



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

North Korea: Denuclearization Talks and Human Rights

**Thursday, September 13, 2018
2:00 – 3:30 p.m.
2255 Rayburn House Office Building**

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good afternoon, and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's hearing on North Korea: Denuclearization Talks and Human Rights. I would like to thank our expert witnesses for taking the time out of their busy schedules to come testify today. I am grateful for the important work you are doing on this topic.

The North Korean regime's unchanging pattern of systematic, egregious human rights violations is well-documented over the course of many years. The people of North Korea continue to suffer under the government's policies of arbitrary detention, torture, extrajudicial killings, human trafficking, and forced abortion. Freedom of speech, religion, the press, and assembly do not exist in North Korea. There is no independent judiciary, and citizens do not have the right choose their own government.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's (USCIRF) 2018 Annual Report states that the North Korean government treats all religions as a threat and often arrests, tortures, imprisons, and even executes those who practice their faith. All religious activity in the country is banned except for a small number of houses of worship that are fully controlled by the state.

Multiple reports describe a system of prison camps in North Korea, often portrayed as concentration camps, which currently detain roughly 100,000 political prisoners. Reports from survivors and escapees cite that starvation, disease, executions, and torture of prisoners is common to everyday life in these camps. According to the United Nations Commission of Inquiry, close to 400,000 prisoners perished while in captivity between 1982 and 2013. It is difficult to comprehend the magnitude of these numbers.

I and my staff have met with several refugees and survivors who were able to escape these horrors in North Korea, flee to the United States, and share their stories with us. I have found their endurance in suffering, and their unquenchable desire for basic universal freedoms to be both inspiring and heartbreaking.

We met with one woman who as a Christian, told us about how she often worshiped in potato cellars and prayed secretly under blankets to avoid detection. She escaped from North Korea three times. She was twice sold into sexual slavery, and twice repatriated by China back to North Korea where she was brutally tortured. Today, she is working tirelessly to advocate on behalf of those who are still suffering in similar situations.

Along with North Korea's oppression of their own people, its threats of armed conflict against the United States, and the development of its nuclear program are also well-documented. As both the security and human rights situations with North Korea become increasingly urgent, policymakers debate whether raising human rights in a security dialogue will threaten progress on reducing a direct military threat to the United States, or if the two tracks can be complimentary.

I called today's hearing to discuss how human rights can be strategic for obtaining a credible, verifiable denuclearization deal with North Korea. Incorporating human rights considerations into denuclearization talks is critically important both as a measure of good faith from a regime that has proven impossible to trust, and because a country that perpetrates crimes against humanity will only continue to breed global instability.

The security of the United States is our priority, but we can perhaps achieve this best by considering the interests and aspirations of the people of North Korea as whole, and not only those of the regime. I look forward to hearing analysis from our witnesses on this topic, and recommendations for how Congress can continue to be involved.

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