

## June 25, 2003: North Korea: USCIRF Statement on Sen. Brownback's Legislation

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WASHINGTON - At a press conference today on North Korea held by Sen. Sam Brownback, Executive Director Joseph R. Crapa of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent and bipartisan federal agency, delivered on behalf of the Commissioners the statement below. At the press conference, Sen. Brownback introduced legislation to allow North Korean refugees to apply for refugee status or asylum in the United States.

Statement by Joseph R. Crapa, Executive Director, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, June 25, 2003:

### Introduction

The Commission commends Senator Brownback for his leadership on this issue and for introducing this timely legislation. We also thank him for giving the Commission an opportunity to join in the call for greater U.S. leadership on addressing the plight of the North Korean people.

The people of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea or DPRK) are among 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.

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.

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.

The ongoing nuclear crisis has made North Korea a top issue on the U.S. foreign policy agenda. However, U.S. efforts to address North Korea's security threat should not be limited to the dismantling of that country's nuclear weapons program. Efforts should also be directed toward the root of the problem, which is the existence of a North Korean regime that has not only terrorized the world, but also brutally oppressed its own people. The U.S. government should lead the international effort to end the plight of the North Korean people.

### Religious Freedom Conditions

Religious freedom does not exist, and what little religious activity that is permitted by the government appears staged for

foreign visitors. 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.

Officials have stratified North Korean society into 51 sub-classes 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. The Commission learned from testimony by defectors and experts at its January 2002 hearing that prisoners held on the basis of their religious beliefs are treated worse than other inmates. Christians are reportedly 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.

#### Commission Recommendations

The deplorable human rights and humanitarian conditions in North Korea have forced many North Koreans to seek refuge in China. However, while in China, these refugees experience numerous difficulties, particularly from the government's ongoing crackdown on their presence. The Chinese government's reaction has forced the refugees to remain in hiding and many have been exploited and abused as a result. In the light of these circumstances, the U.S. government must take a leadership role to resettle the North Korean refugees. Sen. Brownback's proposed legislation, if passed, would mark an important step in this regard.

In the meantime, however, the U.S. government should press upon China, Russia, and other members of the international community to grant refugee status to North Koreans. The U.S. government should also 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.

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