

Statement of Carl Gershman, President, National Endowment for Democracy

Before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

North Korea

September 23, 2010

Chairman McGovern, Chairman Wolf, and Members of the Commission:

Thank you for inviting me to testify on the new developments in the struggle for human rights in North Korea, including the increase in the number of defectors from North Korea now living in South Korea. As you are aware, the Endowment is a nonprofit, bipartisan grant-making organization created in 1983 to strengthen democratic institutions around the world through non-governmental efforts. With its annual Congressional appropriation, the Endowment makes over a thousand grants each year to assist pro-democracy groups in Africa, Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, the Middle East, and Latin America.

The Endowment grants program for North Korea, started in 1998, has grown beyond anything that we could have imagined at the time, involving support not just for human rights advocacy and documentation (including ten annual international human rights conferences), but also for broadcasting news and information into North Korea by four independent radios; publishing a quarterly magazine, *Imjingang*, that gathers information from within North Korea on culture, economics, politics, and other developments and circulates it back inside; and helping defector networks of intellectuals and former military officials establish channels of communication with counterparts inside North Korea to link them for the first time to the world outside. Over the last ten years, there have been many new developments that affect the struggle for human rights in North Korea, including the growing international awareness of the issue. But none has been more important, in my view, than the steady growth in the number of defectors from North Korea living in South Korea.

Just a decade ago there were virtually no defectors at all, which is one of the reasons North Korea was so isolated from the outside world and so little was known about it. North Korea remains a tightly controlled totalitarian system, the most closed society in the entire world. The North Korean Gulag is still in place, as is the apartheid-like system of hereditary political castes known as Songbun; and there are still famine-like conditions in Hwanghae province, which used to be called the country's rice bowl. The extremely limited reforms decriminalizing some market activities that the regime introduced in July 2002 were reversed in October 2005, when the regime banned the sale of grain on the market and tried to restart the Public Distribution

System. The assault on private markets, which the regime views as a threat to its total control of the society, was subsequently intensified when all able-bodied men, and women below the age of 40, were banned from market trading; and last November when the regime imposed a currency exchange intended to abolish markets entirely. The regime, facing widespread anger and dissatisfaction after the currency revaluation, was forced to roll-back some components of this initiative. In March, a senior official in charge of this policy was reportedly executed for his role in the failed initiative. Recently, it was reported that Park Pong-ju, a former prime minister who had been previously banished for championing market-oriented economic policies, has been reinstated in the government.

The regime's effort to restore its total control of the society is ultimately futile. The markets are a coping mechanism by an utterly destitute population, and trying to destroy them will only worsen the already catastrophic conditions in North Korea and widen the cleavage between the elite and the people. A recent report by Hyeong Jung Park of the Korea Institute for National Unification emphasizes that since the currency exchange is understood by the people to be a decision imposed by the central government, it could also "lead to an historic turning point where conscious resistance against the regime becomes stronger in the mid-to-long term." While it is not clear when that turning point will be reached, there is no doubt that the totalitarian system in North Korea is inexorably eroding and is not the closed monolith that it used to be. This provides the context for our efforts in the period ahead to support human rights, development and democracy in North Korea.

There are some 20,000 defectors in South Korea today, a substantial and steadily growing population, many of them still in their twenties and even younger, who have the potential to open up and change North Korea in ways that are highly effective, if not yet well understood or adequately supported by South Korea and the international community. Already these defectors have established NGOs of various kinds, as I mentioned before, among them radio broadcasting operations, a magazine circulated in North Korea based on information gathered from inside the country; and even an incipient think tank connected to internal networks that is trying to encourage the development of a North Korean civil society.

These defectors serve three vital functions. First, they offer a way to reach into North Korea, both informally by phoning and sending remittances to family members, and more formally through the defector networks already noted that enable intellectuals and former military officials to develop channels of communication with counterparts inside. Second, they are what are sometimes called a "bridge population," an exile community that links their oppressed homeland with their country of residence, giving voice to the voiceless society left behind and interpreting that society to the larger world. And third, as a population acculturated to the South but with roots in the North, the defector community is an invaluable resource that can facilitate the

eventual integration of the now destitute, isolated and closed society of North Korea into a dynamic, open and united Korean peninsula.

This is especially true of the so-called 1.5 generation of young defectors. They are still malleable and open to new ideas. They want to learn how people in South Korea and other countries respect and defend human rights and democracy, how political parties organize and campaign, how workers fight for their rights and entrepreneurs compete in the marketplace, how journalists report the news and NGOs educate, defend and give voice to civil society. And they want the knowledge and professional skills they will need to become productive and participating citizens. They are, in other words, a resource that needs to be developed by investing in their education and training, with the goal of producing what Andrei Lankov, the Russian scholar who himself grew up in a communist society, calls “the first generation of modern North Korean professionals.” Having such a core of proficient and highly motivated professionals will be an indispensable asset when the time for the rebuilding of North Korea comes, as someday it surely will. It is extremely important, therefore, that their potential role be factored into the unification process proposed by President Lee Myung-bak, as well as into the assistance programs of the U.S., Canada, and other democracies.

The intellectual and operational capacity that is developing among North Korean defectors deserves recognition as a significant new asset in the struggle for human rights in North Korea. There are many ways this new capacity can be nurtured and supported. For example, as the defectors expand their networks inside North Korea, enabling them to gather more information about the society, they will need help in developing their analytical and reporting capabilities so that they can use this information effectively to promote change. Sponsoring internships for the defectors with NGOs in new democracies can be a way to satisfy their great hunger to learn more about the experience others have had in trying to build democracy after dictatorship. Another priority is helping defectors develop their writing and communication skills.

International democracy assistance organizations are beginning to explore new ways to become involved. For example, the Center for International Private Enterprise, one of the NED’s four core institutes, is planning to study the informal markets in North Korea, called Jangmadang, to learn how they function and how the participants in such markets can be given tailored educational materials on entrepreneurship and free markets. The National Democratic Institute, another NED core group, is hoping to mentor defector activists by sharing with them the lessons it has learned in scores of countries undergoing democratic transition. The European Union is providing support to defector radio broadcasting through Reporters without Borders, and a number of European countries are showing a new interest in providing help. On October 21, the Endowment, in cooperation with our long-time grantee, NKnet, will be hosting a conference

examining ways to improve human rights and democracy programs in North Korea, including a discussion about information flow and the role of defectors. I might note that NED is also linking groups from around the world, such as the National Human Rights Commission of Korea and the U.S. Holocaust Museum, to share knowledge and advance common goals in the struggle for democracy.

I believe that there are three core tasks before us. The first is to expand and diversify the kind of programs already underway, many with NED support, in the areas of human rights advocacy and documentation, broadcasting and communications, and capacity building for young defectors and others from North Korea. Second, governments and non-governmental organizations that provide humanitarian and development assistance inside North Korea should try, to the extent that they can, to foster the learning of problem-solving skills as part of programs that provide medicines and medical equipment and train North Korean health workers, or that focus on increasing crop production or countering land erosion and deforestation. Finally, it is important to begin to treat the steadily growing community of North Korean defectors in South Korea as a critical asset and not as an economic and social burden.

Chairman McGovern, Chairman Wolf, Members of the Commission, the defectors represent a real opportunity for advancing democracy in North Korea. These are courageous individuals who have overcome tremendous obstacles, and they need our assistance and our solidarity. Let us join together in the defense of human rights and in support of freedom the people of North Korea so desperately need.

Thank you.