

Rally Highlights North Korea's Humanitarian Needs

More than 1,000 people gathered in Washington, D.C., April 28 to raise awareness about the humanitarian needs of North Koreans and to draw attention to legislation that would allow U.S. officials to give North Koreans refugee status on a case-by-case basis.

Dubbed the North Korea Freedom Day, the event was organized by the North Korea Freedom Coalition (NKFC), a consortium of about two dozen organizations including Jubilee Campaign, Prison Fellowship, the National Association of Evangelicals and the Defense Forum Foundation, which aids North Korean defectors.

Though most media coverage has focused on North Korea's nuclear agenda, organizer Suzanne Scholte said the purpose of the event was to turn attention toward the humanitarian plight of North Korea's 23 million people, especially those who risk their lives to escape through China. The NKFC reported that those caught by Chinese police are returned to North Korea, where they are treated as defectors and are most likely killed or worked to death in prison camps.

Chung Byung-Ho, professor of anthropology at Hanyang University in South Korea and one of a dozen speakers addressing the crowd on the West Lawn of the Capitol, said 2 million to 3 million North Koreans have died of starvation and brutality in recent years.

After an April 22 train explosion in Ryongchon that killed 170 people and injured 1,300 others, the North Korean government blocked South Korea from entering the nation to provide relief and medical assistance. Activists such as An Hyuk, a North Korean defector and co-founder of the Democracy Network Against the North Korean Gulag, challenged dictator Kim Jong-il to “open his roadways and airways” to receive help for the victims.

Interestingly, on May 7 North Korea agreed to hold high-level military talks with South Korea and to allow aid for the train victims, the Associated Press reported.

On the freedom day, North Korean defectors presented testimony before the House of Representatives’ International Relations Committee. At the same time, about 200 participants lobbied key representatives about passing the North Korea Human Rights Act of 2004, which among other things will provide funds for nonprofit groups to aid North Korea.

Said Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., who co-sponsored the bill with Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass.: “In a free North Korea, people would have a chance to reclaim their conscience and put their faith in a God of their own choosing, not one dictated by the State.”

John Lindner in Washington, D.C.