

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

**Statement of Ambassador Robert R. King**  
Former Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights

**Status of Religious Freedom in North Korea**  
**October 27, 2022**

Thank you very much for the invitation to meet with members of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom to discuss the status of religious freedom and human rights in North Korea.

I was Chief of Staff to Congressman Tom Lantos of California at the time the legislation establishing this Commission was considered in the House Foreign Affairs Committee and approved by the Congress. The legislation was signed by President Bill Clinton on October 27, 1998—24 years ago today. Thank you for the work of the commission and for the important role the commission has played and continues to play in encouraging religious liberty throughout the world, and particularly in countries like North Korea, where religious freedom is suppressed.

In its most recent on religious liberty around the world, USCIRF stated: “Religious freedom conditions in North Korea are among the worst in the world.” I fully endorse the Commission’s assessment. As the Special Envoy for North Korean human rights from 2009 to 2017, I met with the Commission and with members of the Commission staff on many occasions during that time to discuss the lack of religious freedom in North Korea.

Unfortunately, religious liberty in North Korea is not improving, and it appears to be declining, particularly since 2020. It has been increasingly difficult to get information about human rights and religious conditions inside North Korea.

**The Difficulty of Getting Information  
about Human Rights in North Korea**

The first problem is that a principal source of information about conditions in North Korea has been “defectors” or refugees from the North, most of whom have chosen to resettle in South Korea. Over the last 20 years roughly 35,000 North Koreans have settled in the South. Interviews with these new arrivals have been a very important source of information about human rights conditions in the North.

The largest annual number of refugees was in 2011 when 2,706 re-settled in the South. That number averaged 1,500 annually for the following 5 years (2012-2016). From 2017 to 2019 it was about 1,100. In 2020, when the COVID pandemic hit, Pyongyang imposed draconian

measures to close borders and limit border crossings in order to reduce contact with individuals who may have been exposed to COVID, primarily in China. This resulted in a drop to only 229 refugees reaching South Korea in 2020, and that number dropped to only 63 in 2021. In the first 9 months of this year, only 42 North Korean refugees have resettled in South Korea.

The numbers reaching the United States and Europe have always been a small portion of the number of those who went to South Korea. In the last three years the number of refugees going to the United States and Europe has also dropped. The largest number of refugees from North Korea recently admitted to United States was 12 who were admitted last year. For two or three years before that, however, there were no refugees admitted to the United States. Refugees admitted to U.S. since the adoption of the North Korean Human Rights Act in 2004 is a total of only about 200.

Another important source of information about conditions in North Korea has been foreign visitors—tourists, humanitarian aid workers, diplomats, and some businessmen. This source of anecdotal information has also pretty much ended. The few foreign visitors temporarily in North Korea are much more restricted in their ability to travel and even meet with North Koreans in Pyongyang because of COVID limitations. North Korean restrictions on contact with foreigners has been very strictly enforced.

A news story in February 2021 reported two Russian diplomats, who with their families who were returning to Russia, were required to push their belongings and children on a small rail trolley as they walked across the rail bridge over the river separating the small stretch of border between North Korea and Russia. No trains were permitted between the two countries, and no North Koreans were permitted to help the Russian diplomats leave.

Within a few weeks of the COVID shutdown in early 2020, the North Korean government arranged for a charter flight for German, French and Swiss diplomats to leave Pyongyang. Regular North Korean and other international flights were all no longer permitted. These three countries—some of the very few countries who maintained a diplomatic presence in North Korea—closed their embassies.

Foreign humanitarian aid workers have also been forced to leave. North Koreans have essentially stopped contact between foreigners and North Korean government officials. In December 2020, the International Red Cross closed its offices in Pyongyang, and most other humanitarian organizations no longer maintained a presence in the North because they have not been not permitted to carry out their humanitarian missions.

North Korea's border has always been heavily guarded, and information has always been difficult to gather, but the pandemic has created even more difficult conditions to gather information about the situation internally in the North.

### **U.S. Efforts to Encourage Religious**

## **Freedom in North Korea**

Despite the difficulty of getting information about conditions limiting religious practice in North Korea, there are a number of activities that the United States can continue to pursue to encourage religious freedom.

**First, the United States should continue to use our influence and diplomatic capacity through the United Nations to call attention to human rights abuses and limitations on religious freedom in North Korea.** The United Nations is important because North Korea seeks international legitimacy and recognition. International organizations, and particularly the United Nations, are important for North Korea. International criticism from United Nations agencies is an important instrument to push for human rights and religious freedom in North Korea.

It is important that the United States strengthened our human rights efforts at the United Nations beginning in January 2021. The United States has reengaged in participation in the UN Human Rights Council and our involvement there is important, and our full participation in the Human Rights Council in Geneva has made an important difference in pressing North Korea's human rights. This year, the Human Rights Council named a new Special Rapporteur to continue to provide reports on North Korea's human rights abuses to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva and to the UN General Assembly in New York.

In December 2021, the Security Council discussed human rights abuses in North Korea, including lack of freedom of religion, as a threat to international peace and security. The United States fully participated in that discussion, which reversed U.S. policy of the previous two years. It is important to emphasize that North Korea's violation of its citizens human rights and religious liberty is inconsistent with international practice and with North Korea's obligations as a member of the United Nations. Discussing North Korea's human rights violations in this international forum is an important means of pressing Pyongyang on human rights and religious freedom issues.

**Second, the United States should support our ally South Korea in pressing for human rights in the North.** The change in government in South Korea a few months ago has resulted in important changes in South Korea's emphasis on human rights in North Korea. Under the previous government in Seoul, human rights were set aside. South Korea backed away from participation in the United Nations efforts to support human rights in North Korea, and domestic South Korean human rights efforts were discouraged.

The new government of President Yoon Suk-yeol has taken important steps to highlight human rights in North Korea by appointing an Ambassador for North Korea human rights just two months after the new president's inauguration. South Korea has resumed active participation in UN human rights mechanisms to press the North on its human rights abuses.

In a statement to the UN Security Council, South Korea's Ambassador to the United Nations focused comments on human rights violations suffered by North Korean women refugees fleeing the country. Such actions reflect a shift in South Korea on human rights, including freedom of religion. The United States should encourage and support such actions by our South Korean ally.

**Third, the U.S. President should appoint a Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights.**

It is over five and a half years since I resigned as U.S. Special Envoy for North Korean human rights in January 2017. Former President Trump signed legislation extending the North Korea Human Rights Act in 2018, which reauthorized and called for the appointment of the Special Envoy. The Trump Administration for its full four years in office, however, failed to appoint a Special Envoy.

President Biden has taken several actions to reaffirm U.S. commitment to human rights and religious freedom in North Korea, including resuming participation in the UN Human Rights Council and emphasizing North Korea human rights. But the special envoy position still remains vacant. The Special Envoy plays an important role in assuring that human rights and religious freedom are an important part of our policy toward North Korea.

**We should take steps to encourage humanitarian Efforts in North Korea.** Living conditions, access to health care, access to food, and other humanitarian concerns are important in North Korea because of the impoverished conditions that exist there. Many of the groups in the United States who have led humanitarian efforts in North Korea are firmly rooted in U.S. religious communities. We need to work with the United States government to assure that these humanitarian organizations are able to resume their charitable work in North Korea.

I appreciate this opportunity to share my thoughts with the members of the Commission. Religious communities play an important role in the effort to encourage freedom of religion and respect for human rights in North Korea and many other places around the world. It is consistent with United States law and it is in the best interest of our foreign policy to encourage freedom of religion. USCIRF plays a key role in encouraging freedom of worship and respect for human rights. I am grateful for the efforts of the Commission, particularly in dealing with religious freedom in North Korea.