



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

**South Korea's Refugee Policy in the Yoon Administration:
A New Openness to International Standards?**

**Friday, June 23, 2022
9:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.
Virtual via Cisco WebEx**

Rep. Christopher H. Smith

Excerpt of Remarks

I'd like to begin by thanking all our witnesses for joining us today as we look at the Republic of Korea's refugee policy and the new openness which the recently-inaugurated Administration of President Yoon appears to be signaling.

It is appropriate that we hold such a hearing during World Refugee Week, when we are reminded of a particular fundamental principle of human rights – that those who are persecuted on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion should be able to seek safety and freedom among the world's leading democracies.

Among those leading democracies is South Korea, which in the course of my own lifetime has emerged from a war-torn nation dependent on foreign assistance to a cultural and economic force to be reckoned with – an influence that is known as “the Korean wave,” or “*Hallyu*” in Korean.

Culturally, South Korea has had a massive impact on pop music, film, and online gaming. South Korea’s boy band BTS alone is a global phenomenon estimated to bring more than [USD 3.6 billion](#) into the South Korean economy annually.

Korean movies have won awards at the Oscars and Cannes Film Festival, while K-dramas have become a pop culture sensation worldwide, with even my wife and I also enjoying watching K dramas on Netflix.

Combined with its economic prowess, South Korea has become a soft power leader. However, true soft power and leadership entail more than just leading in terms of economic growth and cultural influence. It is demonstrated, for example, when oppressed people look to a nation as a place of refuge, and that nation responds by embracing the vulnerable and the persecuted.

Today, South Korea is at a crossroads.

In 1992, South Korea acceded to the 1951 Refugee Convention, along with its 1967 protocol, and it was also the first Asian nation to enact legislation on refugees.

Despite this, it has a very low rate of approval of asylum claims, dipping [below 1 percent in 2020](#), which marked the lowest figure since the country began to compile relevant data in 1994.

Separate and apart from refugees, the number of North Korean escapees reaching South Korea in 2020 also [dropped sharply](#) – lower than any time in the previous two decades. South Korea’s average refugee approval rate for the last five years is also [less than 1.5%](#), a striking contrast to Western OECD countries, whose acceptance rates in 2020 ranged from a low of 6% in Spain to a high of 74% in Germany, which received over 102,000 applications. The United States, by comparison, accepted 26% of 87,000 plus applicants.

Whether it is a group of Chinese Christians who fled religious persecution, democratic activists who fled a military dictatorship in Burma, or the escapees from the repressive communist regime in North Korea – all share a common desire for safety and freedom.

Until recently, South Korea has been ambivalent, if not hostile, to providing a majority of them with such refuge – indeed, in recent years, it appeared to

discourage even those Koreans who fled the repression of Communist North Korea from seeking refuge in the South. Our first witness, Mr. Jong-chul Kim, will provide a very clear-eyed assessment of the obstacles facing refugees in Korea.

Against this backdrop, the new Administration of President Yoon, who was inaugurated a little over a month ago, has raised expectations that a self-confident Korea is willing to embrace a larger soft-power role with regard to refugees.

On the campaign trail, then-candidate Yoon spoke about the need for “adhering to international refugee protection law and principles.” In his inaugural address before the National Assembly in Seoul he articulated a commitment to “actively protect and promote universal values and international norms that are based in freedom and human rights.”

He also emphasized [Koreans’ role](#) as “global citizens,” calling for Korea to assume a “greater role in expanding freedom and human rights not just for ourselves but also for others.”

With his repeated emphasis on “freedom,” President Yoon also struck a chord among those who saw the previous administration as being very soft towards the Communist North. President Yoon signaled a greater openness towards those who fled Communist oppression seeking a new life in the South.

Two of our witnesses, Ethan Shin and Suzanne Scholte, will address the situation of North Korean defectors and the prospects of greater acceptance of them.

Interestingly, among those attending President Yoon's inaugural reception were a group of Afghans who had worked alongside Korean doctors in Afghanistan before that country fell to the Taliban.

One of our witnesses, Dr. Moon Jun Sohn, former head of Korea Hospital in Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan, will share his experience working alongside Afghani colleagues, and his role in ensuring that they were not left behind when Kabul fell to the Taliban last summer.

Under "Operation Miracle," South Korea, with the help of the US, successfully rescued about four hundred Afghan colleagues and their family members, taking to heart the principle "leave no one behind" – something I wish our Administration had similarly taken to heart as we approach the shameful one-year anniversary of our withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Interestingly, these Afghans were designated as "special contributors" rather than refugees – sidestepping and leaving further room for discussion and debate within Korea about refugees.

Still, South Korea's willingness to rescue them against all odds and the subsequent NGO founded explicitly to help resettle Afghan friends in South Korea, is a promising sign of a generous and open Korea.

Hence why I perceive that Korea seems to be at a crossroads.

Though there is trepidation, there is also a feeling of optimism, nonetheless, that Korea is about to embrace its role a true global leader, and provide an example not just for Asia, but for the rest of the world.

With that, thank you, and I look forward to hearing your testimony, after the remarks of my friend and colleague, co-chair McGovern.