

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**  
**South Korea's Refugee Policy in the Yoon Administration:**  
**A New Openness to International Standards?**

**Friday, June 24, 2022**  
**9:30 AM– 11:30 AM**

**Statement from Rep. Steve Chabot**

Thank you, Co-chairs Smith and McGovern, for convening this important hearing.

I'm currently the Ranking Member on the House Foreign Affairs Committee's Asia and Pacific Subcommittee. I've been closely engaged in issues related to the Korean peninsula for many years now, including when I was Chair of the Asia-Pacific Subcommittee between 2013 and 2014.

Some might wonder why we are focusing on South Korea, which has a strong human rights record and is a close, democratic ally. But as the testimony will show, we need to call to light a very specific problem that is of mutual concern.

What happens on the Korean Peninsula impacts America, whether it's North Korea's weapons build-up or its human rights abuses. The United States is home to many Americans of Korean heritage, including in my district, who care deeply about the developments on the peninsula and have direct family ties. And we must never forget what happened to Cincinnati native Otto Warmbier, who was wrongfully imprisoned and tortured by North Korean agents. He was returned home to Cincinnati in a vegetative state, never regained consciousness, and passed away on June 19, 2017.

The North Korean people themselves, and especially those who have escaped, are brave and enterprising, and are worthy of our support. So, I was troubled to hear about the way the Moon administration treated these refugees.

In 2021, the number of North Korean refugees entering South Korea dwindled to its lowest level in two decades. True, North Korea implemented strict COVID-19 border control measures. For its part, Beijing banned travel from areas with high levels of COVID-19 infection, complicating escape for North Koreans clearing through Russia.

But the Moon administration also created a less hospitable environment for North Korean refugees. In 2018, the Moon government cut its aid for defectors by 31 percent. The government banned the dropping leaflets into the DPRK. And it reportedly intimidated many North Korean human rights organizations and their supporters. North Korea has, of course, used this material for propaganda to discourage its people from going to South Korea.

We – South Korea, the United States, and all nations dedicated to human rights and peace – should be doing what we can to make escape from North Korea easier, not harder.

So, I look forward to hearing from our witnesses what they assess to be the refugee policy of the new South Korean president and what Congress can do to support the Yoon administration on this matter, and I yield back.