

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing

on

North Korean Human Rights Movement:
Current Prospects and Obstacles

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Statement of Park Sang Hak

The Role of Leaflets in Advancing Freedom and
Human Rights in North Korea
Fighters for a Free North Korea

I was born in Hyesan, Yanggang Province, in North Korea. I defected in 1999 and entered the Republic of Korea in 2000. I currently serve as the head of Fighters for a Free North Korea, where I continue to carry out North Korean human rights work, including the sending of leaflets into North Korea. In this testimony, I would like to explain that North Korea-bound leaflets are an important means of conveying the reality of the outside world and the value of freedom to the North Korean people; why the North Korean regime sees them as a threat to its system and therefore seeks to control them so harshly; and the reality and problems of the restrictions placed on these activities within South Korea. I also wish to make clear that efforts to protect the North Korean people's right to know and access to information must continue to be guaranteed regardless of the political circumstances.

1. What Kind of Place Is North Korea, and Why Did I Defect?

North Korea is a country ruled by a three-generation hereditary dictatorship passed down from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong Un. The North Korean regime has long portrayed itself as a "paradise for the people," but the North Korea I personally experienced was a society in which human dignity and freedom were thoroughly suppressed.

In North Korea, the population is subjected from childhood to strict control through an organizational system that runs from the Korean Children's Union to the Socialist Patriotic Youth League and then to the Workers' Party. People are forced to monitor and restrain one another, and they are required to show absolute

loyalty to the Supreme Leader. Anyone who questions or departs from this system is labeled a counterrevolutionary or a traitor and faces severe punishment.

In North Korea, a starving resident may be sent to a political prison camp simply for raising the issue of food distribution. Others may be publicly executed for criticizing the regime after learning the truth about South Korea. Even those who acted merely to survive under extreme malnutrition could become targets for execution.

During the period from 1994 to 1998, which North Korea calls the “Arduous March,” countless people died of hunger. My own family witnessed that tragedy firsthand, and in 1999, at the urging of my father, who was overseas, I crossed the Amnok River and defected. My defection was not simply a personal choice to migrate. It was an unavoidable decision made in order to survive and preserve my dignity as a human being.

2. The Meaning and Necessity of North Korea-Bound Leaflets

For many years, I have carried out leaflet operations that send information into North Korea using large balloons and other means. The purpose of these efforts is to expose the reality of the Kim family’s hereditary dictatorship, to tell North Koreans about the reality of South Korea, where freedom, human rights, democracy, and public welfare are alive, and to help North Korean residents encounter the truth of the outside world and develop, on their own, a desire for freedom.

This work began in 2005, and over the past twenty years, tens of millions of leaflets have been sent into North Korea. This flow of information is an important channel through which North Korean residents learn the realities and truths of the outside world and come to see their own circumstances in a new light. In fact, the inflow of outside information has had a significant effect on changes in public awareness and on people’s decisions to defect.

The Kim Jong Un regime regards this kind of information inflow as a grave threat to the maintenance of its system. On June 16, 2020, when North Korea blew up the Inter-Korean Liaison Office in Kaesong, it cited anti-North Korea leaflets as one of its justifications. I myself have also been the target of two death threats and public intimidation. This shows that North Korea-bound leaflets are not merely printed materials. They are a means of delivering truth that the North Korean regime genuinely fears.

3. The Limits and Contradictions of Appeasement Toward North Korea

South Korea's so-called conciliatory policy toward North Korea, especially the past Sunshine Policy, outwardly promoted peace and reconciliation, but in practice it produced results that benefited the survival of the North Korean regime more than the North Korean people themselves. In the process, the issues of the North Korean people's freedom and human rights were pushed aside, while the regime gained time and resources to preserve itself.

Within a structure in which messages of hope and change that should have reached the North Korean people were instead used in ways that prolonged the life of the dictatorship, North Korea was able to continue developing its nuclear weapons and missiles. In the end, this approach had the effect not of materially improving the lives of the North Korean people, but of helping to prolong the Kim family's hereditary dictatorship.

I have fought against the Kim family dictatorship for the freedom and liberation of the North Korean people. Yet in that process, I have repeatedly experienced restrictions and criminal punishment not only from the North Korean regime but also within South Korea. The fact that efforts to deliver truth in resistance to North Korea's dictatorship can also be restricted in a free and democratic society reveals the structural contradiction of the current North Korea policy. The issue of North Korean human rights and the inflow of information must not be treated as matters of political convenience. They must be addressed as matters of principle—of freedom and human rights.

4. Kim Jong Un's Hereditary Strategy and Policy Toward South Korea

Kim Jong Un has effectively discarded even the existing discourse of unification and has, by his own choice, blocked the possibility of any ethnic solidarity between North and South Korea. He defines the Republic of Korea as the most hostile state and an eternal enemy, and he has redefined inter-Korean relations not as a matter of reconciliation and cooperation, but as one of hostility and rupture.

Moreover, through his recent political actions, he has suggested the possibility of a fourth hereditary succession through his daughter, Kim Ju Ae. This shows that the North Korean system is oriented not toward change or reform, but toward the perpetuation of hereditary dictatorship.

Kim Jong Un will not give up nuclear weapons and missiles so long as they are necessary to preserve his hereditary system. At the same time, he will try to prevent the North Korean people from recognizing a free and prosperous South

Korea as an object of hope. The moment North Koreans come to know the reality of South Korea and begin to dream of freedom, the legitimacy of the hereditary dictatorship cannot help but be fundamentally shaken.

In the end, Kim Jong Un's policy toward South Korea should be understood as a strategy to strengthen internal control and prolong hereditary dictatorship through separation, hostility, and threats. It is not a policy for peace or reunification on the Korean Peninsula, but a political choice for regime preservation.

Conclusion

A system built on dictatorship and totalitarianism, violence and rule by fear, can never endure forever. North Korea is no exception. The Kim Jong Un regime seeks to preserve itself through nuclear weapons and missiles, but it cannot completely block the truth, nor can it suppress forever the human desire for freedom.

The people of North Korea long for freedom even in silence. I therefore urge the U.S. Congress and the international community to stand with the North Korean people, to continue raising the issue of North Korean human rights, and to actively support the inflow of outside information and the spread of truth. What the people of North Korea need is not a compromise that prolongs dictatorship, but real solidarity that can restore freedom, truth, and human dignity.

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