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“Human Rights in North Korea: Challenges and Opportunities”

*Africa, Global Health and Human Rights Subcommittee
Excerpts of Remarks by Chairman Chris Smith
September 20, 2011*

Thank you for joining us for this important hearing to examine a country with one of the worst human rights records today. The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is known to be the world’s most isolated country, as its citizens are prohibited from traveling either internally or internationally without permission. Communications with the outside world also are tightly regulated in attempts by the dictatorship regime to filter all information accessible by the North Korean people.

Therefore, the testimony to be provided today by our distinguished panel, and in particular our two defector witnesses, is particularly welcome and appreciated. Mrs. Kim Young Soon and Mrs. Kim Hye Sook, who both have survived the extreme deprivations of the North Korean prison camps, have travelled all the way from South Korea to share their experiences with us. On behalf of the subcommittee, I wish to convey to them our sincere gratitude.

They will be speaking on behalf of the estimated 150,000 to 200,000 prisoners currently held in North Korea’s penal-labor camps. It is our hope that their testimony will help to galvanize the international community to take action to secure the freedom of those who are needlessly suffering and dying under truly horrific conditions.

Those living in the prison camps are not the only ones suffering in North Korea. As one of our witnesses, Suzanne Scholte, will testify, in North Korea every single human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is violated. North Korea is listed by the State Department as a “Tier 3” country with respect to human trafficking. It was just re-designated this month as one of eight “Countries of Particular Concern” for its egregious violations of religious freedom.

But not all the testimony during this hearing will be bleak. We will hear about new potential for communication to and with the North Korean people, and explore possibilities for peaceful change given upcoming political events in North Korea and changes in other countries in the region. We look forward to discussing this potential to improve the lives of all North Koreans.

I will keep my remarks brief in the interest of leaving as much time as possible to hear the testimony of our witnesses.

Once again, I would like to thank our witnesses for joining us today, and look forward to hearing your testimony.