

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing

on

North Korean Human Rights Movement:
Current Prospects and Obstacles

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Statement of Bae Gwang Min

Operation Truth and the Right to Information for North Koreans
Free North Korea Radio

Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members, my name is Bae Gwang Min, and I am responsible at Free North Korea Radio for what is known as “Operation Truth,” which delivers outside information, basic necessities, and messages of freedom to the people of North Korea.

Today, I would like to explain why these efforts to bring truth and hope to the North Korean people matter, and how such activities are being restricted within the Republic of Korea.

Operation Truth is not simply an effort to send material goods. It is an effort to deliver truth, food, hope, and the Gospel to people isolated under the North Korean regime’s extreme blockade on information. Free North Korea Radio, the U.S.-based Defense Forum Foundation, and networks affiliated with the North Korea Freedom Coalition have publicly introduced these activities. The items delivered include rice, Bibles, USB drives, leaflets, radios, medicine, and at times even one-dollar U.S. bills. The means of delivery are not limited to one method. By sea, rice bottles or containers are set adrift on the currents. By air, leaflets and digital storage devices are sent by balloon. Ganghwa Island, which is part of Ganghwa County in Incheon Metropolitan City, has been one of the representative locations where such operations have been carried out on a continuing basis.

I came to feel the meaning of this work even more deeply when I heard the story of Mr. Kim I Hyeok, one of nine family members from South Hwanghae Province who defected across the Yellow Sea in May 2023. The rice bottles sent by sea from Ganghwa Island drift to the coast of South Hwanghae Province, and Mr. Kim and

his wife said that they had encountered such rice bottles from childhood into adulthood. In school, they were taught that these were “propaganda materials sent by bad reactionaries.” But to them, the rice bottles felt like proof that someone had not forgotten them, a symbol of hope like a gift sent from heaven. They also said that, as adults, those rice bottles came to them as a clear signal that “the outside world had not forgotten us,” and that this became one of the reasons they decided to choose freedom.

This case is profoundly important. For the people of North Korea, outside information is not merely a matter of curiosity. It is what opens the door to independent thought and provides a path toward recognizing the lies of the regime. At times, one bottle of rice, one radio, or one USB drive can change a person’s life and alter the future of an entire family.

Operation Truth has continued even in recent years. Between 2024 and 2025, the Defense Forum Foundation, working together with North Korean defectors in the Republic of Korea, delivered leaflets, Bibles, shortwave radios, rice, medicine, USB drives, SD card duplicators, and one-dollar U.S. bills to the people of North Korea. Even based only on publicly reported figures during that period, 140,000 leaflets, more than 1,000 USB drives, more than 1,430 pounds of rice, 200 Bibles, and 200 one-dollar bills were delivered. On a cumulative basis, the totals exceed 3 tons of rice, 1,760 Bibles, 1,100 shortwave radios, more than 10,360 flash drives, and more than 450,000 leaflets sent into North Korea.

In particular, in December 2024 and January and March 2025, Operation Truth was carried out around Ganghwa Island and Seokmodo through water-balloon operations, rice-bottle deliveries, and leaflet launches. On December 16, 2024, 50,000 leaflets, 800 USB drives, 300 kilograms of rice, and 250 packages of ramen were delivered from Ganghwa Island. The following day, from Seokmodo, rice bottles were sent containing 180 kilograms of rice, 200 USB drives, 5 SD card duplicators, 200 Bibles, and 200 one-dollar U.S. bills. In January 2025, 90,000 leaflets and flash drives were sent from Ganghwa Island by balloon, and GPS tracking confirmed that some reached areas near Kaesong. In March 2025, water-balloon operations continued, carrying rice, Choco Pies, ramen, and flash drives.

However, in the Republic of Korea, these activities have instead been continuously suppressed through law and administrative power.

In December 2020, the Moon Jae-in administration amended the Inter-Korean Relations Development Act to ban the sending of anti-North Korea leaflets and

goods, providing for penalties of up to three years' imprisonment or a fine of up to 30 million won for violations. This law took effect on March 30, 2021. In particular, because this legislation was pursued in earnest immediately after Kim Yo Jong issued a statement on June 4, 2020, criticizing anti-North Korea leaflets and effectively telling the South Korean government to "make a law if necessary," criticism was especially strong in South Korea, where many called it the "Kim Yo Jong order law." The government justified the measure in the name of protecting residents in border regions and reducing military tensions, but many North Korean human rights activists and civil society organizations saw it as a step that, in practical terms, responded to the demands of the North Korean regime while simultaneously restricting the freedom of expression of South Korean citizens and the North Korean people's right of access to information. In fact, based on this law, even the legal registration of North Korean defector organizations that had been sending such leaflets was revoked, resulting in the institutional blocking of the activity itself.

During the Yoon Suk Yeol administration, that blanket prohibition established under the Moon government clearly began to be dismantled. In September 2023, the Constitutional Court ruled the relevant provision unconstitutional on the grounds that it excessively restricted freedom of expression, and afterward the central government stated that it would respect the spirit of that ruling. The Ministry of Unification also stated in 2024 that it would no longer make any separate request for restraint regarding the sending of anti-North Korea leaflets. At that time, the government and the police maintained that there was no clear legal basis to block such launches across the board, and in practice leaflet launches did not automatically lead to prosecution or criminal punishment. In addition, with respect to organizations whose legal registration had previously been revoked, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, finding that the cancellation of their registration was improper. In other words, under the Yoon administration, leaflet and material-delivery activities toward North Korea were gradually moving toward normalization, and the police were not engaged in a sweeping crackdown. To be sure, beginning in the fall of 2024, there were cases in places such as Paju and Ganghwa in which local governments issued administrative orders and blocked operations on the ground, but these were closer to exceptional and localized cases led by local authorities rather than the basic posture of the central government.

However, after the launch of the Lee Jae-myung administration, the situation changed sharply once again. In June 2025, the Ministry of Unification strongly requested an end to anti-North Korea leaflet launches, effectively reversing its previous position, and on June 10 and June 14, President Lee Jae-myung instructed

the relevant ministries to prepare preventive measures and post-incident punishment measures. This shows that, after the Constitutional Court's ruling made a direct legal ban of the previous kind more difficult, the government shifted toward recreating the same effect indirectly through administrative orders and follow-up legislation.

These changes became even more visible on the ground in border areas. Administrative measures such as the designation of danger zones and restrictions on access were greatly strengthened, and in Ganghwa an additional approximately 100 police officers were deployed to conduct constant patrols and vehicle inspections. According to testimony from individuals familiar with the field, there were even reports of internal encouragement within the police that officers who caught those engaged in sending materials to North Korea could be eligible for a one-rank special promotion. These measures go beyond simple management. In practice, they function as a powerful deterrence system that suppresses the activity itself.

The enforcement by local governments was also very direct. Gyeonggi Province designated Gimpo, Paju, and Yeoncheon as danger zones and then extended that designation virtually indefinitely. Ganghwa County likewise designated the entire county as a danger zone and banned the launching of anti-North Korea leaflets and similar items. At the sites, even banners were posted bearing the words: "Report suspected launches to 112; reward provided." According to local residents who had cooperated with these activities, even now many residents remain in an extremely tense state, and there is a very strong atmosphere of actively reporting anyone who attempts to carry out such deliveries to North Korea. In fact, on Ganghwa Island, bridge inspections, constant patrols, and surveillance activities have all been visibly strengthened.

At the same time, the government also pursued follow-up legislation. In the second half of 2025, through revisions to the Aviation Safety Act and the Police Officers' Duties Execution Act, it restricted the operation of unmanned free balloons and established a legal basis for the police to issue prior warnings and intervene. This can be understood as the creation of a new legal structure through which North-bound balloon launches and deliveries of materials can once again be restricted and punished under law. The government has explained these measures as steps intended to "prevent recurrence."

But in practical terms, I believe that the direct prohibition structure which the Constitutional Court struck down as unconstitutional is now being restored and strengthened through administrative control and indirect legislation.

This reality does not stop at a chilling effect. It has led to actual arrests and criminal investigations. In the early morning of June 27, 2025, at Mangwoldondae in Ganghwa County, Incheon, six Americans were detained by police while attempting to float approximately 1,300 PET bottles containing rice, one-dollar U.S. bills, and Bibles toward North Korea. This case is a representative example showing that actual arrests and criminal charges are taking place in the field. In addition, the Northern Gyeonggi Police Agency stated that it had arrested a North Korean defector in June 2025 in connection with a leaflet launch toward North Korea, and it announced that dozens of related cases had been received, with some already referred onward and others still under investigation.

Mr. Chairman and Members, the people of North Korea cannot speak freely, cannot listen freely, and cannot know freely. To deliver outside information and messages of hope to such people is not merely a political act. It is an effort to restore human dignity and freedom.

I hope that freedom of expression will once again be fully guaranteed. I also hope that people who still have family members in North Korea will not be blocked from at least sending those families messages of truth and hope. Telling the truth to the people of North Korea is not an act that heightens tensions. Rather, it is an act that breaks down North Korea's lies and oppression and helps prepare the way for a free future. Thank you.

For further information contact Suzanne Scholte at Suzanne@defenseforumfoundation.org (English) or johnnypark@defenseforumfoundation.org (Korean)