

March 6, 2007: USCIRF calls on U.S. Government to Put Human Rights Concerns on Table in Negotiations with DPRK

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WASHINGTON-As the United States begins bilateral discussions with the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (DPRK), the bipartisan, federal United States Commission on International Religious Freedom urges the U.S.

government to place long-standing human rights, humanitarian, and refugee concerns squarely on the negotiating table. "The current discussions provide a historic opportunity to address urgent issues of concern," said Felice D. Gaer, Chair of the Commission. "The U.S. should tie future consideration of economic assistance or diplomatic recognition to reforms that will increase the freedoms of North Koreans and strengthen the security of the Korean Peninsula." "North Koreans live in a closed society that permits no dissent and strictly curtails freedoms of speech, press, religion and assembly. The government views religious belief as a potential competitor to the officially propagated cult of personality centered on Kim Jong Il and his late father, Kim Il Sung. North Korean officials have arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and sometimes executed those discovered engaging in clandestine religious activity." "Refugees, famine, and the violent repression of religious belief and practice are transnational and human rights problems that will continue to destabilize the Korean peninsula. That is why the human rights and humanitarian crises in North Korea deserve to be treated on a parallel track with security issues involving weapons of mass destruction and should not be marginalized," said Gaer.

"The DPRK should know that one of the obligations that come with joining the international community, and receiving international aid, is making verifiable commitments on a variety of pressing human security issues." "The Commission continues to recommend that the U.S. work with its regional and European allies to fashion a permanent framework that addresses both human rights and other security and economic concerns on the Korean Peninsula, modeled on the Helsinki Process. Such a framework should contain agreements on ways to monitor the delivery of humanitarian and economic aid, provide refugee resettlement and protection, facilitate family reunification, and address other pressing human rights issues, including religious freedom. The Commission, a bipartisan, independent federal agency, is mandated by Congress to monitor abuse of freedom of religion or belief and related human rights around the world and to make recommendations to the President, State Department and Congress on ways to address religious freedom concerns. Since its inception in 1999, the Commission has closely followed human rights developments in North Korea. Since 2001, it has recommended that North Korea be designated as a "country of particular concern" (under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998) and the Administration has done so since that year. The Commission published "Thank You, Father Kim Il Sung": Eyewitness Accounts of Severe Violations of Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion in North Korea, a report based on interviews with 40 former North Koreans who recently fled to China and South Korea. Two of the people testified that they had witnessed public executions of people accused of engaging in unauthorized religious activities. The regime maintains a brutal system of prison camps that house an estimated 200,000 political inmates, who are subject to slave labor, torture and execution. The Commission publishes an annual assessment of human rights conditions in North Korea. The Commission has also sponsored discussions with the Asia Society and the American Enterprise Institute to consider policy options for addressing human rights and security concerns within the Six-Party Talks, and conducted hearings on North Korea in Los Angeles, New York and elsewhere.

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