

Statement of Rep. Christopher H. Smith
Chairman, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human
Rights, and International Operations
Hearing on “The North Korean Human Rights Act
of 2004: Issues and Implementation”
April 28, 2004

I want to thank my good friend from Iowa, Jim Leach, for co-chairing today’s joint hearing, and for his groundbreaking work in authoring the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004. I was proud to work with him on that legislation, and I share his resolve to see that the new law results in real improvements in the lives of the men and women of North Korea. It is particularly fitting that we are meeting today, on the first anniversary of the North Korean Freedom Day rally that took place on the National Mall.

Just over a decade ago, I convened the inaugural hearing of the House Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights. The hearing was a review of the State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1994, with Assistant Secretary John Shattuck. At that meeting I raised the issue of North Korea, and noted what were then little-known reports of North Korean abductions of foreign citizens, and of a North Korean gulag containing an estimated 150,000 political prisoners. In many ways, the issues haven’t changed, except that we now know far more about conditions inside North Korea than we did then. And the reality has turned out to be worse than what we imagined at the time.

In this very room, we have received tearful testimony from eyewitnesses to some of the most barbaric abuses imaginable. We have heard of North Korean Christians who were tortured to death because they refused to renounce their faith. We have heard from survivors of the vast North Korean gulag, where slave labor, torture, and perpetual starvation are the daily lot of 200,000 political prisoners and family members. We have heard about lethal chemical experimentation on camp inmates. We have heard how pregnant prisoners are routinely subjected to forced abortion because the regime also views their children as political criminals. According to one witness, “If the mom would cry for help to save her child, it was an expression of dissatisfaction against the Party. So such a woman would be dragged out of the building and put to public execution by firing squad.”

One cannot hear these things and remain silent in good conscience. Thankfully, many nations have joined their voices to protest this inhumanity, most recently at the 61st Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva earlier this month.

Sadly, the sufferings of Koreans in the North do not end at their own borders. Tens and hundreds of thousands of North Koreans seeking food and freedom have fled into China, where they are hunted and exploited. Women and girls fall prey to traffickers, and are forced into prostitution, or sold into so-called “marriages” that are frequently abusive. Some escape only to be captured and re-sold multiple times. Contrary to China’s obligations as a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention, it hunts down North Koreans and forcibly returns them into the hands of North Korean

authorities. Of those returnees, most are imprisoned, many are tortured, and some are executed. We have heard from former refugees who carried poison during their time in China, because they would have preferred suicide to the conditions that they would have faced upon repatriation to North Korea.

I recite these details because I am not convinced that the Executive Branch fully understands the depth of Congressional resolve behind the Act, particularly with regard to refugee assistance and protection. The United States has by far the largest refugee resettlement program in the world. It is also home to the largest Korean population in the world, outside of Korea. Many members of the highly successful Korean American community came from the North around the time of the Korean War. Large networks of vibrant Korean American churches have expressed a desire to help their brothers and sisters who are seeking refuge. In light of these facts, it is an utter travesty that, as reported by the State Department, “no North Koreans were resettled by the U.S. refugee admissions program” during the past five years. As this Committee stated in its official Report on the Act, “the status quo is unacceptable.” While the Congress understands the challenges posed in screening North Korean refugee applicants, “those challenges should be regarded as just that: challenges to be addressed, rather than reasons for inaction.”

I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses, and trust that this hearing is just the start of a continuing conversation with the Administration on these issues of common concern.