

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing

on

North Korean Human Rights Movement: Current Prospects and Obstacles

April 28, 2026, 12:30 pm

2118 Rayburn HOB

Statement of Suzanne Scholte

Chairman

North Korea Freedom Coalition

Thank you to Congressmen Chris Smith and James McGovern and the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for hosting this hearing during our annual North Korea Freedom Week to assess the current North Korea Human Rights Movement. I can state emphatically that we are facing the most challenging time in the history of this movement since we first began hosting defectors here on Capitol Hill in the late 1990s. There are two main reasons for this: first, we have failed for decades to listen to the voices of those who understand the Kim family dictatorship better than any of us: those who have escaped this brutal regime. When North Korea's highest-ranking defector, Hwang Jang yop, defected in 1997, he told us: North Korea will NEVER give up their nuclear weapons as the dictatorship will only use negotiations to extract concessions, because it only cares about its own survival, not its citizens. But Hwang said and thousands of North Koreans since have said this very same thing: the dictatorship has an Achilles' heel: human rights. When North Koreans understand their God given rights – that they have value and meaning and were not born to be the Kim family's slaves, everything changes.

Second, we now have an administration in the Republic of Korea that is abandoning its constitutional obligations in multiple ways to ensure the Kim dictatorship continues. It is such a grave a time for us right now that we have painfully joked that as we mark the 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual North Korea Freedom Week will we need to now establish a South Korea Freedom Week? No one on Earth has a greater moral and constitutional responsibility than the president of the Republic of

Korea, Lee Jae Myung, to uphold the rights of the Korean people whether born North or South of the DMZ. President Lee has abandoned the people of North Korea and deprived his own citizens in South Korea of their constitutional rights.

It is important to note that the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission had a hearing in April 2021 because of grave concerns of the state of civil and political rights in the Republic of Korea during the Moon Jae-in administration. The situation today under the Lee Jae Myung administration is even worse. For the first time the Republic of Korea has ended all its radio broadcasting to North Korea and for the first time the Republic of Korea has ended all support for the North Korean defector organizations. It is vigorously enforcing an anti-leafletting law that was declared unconstitutional. The current government is depriving its own citizens of the rights they have under the Republic of Korea's constitution AND it is violating its obligations as signatories to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as Article 19 states *“everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression, this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.”*

For my testimony today I am going to quote from the testimonies that are being submitted by members of our North Korea Freedom Week delegation to underscore these points.

**First, Hu Kang Il, Chairman of the North Korea Democratization Committee** has submitted testimony entitled “Thirty Years of North Korean Defector History and the Activities of North Korean Defector Human Rights Organizations” that traces the progress and setbacks of the activities of the North Korean defectors in South Korea since this Committee was established by Hwang Jang yop. According to Hu, the Lee administration is prioritizing “de-escalation and peaceful coexistence over the freedom and human rights of the North Korean people. But true peace on the Korean Peninsula cannot be achieved while turning away from the freedom and human rights of the North Korean people.”

Hu express deep concern that punishment against those who seek to send information to North Korea has intensified and that the Ministry of Unification is even changing the term used to describe North Korean defectors to weaken its

meaning. “The term ‘North Korean defectors’ is not merely a label. It is an expression that contains the political and legal identity of people who escaped North Korea’s oppression in search of freedom. In light of Article 3 of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, it is also connected to the principle that residents who escape from North Korea must be protected as citizens of the Republic of Korea.”

“The Republic of Korea now stands at an important crossroads. This is the moment to decide whether it will stand firmly on the principles of liberal democracy, or whether it will weaken the value of freedom...through compromise and appeasement toward the North Korean dictatorship. Stability and peace on the Korean Peninsula can never be realized so long as Kim Jong Un’s nuclear weapons, missiles, and politics of terror remain in place. True peace is possible not through silence and submission, but only through the foundation of freedom, human rights, truth, and principle. Today, as one of the North Korean defectors who risked his life to find freedom, I say this clearly: North Korean defectors are people who know better than anyone the value of freedom. We are prepared to risk our lives again in order to defend the freedom we risked our lives to obtain. The North Korea Democratization Committee, Free North Korea Radio, Fighters for a Free North Korea, and other defector-led North Korean human rights organizations will continue to fight with unwavering resolve for the freedom and human rights of the North Korean people...I urge the United States, which has led the free world, to give greater attention to this struggle for the freedom and liberation of the North Korean people...and provide political, diplomatic, and moral support so that defector-led North Korean human rights organizations can carry out meaningful work on the ground.”

Last September, we lost our dear partner, Kim Seong Min, who founded Free North Korea Radio, but I am proud to introduce testimony entitled “Truth, Information and Freedom in North Korea” from the woman he named to lead this award-winning radio station, **Kim Ji Young, the president of Free North Korea Radio**. She was also selected by the North Korean defectors to chair the delegation for this North Korean Freedom Week. “I was thirteen years old when I first secretly listened to an outside radio broadcast. In North Korea, listening to foreign broadcasts is not simply an illegal act. It is a dangerous choice that puts not only

one's own safety at risk, but the fate of one's entire family as well. If discovered, the punishment does not end with the individual; it can extend to the whole family. And yet I listened. The reason was clear. It was because there was truth in those broadcasts—truth that could never be heard in North Korea. There were stories of a world in which human beings could live with dignity, a society in which people could speak freely, the possibility that one could change one's future through effort, and the idea that human dignity is worthy of respect. To me, that small voice coming through the radio was not merely information. It was the first window through which I encountered freedom and hope.

“From that day on, my life changed. Information awakened me. It made me ask questions. And in the end, it led me toward freedom. I can say clearly before you today: 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. I myself am living proof of that...we know what the North Korean regime fears most. It is not guns; it is not sanctions. It is outside information.”

Regarding the Lee administration's current policy of ending all its radio broadcasting, Kim said, “Silence and concession only create more room for dictatorship, and in that process, it is the people of North Korea who pay the highest price.”

Kim respectfully asks that support for delivering outside information to North Korea be strengthened, not stopped because “true peace is not built on silence, it is only possible on the foundation of truth, freedom and the people's right to know.”

I am also submitting testimony entitled “The Role of Leaflets in Advancing Freedom and Human Rights in North Korea” from the North Korean defector most associated with the balloon launches, **Park Sang Hak, Head of Fighters for a Free North Korea**. “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. 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 compromise that prolongs dictatorship, but real solidarity that can restore freedom, truth, and human dignity.”

In addition to financing the broadcast of Free North Korea Radio, my Foundation, the Defense Forum Foundation launched another project following the same model as FNKR: 100% financed by freedom loving people and 100% conducted by North Korean defectors called Operation Truth. Our goal was to reach the people of North Korea by land, by sea and by air! I am pleased to submit testimony from Bae Gwang Min of Free North Korea Radio who has been leading these efforts entitled, “Operation Truth and the Right to Information for North Koreans.”

“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 U.S. one-dollar 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 conducted 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’.”

Bae describes in his testimony the measures that the Lee administration has taken to stop the delivery of humanitarian aid hope and truth to North Korea: dispatching police officers to the sites where these launches took place and labeling these sites danger zones, giving promotions to police who caught those trying to carry out operation truth AND providing rewards to citizens who turn people in, which sounds a lot like North Korea to me.

Bae said for the areas where Operation Truth was being conducted successfully like Ganghwa Island, bridge inspections, constant patrols, and surveillance activities have all been visibly strengthened. According to Bae: “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.”

Finally, I am also submitting information from **Choi Jeong Hun Commander of the North Korea People’s Liberation Front** regarding the urgent situation facing two North Koreans who are now POWs in Ukraine. (On the Risk of Forced Repatriation of North Korean Prisoners of War and the Need for Humanitarian Protection.”) According to Choi, “North Korean troops were sent to the front under an extremely closed and coercive system, having been subjected to intense ideological control. Testimony from the Ukrainian side indicates that these soldiers

charged forward in battle without retreat, even under severe danger, resulting in devastating casualties. Some reports estimate that the number of North Korean troops killed or wounded has exceeded 7,000...As a former North Korean soldier and as someone who has personally experienced the North Korean system, I must state clearly that these two young men must not be sent back to (North Korea) where punishment and retaliation await them. I respectfully urge the U.S. Congress and the international community to play a responsible role so that they may begin new lives in an environment where freedom and safety are guaranteed.” Choi hopes that these POWs can be treated humanely citing the Geneva Convention as their fate if returned to North Korea is certain torture and death especially as they have both expressed the desire to resettle in South Korea.

I raise this situation because North Koreans’ greatest advocate should be their President who under the Republic of Korea constitution is Lee Jae Myung. Today, is the most challenging time in the history of the North Korea human rights movement because we have come from the ignorance and indifference of the late 1990s and early 2000s, when people simply did not first believe the horrific stories being told by the first escapees to open hostility to their plight.

All through my years of working for North Korea human rights, I always had someone -- until Lee Jae Myung became President -- that I could call at the Embassy of the Republic of Korea no matter what time of day, no matter what day of the week if a North Korean was in danger. Working closely with the Republic of Korea I was able to rescue hundreds of North Koreans including since the COVID pandemic: a family of four detained in China in danger of repatriation, two women who were victims of trafficking and eight fishermen detained in Russia. One of those fishermen is here today as a member of the North Korea Freedom Week delegation. The Republic of Korea has done an amazing and impressive job of helping rescue and resettle close to 40,000 North Korea refugees. We implore the Republic of Korea to become an advocate once again for those born North of the DMZ and to restore the constitutional rights of all those living South of the DMZ.

The theme of this year’s North Korea Freedom Week is “TRUTH will set them FREE and NORTH KOREANS are leading the way.” I thank the U.S. Congress for always showing bipartisan concern and compassion for the North Korean people, and I hope that this hearing will help lead to raising the consciousness of the Lee administration to invest in our greatest resource: North Korea escapees whose fervent desire is to bring freedom to their homeland and peaceful unification.

As Kim Seong Min wrote in his poetry book, MEMOIRS OF A SOLDIER,  
published just before he died:

*FREEDOM*

*Though it is mine by right,  
It was never ours from birth.*

*Not a thing sold in any market,  
Yet taken from our parents.*

*Without it, we may breathe,  
But we are already dead.*

*Freedom-  
Breathe itself,  
The worth of being-  
It is our vow  
To carry it  
Back to our homeland.*

##