

Hundreds Protest North Korea Human Rights Abuses at Capitol Hill Rally

✖ **April 28, 2009** – Hundreds were expected to gather on Capitol Hill today to rally for an end to human rights abuses in North Korea, where millions have died of starvation in the last decade and some 200,000 political prisoners are languishing in labor camps.

Part of North Korea Freedom Week, which began with a prayer service on Sunday, the rally joined Christian and human rights groups, 30 North Korean defectors and politicians such as Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., and Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R-Fla.

“North Korea is the worst human rights tragedy in the world today,” said Suzanne Scholte, a charismatic Christian who chairs the North Korea Freedom Coalition, which is organizing freedom week. “While there are many tragic situations and terrible atrocities occurring in the world, the North Korean people are the most isolated, the most persecuted and the most suffering.”

In February Open Doors, a Christian advocacy organization and a co-sponsor of Freedom Week, named North Korea the world’s worst persecutor of Christians for the seventh consecutive year. And last month the U.S. State Department again designated the closed communist nation as one of eight “Countries of Particular Concern” for its severe religious freedom violations.

Tensions have long been high between North Korea and the international community. Earlier this month North Korea launched a ballistic missile that passed over Japan and fell into the Pacific Ocean, violating international agreements and United Nations Security Council sanctions. On Friday, North

Korean leaders announced that two U.S. journalists accused of entering the country illegally from China and committing "hostile acts" will be tried on criminal charges, the Associated Press reported.

Although international concerns have centered largely on North Korea's nuclear arms capabilities, Scholte said dictator Kim Jong Il uses his nuclear program to distract the international community from his regime's human rights abuses.

"We believe that silence is death," Scholte told *Charisma*. "What we feel is we're at this turning point right now. We're either going to have the Obama administration take us on a course that will help and give hope to the North Korean people, or we're going to go back to the same pit that we've been in throughout the Clinton and Bush administrations where we let Kim Jong Il set the agenda and we just concentrate on the nuclear issue. That will lead to the deaths of millions more people."

Humanitarian relief experts report that more than 3 million North Koreans have died of hunger since 1995. Although the famine has drawn international relief into the area, government restrictions on food distribution have left many malnourished.

Anyone caught criticizing Kim Jong Il is arrested and subjected to hard labor, torture or mass execution. As many as 200,000 men, women and children accused of political crimes are languishing in forced labor camps throughout North Korea.

In recent years, Christians in South Korea and China have been sending food and humanitarian aid into the nation through smugglers. And several activist groups have been launching helium balloons carrying small, solar-powered radios into North Korea to provide access to information from the outside world.

"We are now at a point where people in North Korea are finding

out more and more what's going on in the outside world," Scholte said. "This is an even more important time to make them aware that the international community has been trying to get humanitarian aid in there. The North Koreans believe that we are their enemies. They're taught to hate Americans; they believe we occupy South Korea. But at this time, they're getting more and more information and realizing that their greatest enemy is Kim Jong Il."

In addition to today's rally, the Freedom Week includes a screening of *Kimjongilia*, a film exposing North Korean human rights abuses, and a demonstration at the new Chinese Embassy on Saturday to protest the nation's practice of returning refugees to North Korea, which often leads to their imprisonment or death.

Participants also will lobby for passage of the North Korea Sanctions Act of 2009, which would require that North Korea be listed as a state sponsor of terrorism and ensure that human rights is a prominent issue in negotiations between the United States and North Korea. Brownback introduced the bill last week in the Senate, and Ros-Lehtinen introduced similar legislation in the House.

On Thursday morning, the largest delegation of North Korean defectors since Freedom Week began in 2004 will testify at a congressional briefing on North Korea's humanitarian situation and how the international community can help.

Defector Bang Mu Sun told Open Doors she was sold three times into a sex-trafficking ring that flourishes on the border between China and North Korea. "I was sold like livestock three times," she said. "I realized that there was a world where human beings were bought and sold and that people could show such cruelty and shamelessness."

The Freedom Week marks the end of Open Doors' three-year prayer campaign for North Korea. Since 2006, roughly 1,500

people in the U.S. and Europe have been praying for 10 minutes at least once a week for the nation.

“We believe that God is going to do great things in North Korea, like Russia, the walls came down and now we can bring Bibles into Russia,” said Jerry Dykstra, spokesman for Open Doors. “I think, really, that’s what North Korea is afraid of. Kim Jong Il, he’s so afraid of Christians because he knows that when Christians pray something great happens.”