

“North Korean Human Rights Movement: Current Prospects and Obstacles”

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Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
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Good afternoon and thank you to everyone joining us today – above all our witnesses, Tara O and Suzanne Scholte, for their dedicated service to the people of North Korea, and for their unique knowledge of the North Korean human rights movement, which we will benefit from today.

Something important is happening in North Korea—and this despite the outward appearance of an overwhelmingly controlled society, suffering under what may well be the most comprehensively repressive government in the world.

The government of North Korea continues to operate, as it has for many decades, an unimaginably horrific system of repression—including the pervasive use of torture, denying its citizens every basic freedom of expression, religion, and movement. Above all, it is focused on denying North Koreans access to any information about or from the outside world. And it enforces those restrictions through pervasive digital and social surveillance, arbitrary detention, and a vast system of penal labor camps. And that system of control has only tightened in recent years, particularly by reducing citizens’ exposure to outside information and reinforcing ideological discipline.

But even within that closed system, we are reminded today of a crucial truth: some information, some ideas from the outside world can always get

through—and it does—and all of the government’s efforts to suppress it make it all the more precious and powerful.

It’s long been and continues to be our government’s policy to help as much information, news, ideas, truth get through as possible.

Some of the North Korean defectors who are with us in the hearing room today have experienced the transforming power of ideas firsthand. In a written submission to the commission, one defector leader explains that when North Koreans come to understand their “God-given rights...everything changes.” Another defector, now leading a broadcasting effort, recounts that listening to a forbidden radio signal as a child was “the first window through which I encountered freedom and hope.”

And as that same testimony makes unmistakably clear: “one of the most powerful forces that can change North Korea is not military force, but information...information changes people and changed people ultimately change society.”

That insight should guide us, inspire us, and motivate us to do more.

Information is transformative, and efforts to block it—wherever they occur—must be taken with the utmost seriousness.

And that brings us to the deeply troubling actions of the government of the Republic of Korea.

For almost forty years the United States government and Congress have considered South Korea as a model democratic ally and a partner in advancing human rights. Yet developments in the past years raise serious concerns about democratic backsliding. These concerns include the government's poor treatment of the North Korean human rights movement but extend to the Lee government's violations of core freedoms within South Korea.

The Lee government has taken a series of steps that have had the effect of constraining human rights advocacy related to North Korea. These include:

- disbanding the Ministry of Unification's Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs Office;

withholding its annual North Korean human rights report from public release;

- halting government-sponsored broadcasts into North Korea;
- and supporting legislation that allows police to block activists from sending information—such as leaflets and digital media—into North Korea.

These are not minor administrative adjustments. These are actions that directly affect the ability of civil society—especially defector-led organizations—to carry out one of the most effective forms of engagement with the North Korean people: the transmission of information.

We will also hear testimony that enforcement actions have gone further—targeting activists, restricting access to launch sites, increasing surveillance, and creating a chilling effect on those engaged in this work.

Suzanne Scholte describes this moment as “the most challenging time in the history of the North Korean human rights movement,” pointing not only to the failures of the international community, but to the fact that efforts to send information into North Korea are now being actively constrained.

She relays the words of defectors who warn that “true peace...cannot be achieved while turning away from the freedom and human rights of the North Korean people,” and who emphasize that silencing the flow of information does not promote stability—it strengthens repression.

Tara O likewise raises serious concerns about the trajectory of freedom within South Korea itself, describing “more and more restrictions on freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and other freedoms,” and warning that these measures are increasingly being codified into law. These developments deserve careful scrutiny.

Policies that suppress the flow of information into North Korea, or that penalize those seeking to expose the truth, are not neutral acts. They have consequences. They affect whether the people of North Korea hear alternative voices. They affect whether defectors can continue their work. And ultimately, they affect whether the cause of human rights advances or recedes.

We need peace on the Korean peninsula – but we will not deter the North by suppressing the voice of freedom in the South, or by limiting fundamental freedoms.

The defense of human dignity and human rights are central to meeting the challenge of the militant North Korean dictatorship. It is in deep commitment to human rights that we find the strength and stability to responsibly stand up to the nuclear blackmail games played by the Kim dictatorship over North Korea. Congress has acted on that principle through legislation such as the North Korean Human Rights Act, and through sustained bipartisan engagement on this issue.

The North Korean defectors play the leading role in this defense. They are the best, the most credible, witnesses for human dignity and what is at stake between North Korean nuclear blackmail and the free world. They are witnesses that we need to hear - in Congress, and in South Korea.

They are agents of change, strengthening and educating the hearts of the people of North Korea. That's why our government should help, and South Korea should help, amplify their words into the North. As one defector testified, "what the North Korean regime fears most...is outside information."

I ask unanimous consent that these written statements of five North Korean defectors be entered into the hearing record. These have been distributed to all members.