

Written Statement to the Korean Church Coalition Prayer Vigil

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Washington, DC

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I send greetings to all of those involved in the May 13 Prayer Vigil in Los Angeles, and express my appreciation and support for your activities on behalf of North Korean refugees. You have chosen to conduct your vigil in front of the Consulate General of People's Republic of China to convey your disappointment with that government's treatment of North Korean refugees. I share this disappointment with you, and call on the Chinese government to comply with its international obligation to enable the protection of refugees within its borders.

Those fleeing the tyranny of the Kim Jong Il regime in North Korea, as well as the hunger and misery caused by its policies, often have no choice but to cross into China. Instead of welcoming these abused and vulnerable people, and allowing them to be resettled to South Korea, the United States, or other countries, the government of China routinely and forcibly repatriates these refugees to North Korea. Upon their return, the refugees face the prospect of brutal punishment. In this way, the government of China compounds the mistreatment the North Korean people receive from their own regime. This conduct is inconsistent with the 1967 Protocol to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, to which the Chinese government is party.

As the world turns its attention to China for the Olympic games this August, increasing attention will be paid to the way China treats people within its borders. In recent months, we have witnessed this with the passing of the Olympic torch through countries that respect the free speech and other inalienable rights of their citizens. Free people everywhere should support those who are oppressed, and we have seen unmistakably that many people around the world join us in our concerns for the welfare of the North Korean people.

I join you in calling on the Chinese government to cease the forcible repatriation of North Korean refugees. It should allow aid workers to tend to this population, and work with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the U.S. and other governments to resettle permanently all of these refugees. By taking these steps, the Chinese government could signal to the world that it is serious about its humanitarian and international obligations.

Godspeed with your prayer vigil today. Together, we work toward the day when North Koreans are free.