in North Korea to develop a code of conduct similar to the Sullivan principles applied in South Africa.

-

Use the good offices of the government of the People's Republic of China. Press the PRC to urge that Pyongyang open its economy and society. Urge the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to press the PRC to fulfill its obligations under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and end its practice of cooperating in the forced repatriation of North Koreans.

-

Provide support for new research and a comprehensive new report. We must begin by acknowledging the lack of reliable information on any aspect of human freedom in North Korea. We know that large numbers of people are imprisoned for their beliefs, but we don't know how many, who they are, where they are held, how long their sentences are. We know that imprisonment involves harsh conditions, including forced labor, poor food and health care, and torture; but we don't know just how bad it is for which kinds of prisoners at which kinds of prisons. We know that the government divides the population into segments according to perceived levels of loyalty to the regime, and we know that the distribution of goods and services benefits those perceived to be most loyal and fails to serve others. But we don't know exactly what the consequences are for which people. Such reporting will need to be done by an entity with the experience and the capacity to get it right, and the independence and reputation necessary to be heard in Pyongyang.

- Conclusion

The time has come to expose this repression and, by so doing, to make clear that the norms of human rights, as defined by the United Nations, apply as much to the people of North Korea as to the people of all other countries. Significantly, North Korea has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. It therefore owes its own citizens and the world community a commitment to comply with the provisions of these documents, and it must be held accountable for policies and actions that violate these norms.

It is altogether too easy to ignore North Korea, to wait until

"something happens" and then respond. The North Korean people deserve better than that. They have been oppressed, frightened and enslaved for long enough. They deserve the best we can do to return to them their basic human rights.