

Testimony of
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Hearing on “Protecting North Korean Refugees”
*Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights
House Foreign Affairs Committee*

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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, Members of the Committee—

It is a great pleasure for me to testify before this Subcommittee. It is almost nine years since I left the House Foreign Affairs Committee staff to join the Department of State. During the 25 years that I was chief of staff to Congressman Tom Lantos, a good portion of that time was also spent as a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee staff. It is nice to come “home.”

I want to thank you for your focus on human rights issues. I respect your commitment to human rights around the world. When I was chief of staff to Congressman Lantos, he was Ranking Member during a part of the time you were Chair of the Human Rights Subcommittee. I remember some of the marathon hearings you held on human rights issues.

Mr. Chairman, I want to commend you on the caliber of the other witnesses you have invited to testify today. It was extremely helpful to hear from these defectors who left North Korea and found refuge elsewhere. Also on this panel, Greg Scarlatoiu, the Executive Director of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, has produced a series of extremely important studies on human rights abuses in the North. Suzanne Scholte has been an energetic voice for aiding North Korean defectors and mobilizing opinion against the abuses of the DPRK. It is an honor for me to appear with them.

The issue of refugees or “defectors” who have chosen to leave North Korea is the principal topic of the hearing today. It is also a key issue in dealing with the broader issue of human rights in the North. There has been a steady flow of defectors from the North since the famine in the late 1990s. Initially the refugees were desperate, starving people looking for work opportunities in China. Many of them subsequently went on to South Korea. Over the last two decades some 30,000 North Koreans have fled the North and have resettled in South Korea.

The interest of Americans in helping defectors from the North and the Congressional focus on this issue was the principal factor behind the adoption of the North Korea Human Rights Act in 2004 and its subsequent reauthorization. Provisions of that legislation called for Federal assistance to defectors who sought to flee to America. Since that legislation was adopted, the State Department and other Federal agencies have helped some 250 North Korean refugees

resettle in the United States. Most refugees, however, have chosen to settle in South Korea because of the familiar language and culture, as well as family members already living there.

The number of refugees leaving the North annually has recently declined. The high point of nearly 3,000 was reached in 2011, but tighter control of the borders by the North has reduced that number to less than 1,500 last year, and numbers thus far this year look to be even lower.

Virtually all defectors flee the North through China. Only a very few have fled across the inter-Korean border. The rare exception a few weeks ago was a North Korean soldier, who was seriously wounded as he escaped across the border. That indicates the danger as well as how uncommon it is for defectors to go directly from the North to South Korea.

For defectors who escape through China, there are other issues. China has a mixed record with Korean defectors. When relations were good between China and North Korea, most defectors who were captured in China were quickly returned to North Korea, where they were brutalized and sent to reeducation camps to discourage others from attempting to leave.

I remember one poignant conversation I had in South Korea with a young woman who fled the North and was finally able to reach the South. I asked her if this had been her first attempt. She said, “No. It was my sixth try.” Five times she sought to leave, and she was captured before she reached the border in the North or after she crossed into China. She was returned to North Korean authorities and spent months each time in a reeducation camp where she was brutally treated. On her sixth attempt, she and a friend, who agreed to make another attempt with her, decided to take poison pills with them. Rather than be forcibly returned again and sent to a reeducation camp, they would have taken their own lives.

At times, when Chinese relations with South Korea have been good and China’s relationship with the North was strained, the Chinese have allowed North Korea defectors to go to the South. A couple of years ago in a highly unusual arrangement, the Chinese allowed some 14 North Korean restaurant workers to fly directly from China to South Korea where they resettled.

A year or two ago, however, a THAAD missile battery was placed in the South by the U.S. with South Korean government cooperation. This led to strained relations between China and the South. Since that time, it has again been more difficult for defectors from the North to reach the South through China. I am hopeful that the recent indications of better ties between Beijing and Seoul will lead to easier conditions for defectors to pass through China.

The United States government has taken a strong interest in North Korean defectors being able to leave if they wish to do so. Although I am no longer at the Department of State, during the seven years that I was there from 2009 to early 2017, we strongly supported the South Korean effort to assist defectors to reach the South. On many occasions, I personally raised with senior Chinese government officials the U.S. concern that defectors be permitted to go to the South if that was

their wish. I know that other more senior State Department officials also raised this matter with the Chinese during that time.

Mr. Chairman, it is important that the United States continue to urge China to allow defectors to resettle elsewhere. Some will wish to come to the United States, but as we have seen the number is small. If they wish to go to the South, the United States should do all we can to support South Korean efforts. Indications of Congressional support for these refugees—such as through the reauthorization of the North Korea Human Rights Act—are important, and I urge approval of that legislation. It has already been adopted by the House and is awaiting action in the Senate.

A second matter that I was asked to discuss is the issue of providing information to the people of North Korea. We must continue to encourage the free flow of information into North Korea. The availability of accurate information about events beyond the borders of the North is an extremely important in order to limit the regime’s ability to manipulate its own people.

Despite the fact that it is illegal to own a radio capable of being tuned to stations other than the official government mouthpiece, we estimate, based on survey research, that as many as one third of North Koreans listen to foreign radio broadcasts. Programs from Voice of America and Radio Free Asia that are funded by Congressional appropriations are an extremely important source of information reaching the North. There are also creative and innovative programs funded by the United States to get digital information to the North Korean people. These need to be encouraged and expanded.

Mr. Chairman, military actions against North Korea are severely limited. But one thing that we can do that will encourage positive change is to increase the flow of accurate information from the outside into the North. Our human rights efforts are an important aspect of our policy toward North Korea. We must not underestimate the importance of these efforts.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, for the invitation to participate in this hearing today. I look forward to any questions you and the Committee members may have.