

June 6, 2003: "Life Inside North Korea."

Senate
Foreign Relations Committee

Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs

Hearing on "Life Inside North Korea"
Statement by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

June 5, 2003

Introduction

The people of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea or DPRK) are arguably the least free on earth, barely surviving under a totalitarian regime that denies basic human dignity and lets them starve while pursuing military might and weapons of mass destruction. By all accounts, there are no personal freedoms of any kind in North Korea, and no protection for human rights. Religious freedom does not exist, and what little religious activity that is permitted by the government is apparently staged for foreign visitors.

North Korea is also a humanitarian disaster of unimaginable proportions. Failed economic policies and natural disasters have reportedly left 1 million or more North Koreans dead from starvation and disease in the last 10 years, and there may be countless millions more, particularly children, who are stunted in both their mental and physical growth. As awful as the physical toll has been, the deprivation of the human spirit must be even greater. Just how bad the situation is in North Korea is not known, since the ruling regime maintains strict control over communication media and the flow of information into and out of the country.

Religious Freedom Conditions

Religious freedom remains non-existent in North Korea, where the government has a policy of actively discriminating against religious believers. The North Korean state severely represses public and private religious activities. The Commission has received reports that officials have arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and sometimes executed North Korean citizens who are found to have ties with overseas Christian evangelical groups operating across the border in China, as well as those who engage in unauthorized religious activities such as public religious expression and persuasion. Although access to updated information about North Korea remains limited, by all accounts, including testimony delivered at the Commission's hearing on North Korea in January 2002, there has not been any improvement in the conditions for religious freedom in the past year.

In recent years, the government has formed several religious organizations that it controls for the purpose of severely restricting religious activities in the country. For example, the Korean Buddhist Federation prohibits Buddhist monks from worshiping at North Korean temples. Most of the remaining temples that have escaped government destruction since the Korean War are regarded as cultural relics rather than religious sites. Similarly, the Korean Christian Federation restricts Christian activities. Following the reported wholesale destruction of over 1,500 churches during Kim Il Sung's reign (1948-1994), two Protestant churches and a Roman Catholic church, without a priest, opened in Pyongyang in 1988, even though the absence of a priest for Roman Catholics means that Mass cannot be celebrated and most sacraments cannot be performed. Several foreign residents have reported that they regularly attend services at these churches and that it is clear that whatever public religious activity exists, such as services at these churches, is staged for their benefit.

Persons found carrying Bibles in public or distributing religious literature, or engaging in unauthorized religious activities such as public religious expression and persuasion are arrested and imprisoned. There continue to be reports of torture and execution of religious believers. Although the practice of imprisoning religious believers is reportedly widespread, the State Department has been unable to document fully the number of religious detainees or prisoners. The Commission learned from testimony by defectors and experts at its January 2002 hearing, as well as subsequent reports, that prisoners held on the basis of their religious beliefs are treated worse than other inmates. For example, religious prisoners, especially Christians, are reportedly given the most dangerous tasks while in prison. In addition, they are subject to constant abuse from prison officials in an effort to force them to renounce their faith. When they refuse, these religious prisoners are often beaten and sometimes tortured to death.

Officials have stratified North Korean society into 51 specific categories on the basis of family background and perceived loyalty to the regime. Religious adherents are by definition relegated to a lower category than others, receiving fewer privileges and opportunities, such as education and employment. Persons in lower categories have reportedly been denied food aid. Thousands of North Koreans have fled to China in recent years. Refugees who are either forcibly repatriated or captured after having voluntarily returned to the DPRK are accused of treason; those found to have had contacts with South Koreans or Christian missionaries are subjected to severe punishment, including the death penalty.

Commission Recommendations

In recent years, an increasing number of foreign government officials, journalists, and representatives of NGOs have visited the DPRK and presented their observations about conditions in that country. At the same time, thousands of North Korean refugees have left the country with information on conditions there. However, the highly

totalitarian state in North Korea still maintains such tight control over all aspects of state and society that garnering verifiable information about conditions in that country, as well as how the regime operates, is very difficult. This greatly complicates the process of determining specific problem areas and, consequently, well-calibrated solutions.

The U.S. should make every effort to encourage the DPRK government to maintain its currently limited contacts with the outside world and to open the country to individuals, organizations, and governments concerned about the plight of the North Korean people and who want to help. At the same time, the U.S. government should, in its dialogue with the DPRK on issues of concern, also press the North Korean government to allow foreign human rights monitors and humanitarian agencies access to all parts of the country.

The Commission makes the following recommendations:

-- The U.S. government should develop and support ways to provide information to the people of North Korea, including Voice of America and Radio Free Asia broadcasts, channels of people-to-people exchange, and other forms of contact with North Koreans, particularly on religious freedom and other human rights issues.

-- The U.S. government should urge China, Russia, and other members of the international community to grant refugee status to North Koreans.

-- The U.S. government should urge the Chinese government to allow South Koreans and international NGOs greater access to northern China and greater capacity to serve the needs of North Korean refugees.

-- In any discussions regarding humanitarian assistance, the U.S. government should urge the North Korean government to allow considerable expansion of both the amount of assistance and the number of providers, which should include non-governmental organizations.

-- With all humanitarian assistance to North Korea, the U.S. government should work to ensure that the delivery of such aid is adequately monitored. Monitors should be able to read, speak, and understand the Korean language. The United States should ensure that delivery of U.S. and other foreign aid is not misrepresented

by the North Korean government through false claims that the aid is being provided by that government.

-- The U.S. Congress should expand its funding for (a) organizations advocating the protection of human rights in North Korea and (b) activities that raise the awareness of human rights conditions in that country.

-- The U.S. government should launch a major international initiative to expose and raise awareness of human rights abuses and humanitarian conditions in North Korea, including expanded U.S. government reporting, congressional engagement, and multilateral diplomacy.