



One Hundred and Fourteenth Congress

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing

North Korea's State-Sponsored Forced Labor Enterprise: Exposing the World's Human Trafficking Marketplace

Wednesday, April 29, 2015

2:30 – 4:30 PM

Opening Remarks by Co-Chairman James P. McGovern

Good afternoon.

I join my colleague and Co-Chair, Congressman Joe Pitts, in welcoming all of you to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's hearing on "North Korea's State-Sponsored Forced Labor Enterprise: Exposing the World's Human Trafficking Marketplace." I thank all of our witnesses for their presence today, and I also want to thank the staff of the Commission, especially Carson Middleton, for organizing this important hearing.

North Korea has a deplorable, perhaps unparalleled human rights record. It is a totalitarian state that tortures and imprisons tens of thousands of people, and prohibits freedom of thought and expression. The regime's apparent single-minded focus on preserving its own power comes at the cost of failing to provide for some of the most basic needs of its citizens, including food and nutrition. In part through its stringent control of engagement with the outside world, and in part because the global community has not made human rights in North Korea a priority, the country has been able to continue this horrific pattern of abuses for decades without facing any significant consequences.

Last year, for the first time, the United Nations conducted an official inquiry into North Korea's human rights situation. In February 2014, the UN Commission of Inquiry concluded that the regime's actions amounted to crimes against humanity punishable under international law and called for urgent action by the global community. Since then, international pressure has been growing. The UN Security Council, for instance, placed North Korea's human rights record on its agenda for the first time. There is no doubt that significant challenges lie ahead, but a positive step has been taken towards stopping North Korea's widespread and systematic abuses.

Today we would like to build on this momentum by examining North Korea's provision of labor to foreign governments and transnational corporations. Although many of these jobs may initially be attractive to North Koreans eager to boost their families' incomes, more and more reports are emerging that thousands – and perhaps tens of thousands – of North Koreans are sent abroad to work in slave-like conditions. The reports indicate that dozens of countries, including China, Russia, and Qatar are receiving North Korean workers in factories and construction sites. Overseas restaurant jobs appear to be sought after by young North Korean women. But most of the workers' income is confiscated by the North Korean government as a source of much needed foreign currency. Some reports allege that the number of workers has increased rapidly in recent years, as North Korea loses other sources of foreign currency due to tightening international sanctions.

Today I look forward to learning more about the situation of North Korean workers abroad. I am eager to discuss constructive and concrete actions that Congress can take to stop exploitation and trafficking. I also hope to explore this issue as a new point of entry to engage North Korea's overall human rights situation.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.