

**Testimony of Minister Thae, Yong-ho**  
**House Committee on Foreign Affairs**  
**November 1, 2017**

Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, Distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today.

First, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Chairman Royce, who kept his promise to accommodate my wishes to visit the United States and gave me this opportunity to testify before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

As you are all aware, I worked at the frontline of North Korean diplomacy until I defected to South Korea in 2016. But my story is quite different from other defectors, who may have experienced political oppression, inhuman treatment in political prison camps, or who left North Korea in order to avoid hunger and economic difficulties. Rather, today I would like to tell you about my life as a North Korean diplomat, why I defected to the free world, why Kim Jong Un is developing nuclear and ICBM programs, and how best to deal with the North Korean regime.

I went through elite educational courses in North Korea, which could not even be dreamed of by ordinary citizens there. At the age of 14, I was sent to China for a special elite educational program. More than 20 years of the past 55 years of my life, were very privileged by North Korean standards. I lived and worked in foreign countries such as China, Denmark, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The North Korean system provided me with all kinds of political privileges and economic benefits during this time and, in the course of my last posting, I was fortunate enough to live in the UK with my wife and two sons.

Throughout my life, my family members and relatives were all dedicated true communists. Ironically, however, I ended up deserting that system and ideology, and I am living in South Korea – where I do not have any friends or relatives. And, today, I am even testifying at the United States Congress, which I had always been taught to fight against.

The reason why I gave up all the privileges and economic benefits was that I felt I could not let my sons lead a life like me, as a modern-day slave. I believed the best legacy I could leave for my sons was to give them the freedom that is so common to everyone in America. Had we not defected, I feared that someday my sons would have cursed me for forcing them back to North Korea. They were used to online gaming, Facebook messaging, email and internet news. I believed my sons would suffer a lot if they returned to the North Korean system. Indeed, how could any boys raised in the London education system and familiar with freedom of thought ever go back and re-acclimatize to life in North Korea? I could not confiscate freedom and enjoyment of liberty from them. I could not take back the happy smiles of my sons by bringing them back to North Korea. I could not force my sons to pretend to be loyal to Kim Jong Un and the North Korean system and to shout ‘long live the supreme leader Kim Jong Un!’, ‘long live the socialist paradise of the DPRK’ – like I did all my life.

As a North Korean diplomat, everyday activities and services were like leading a ceaseless double-life, which was psychologically difficult. I had to pretend to be loyal to the Kim Jong Un regime, even though my heart did not agree. I often was asked questions by my British friends which caught me flat footed. Trying to justify the North Korean system when, deep down, I knew their concerns were fair and legitimate. They asked me things such as:

- “How could Kim Jong Un persecute his own uncle?”

- “Why does North Korea continue to appeal for humanitarian aid while pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into its nuclear and missile development?”
- “Communism has always opposed a dynastic transfer of power, so how then does the Kim family’s hereditary leadership system prevail so long in North Korea?”

While dealing with these kinds of questions was always painful, they made me increasingly realize the deep-rooted contradictions upon which the entire North Korean system is built.

You might think that living as a member of the elite class in North Korea is all about luxury goods, fine wines and abuse of power. Yet, the reality for many privileged people in Pyongyang is far different. For example, all high-ranking leaders have to live collectively in separated apartments, according to their rank. Moreover, getting promoted within this system actually requires more sacrifices, reduced freedoms and an increasing risk of your life – even though you may enjoy more economic benefits as a result. Indeed, if it is discovered that a senior elite may have different ideas or express private dissatisfactions, then he or she could be subject to persecution. And as you all know, even the members of the Kim’s family have been subject to this type of persecution. Such was the case with the killing of Kim Jung Un’s uncle Jang Song Thaek and half-brother Kim Jong Nam.

Beyond these high-profile incidents, much more has been going on beneath the surface over the past five years, hundreds of cadres have been persecuted without due process. For example, the families of former North Korean Ambassadors to Cuba and Malaysia were sent to prison camps and nobody knows whether they are now alive or dead. The former North Korean Ambassador to Sweden and the former North Korean Ambassador and deputy Ambassador to UNESCO were also forced to return back to Pyongyang and expelled from the Foreign Ministry after the death of Jang Song Thaek.

While on the surface the Kim Jong Un regime seems to have consolidated its power through this reign of terror, simultaneously there are great and unexpected changes taking place within North Korea. Contrary to the official policy and wish of the regime, the free markets are flourishing. As more and more people get used to free and capitalist-style markets, the state owned socialist economic system becomes increasingly forgotten about. The welfare system of North Korea has long collapsed and millions of civil servants, army officers, and security forces are dependent on bribes and state asset embezzlement for their survival.

The citizens do not care about state propaganda but increasingly watch illegally imported South Korean movies and dramas. The domestic system of control is weakening as the days go by. Back in 2010, during the Arab Spring, many experts said it would be impossible to imagine such similar events taking place in North Korea. These changes, however, make it increasingly possible to think about civilian uprising in North Korea. As more and more people gradually become informed about the reality of their living conditions, the North Korean government will either have to change and adapt in positive ways for its citizens, or to face the consequences of their escalating dissatisfaction. Until now, the North Korean system has prevailed through an effective and credible reign of terror and by almost perfectly preventing the free-flow of outside information.

Today, Kim Jong Un thinks that only nuclear weapons and ICBMs can help him avert the continuing disintegration of the North Korean system. He also thinks that the existence of a prosperous and democratic South Korea so close to the border is, by itself, a major threat towards his dynasty. While Kim Jong Un has already long had the tools to destroy South Korea effectively, he also believes it is necessary to drive American forces out of the peninsula. And

this can be done, he believes, by being able to credibly threaten the continental United States with nuclear weapons. On top of the thousands of artillery pieces and short-range missile capabilities long held on the North Korean side, the potential deployment of battle-ready nuclear ICBMs means the threat is not only towards South Korea, but also towards America.

In face of this emerging situation, the U.S. government is now pursuing a policy of ‘maximum pressure and engagement’. However, it will take some time to assess the effectiveness of the current economic sanctions and campaign of diplomatic isolation. As we wait to see the outcome, we should seek to continue the momentum and even expand targeted sanctions until the North Korean regime comes back to the dialogue table for denuclearisation.

In face of the emerging threat, we should strengthen the U.S.-ROK alliance and enhance military preparedness in order to prevent potential nuclear and ICBM provocations by North Korea. The US and ROK Governments should enhance the level of their coordination and communication under the slogan of ‘We go together.’ It is a long established dialogue strategy of North Korea to exclude South Korea while communicating only with the US. The US and South Korean Governments should frustrate this North Korea strategy through strong concerted co-ordination.

Frankly, Kim Jong Un is not fully aware of the strength and might of American military power. Because of this misunderstanding, Kim Jong Un genuinely believes that he can break the sanctions regime apart once he compels Washington to accept North Korea’s new status after successfully completing the development of his ICBM program and putting the new missiles into deployment.

Some people do not believe in soft power, but only in military options. But it is necessary to reconsider whether we have tried all non-military options before we decide that military action against North Korea is all that is left. Before any military action is taken, I think it is necessary to meet Kim Jong Un at least once to understand his thinking and to try to convince him that he would be destroyed if he continues his current direction.

We cannot change the policy of terror of the Kim Jong Un regime. But we can educate North Korean population to stand up by disseminating outside information. However, is the United States really doing enough in this regard? The U.S. is spending billions of dollars to cope with the military threat. Yet how much does the U.S. spend each year on information activities involving North Korea in a year? Unfortunately, it may be tiny fraction.

Yet we now know that the communist systems of the Soviet Union and East European countries crumbled as a result of the dissemination of outside information and the subsequent changes in thinking caused among people within those systems. Indeed, the Berlin wall would not have easily collapsed if East German people did not regularly watch West German TV. To sum up, much more needs to be done to increase the flows of information into North Korea. German reunification could not have been achieved if the Hungarian government did not open its border with Austria to provide an exit route for the East German people.

Now some 30,000 North Korea defectors have come to South Korea. In China, however, tens of thousands of North Korean defectors are living without papers, under the shadows, and are being physically or sexually exploited. While the U.S. should continue urging China and Russia to support more economic sanctions, it should also do more to stop Beijing repatriating defectors back to North Korea.

The world was united to abolish the South African apartheid. Now it is time for the world to stop the widespread and systematic human rights violations in North Korea, which are tantamount to the crimes committed by the Nazis.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my opening statement. Thank you again for this opportunity and I look forward to your questions.