



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Religious Freedom in North Korea and North Korean Refugees: Trends and

U.S. Policy Options

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Stephen Schneck, USCIRF Chair

Good morning and welcome to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing *Religious Freedom in North Korea and North Korean Refugees: Trends and U.S. Policy Options*. My name is Steve Schneck, and I am the Chair of USCIRF. Thank you to our distinguished witnesses for joining us today to provide their expertise.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes

policy recommendations to the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government. Today, USCIRF exercises its statutory authority under IRFA to convene this important hearing.

Unfortunately, the religious freedom situation remains incredibly poor in North Korea, as the government there continues to enforce some of the world's harshest religion policies in direct contravention of international human rights law. North Korea's ruling ideology, known as Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism [Kim Mill-Sung-ism Kim Jong-ill-ism], treats religion as an existential threat, resulting in severe punishment for those who practice their religious beliefs in defiance of this cult of personality. The Kim Jong Un regime considers Protestant Christians to be "counter-revolutionaries" and "traitors" and views many common folk religious practices among its citizens as "unsocialist behaviors." North Korean citizens caught engaging in Christian, Shamanist, or other religious activities, including simply possessing a Bible, face torture, forced labor, imprisonment, and even execution by firing squad.

North Korea's religious freedom conditions have remained among the worst in the world for decades. For nearly 25 years, USCIRF has recommended that the U.S. Department of State designate North Korea as a Country of Particular Concern for engaging in or tolerating particularly severe violations of religious freedom. And

this year marks the 10th anniversary that a UN Commission of Inquiry released its damning report on the situation for human rights in North Korea, which found that “there is an almost complete denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion” in the country.

In light of the grave concern for religious freedom in North Korea, Vice Chair Eric Ueland and I traveled to South Korea last July as part of a USCIRF delegation to meet with South Korean government officials and civil society organizations working on religious freedom and related human rights issues in North Korea.

While obtaining new information about the situation inside North Korea has proven difficult in recent years due to a decrease in the number of North Korean refugees arriving to South Korea, government and civil society actors continue to welcome North Korean refugees, document their experiences, and help integrate them into South Korean society where for the first time in their lives they can choose for themselves whether and how to practice a religion without fear of persecution. Without the tireless efforts and leadership of the government officials and civil society leaders, the world would know even less about the brutality North Korea employs against its own people. With that, I will turn the floor over to Vice Chair Ueland for additional remarks.

Eric Ueland, USCIRF Vice Chair

Thank you, Chair Schenck. Our trip to South Korea was indeed an eye-opening experience. USCIRF met with South Korean government officials, human rights activists, researchers, religious leaders, missionaries, radio broadcasters, North Korean defectors, and many others who all provided their own unique perspectives on the situation for religious freedom in North Korea. We also met with the family of Kim Jung-wook, a South Korean missionary wrongfully imprisoned in North Korea. He and two other South Korean missionaries, Choi Chun-gil and Kim Kook-kie, have each spent a decade imprisoned in North Korea after North Korea authorities sentenced them to life imprisonment on bogus charges related to their activities ministering to the religious needs of North Koreans.

Another major theme we heard during our visit was the prominent role China plays in facilitating North Korea's gross human rights abuses. Chinese authorities have cracked down heavily on North Korean refugees who try to flee to South Korea via Southeast Asian countries, including by using technology that allows for greater surveillance and tracking of North Koreans inside the country. China also continues to repatriate North Korean refugees despite the credible risk of persecution and torture upon their return home. North Korean refugees in China who engage in religious activities and have contact with Christian missionaries and

nongovernmental organization workers face severe punishment when repatriated to North Korea.

Our trip also reinforced many of USCIRF's key recommendations on North Korea. First, North Korea's human rights situation, which includes religious freedom, cannot sit on the backburner for any U.S. administration. Denuclearization and security concerns related to North Korea cannot be solved without also addressing its human rights situation. Second, the United States must continue to be a leader on North Korean human rights issues, including Congress, who should reauthorize the North Korean Human Rights Act. Reauthorizing this legislation would showcase to the world the United States' continued commitment to make progress on human rights in North Korea. Lastly, the United States must continue to build an international coalition to seek accountability for North Korean human rights abuses and press China to stop aiding and abetting these atrocities, including through coordinated, multilateral sanctions.

The structure of today's hearing will be divided into two parts. In our first panel, we will hear from Ambassador Julie Turner, the U.S. Special Envoy on North Korean Human Rights Issues. Our second panel will then feature remarks from Hanna Song, Executive Director of the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights; Ethan Shin, Legal Analyst at the Transitional Justice Working Group;

Joanna Hosaniak, Deputy Director General of Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights; and Greg Scarlatoiu, Executive Director of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea.

Thank you all for being here. Ambassador Turner, please begin your testimony.