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Chair

Mr. Scott Reid

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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● (1310)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Lennox and Addington, CPC)): We will begin the meeting.

We are the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today is October 25, 2012, and this is our 53rd meeting .

[*English*]

Our meeting is televised today. Remember, your mother will probably be watching.

Because my mother is watching, I want to say happy birthday to my sister. I won't tell you how old she's turning today because she's of the age that you wear sackcloth and ashes on your birthday, but nevertheless, Jackie, happy birthday.

We have with us today Robert King, the United States ambassador and special envoy for North Korean human rights. He testifies to us pursuant to our ongoing study of the human rights situation in North Korea, which has occupied this committee on and off for almost two years.

Ambassador King will give a presentation. The length of his presentation and how much time we have left will determine how long each set of questions is today.

Once we've dealt with this, I have an item of business dealing with the potential witness from the Congress of the Philippines, which we'll deal with at the end, but I'll try to speak to each of you separately to whisper in your ear about it to get a sense from the committee prior to that so we can deal with it as quickly as possible.

All that being said, Ambassador King, we're glad to have you here. Please feel free to begin.

His Excellency Dr. Robert R. King (Ambassador, Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues, United States Department of State): Thank you very much. I appreciate the opportunity to be here.

I spent many years with the United States Congress, and I appreciate the legislative branch.

Let me make a few comments about North Korea and the North Korean human rights situation. I'll try to save most of the time for questions, because I'm sure you have a number of issues you would like to raise.

The human rights situation in North Korea is deplorable. The State Department produces a report annually examining the human rights situation of countries around the world. The report for 2011, the most recent report, talks about extrajudicial killings, disappearances, arbitrary detention, arrests of political prisoners, and torture.

The judiciary is not independent. It does not provide fair trials or due process. The North Korean government continues to control almost all aspects of citizens' lives. It denies freedom of speech, press, religion, assembly, and association. Reports continue that the government severely restricts freedom of movement and subjects its citizens to forced labour. We've also had reports that the government is responsible for disappearances, and there's been very little progress on the investigation into cases of suspected abductions of Japanese nationals by the North Korean government.

I want to mention two specific issues regarding North Korea and human rights that are noteworthy. The first is with regard to political prisons in North Korea. There are a number of books and reports and recent conferences dealing with the issue of North Korean political prisons. These reports describe very harsh, life-threatening conditions in prison camps and the detention system in North Korea. This year prominent American journalist Blaine Harden published *Escape from Camp 14: One Man's Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West*. This is based on interviews with Shin Dong-hyuk. He is the only prison camp inmate who is known to have escaped from this most secure of North Korean prison camps.

Shin Dong-hyuk was born in a prison camp. His father was in a prison camp because his father's brother had gone to South Korea. His mother was in the prison camp not because of anything she had done but because, again, one of her family members had been guilty of committing some crime. The parents of Shin Dong-hyuk were allowed to marry in the camp, and Shin Dong-hyuk was the result of that marriage.

The book describes in great detail the brutal conditions in those prison camps. Shin Dong-hyuk was a 14-year old boy. He was in a prison camp not because of anything he had done but because his parents were there. He was told that there was no hope that he would ever be released from the prison camp. As a young teenager, he was asked to carry a very heavy piece of equipment up a flight of stairs. It was too heavy for him, and he dropped it. He damaged the equipment. His immediate punishment was that his middle finger was severed at the second knuckle.

This young man also was taught that the worst thing a prison camp inmate can do is leave the camp, try to escape, and that every person in the camp has a responsibility to report it to the guards if they find somebody who is going to escape.

Shin Dong-hyuk went to see his mother. They didn't live together. He was still a teenager. He went to visit his mother and found out that his mother and brother were intending to escape from the camp. He went back and concluded that he had to report it, because this is what he was told he had to do. He reported it. He was not trusted. They took him and tortured him. Hooks were put through him. He was held over hot charcoal. After a week or so of punishment, they came to the conclusion that he was probably telling the truth. Then he was taken out to a large field where all the inmates in the camp were gathered together, and there, in front of the entire camp population, his brother was executed by a firing squad and his mother was hanged.

● (1315)

This is a very dramatic account of what conditions are like in North Korean prison camps.

I think the publication of this book and the publication of other reports have provided a great deal of information about these prison camps. The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea has published a book, *The Hidden Gulag*, that has satellite photographs of various locations identified as North Korean prison camps, so a great deal of information has become available recently.

The second significant issue I'd like to talk about relates to the flow of information into and out of North Korea. In this area there's been some progress.

North Korea remains one of the most isolated places on earth. North Korea is a place where it is illegal to own a radio that can be tuned. You are not allowed to have a tunable radio. You cannot buy a tunable radio in North Korea; it is preset to the government channel. The same thing is true with television sets. The government does not want information from the outside to come in. This is a country where the Internet is virtually non-existent. A few government agencies are allowed to have access to the Internet, but, internally in the country, no one has access to the Internet. Despite this, from interviews with people who have left North Korea, somewhere between 20% and 30% of the North Korean population indicate that they have listened to foreign radio broadcasts, so there's a certain amount of information going into North Korea, and it appears to be increasing.

The other interesting thing is that the most valued DVDs, which provide entertainment more than they provide information, are South Korean soap operas. South Korea is the wave of culture in Asia right now, and South Korean DVDs are very highly prized in North Korea. Estimates from refugees who have left North Korea indicate that some half the population has seen these DVDs of South Korean soap operas. These DVDs provide information about what is going on outside, beyond the boundaries of North Korea.

North Korea is also a place where, until recently, it has not been possible to have a cellphone. Cellphones have come in over the last few years, and it is now possible for people in North Korea to have cellphones. There are about a million cellphones for 24 million people.

It is not an unrestricted cellphone. In North Korea you are allowed to have a cellphone, but you can only call other North Koreans. You cannot make foreign calls, and you cannot call foreigners who live in North Korea. It is possible for foreigners to have a cellphone, but foreigners are given a cellphone that will only work to call other foreigners. The British ambassador has a cellphone and the British ambassador's North Korean driver has a cellphone, but the two of them can't call each other, which gives you some indication of the problem.

The difference between North Korea and South Korea is indicative of the difference between North Korea and the rest of the world. In North Korea, as I say, there are about a million cellphones for 24 million people, or 0.04 cellphones per person. In South Korea, on the other hand, there are 1.3 cellphones per person, which gives you some indication of the difference in terms of access to information. It's significant, however, because information does circulate in North Korea, and with cellphones it's circulating even faster.

There are some markets that are allowed to function and to operate. Prices in the market are more readily available. You know what the price is on products from one market to another. Information is beginning to circulate in North Korea, and that's probably a very encouraging kind of step.

I want to make a couple of comments about some of the things we appreciate that the Canadian government has done. We have tried to work carefully and closely with the Canadian government and with other governments that are involved in dealing with North Korea. We appreciate the cooperation and the opportunity of consulting on what we and other countries are trying to do in dealing with North Korea.

● (1320)

When I was in Seoul, I met with the Korean ambassador in Seoul, who also has been accredited in the past to North Korea. It has been useful to exchange information. I met your ambassador when I was in Seoul just a couple of weeks ago.

The Canadian government and Canadian NGOs have played an important role in terms of engaging with North Korea. We think that has been helpful and productive.

The University of British Columbia has a program right now through which a handful of North Korean professors will spend six months in Vancouver and will be able to improve their understanding of economics and Western market economy. These are useful programs. We've had a few North Koreans come to the United States, but none of them for that length of time, so I commend the Canadians, particularly the NGOs and the University of British Columbia, for playing an important role in terms of engagement with the North Koreans.

We've appreciated being able to talk with your diplomats, being able to discuss and share information that we have on North Korea, and it has been useful and productive.

We've noted that Canada has imposed very tough sanctions on the DPRK, and that's been significant. The United States has worked with Canada and with other countries in the United Nations in imposing sanctions, and we appreciate the cooperation we've had in doing that.

The Canadian government has also made a number of contributions through the World Food Programme to providing humanitarian assistance to North Korea, and we appreciate that. We've recognized the value of working through the UN agencies, particularly through the World Food Programme, and when we've provided aid in the past, we've worked with the World Food Programme.

The Canadian government has also been very supportive in the United Nations of resolutions critical of North Korea's human rights record. Particularly in the third committee of the General Assembly, where resolutions have been passed for the last eight years, the Canadian government has been supportive and positive in these resolutions critical of North Korea.

We've seen a number of statements from the Canadian government as positive and helpful in terms of criticizing the North Koreans for their human rights records. Of recent statements on Dr. Oh Kilnam, a South Korean whose wife and children were left in North Korean prisons when he defected and who has been trying for some time to get his family back, the statement that the Canadian government issued on his behalf was a very useful one and a very helpful one. We appreciate the opportunity to work with Canada on issues relating to North Korea and to North Korean human rights issues.

I think the most important consideration here is that the United States and Canada share a very strong commitment and tradition of respect for human rights and of the value and importance of pursuing these rights. We look forward to working together with the Canadian government and the Canadian Parliament in terms of working on these issues.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to talk with you today about these issues.

● (1325)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Ambassador.

It appears that we'll have time for the rounds to be five minutes long, including answers.

We will begin with Mr. Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you very much, Mr. Ambassador, for your testimony and for investing your time here. We're grateful for your commendation, too, to the Government of Canada for its participation with the United States in trying to put as much pressure as we can on North Korea so they will capitulate in this terrible, tragic tradition of human rights violations to a degree. When you're talking about putting hooks in people, there's not much more that we've heard more severe here.

We had our own foreign affairs people brief us just recently on the dimension of the sanctions. This is a very broad question. We've seen sanctions make a substantial difference; although nothing has changed in the regime in this case, in a relatively short period of time compared to North Korea, sanctions have really made a severe impact on Iran.

We haven't seen any results, really, in these North Korean sanctions. They have done substantial damage to their economy, but we haven't seen any capitulation so far on their behalf.

Is there a reason these sanctions aren't working?

Dr. Robert R. King: Probably the difference between the North Korean economy and the Iranian economy is North Korea is a much smaller, much less sophisticated economy. The result is that the effects, I think, are less felt because there are not large amounts of foreign purchases of North Korean goods or resources. North Korea has more trade and external economic relations with China than with any other country. The sanctions against North Korea have been in place for a number of years, and the result is that this is not a functioning economy. I think it's much harder.

I think sanctions are important. I think we need to keep them in place. I think the sanctions have prevented further problems that might have developed if we hadn't had them in place. In terms of having the impact such as the sanctions have had in Iran recently, it's quite different.

Mr. David Sweet: Yes. We don't see people marching in the street, as we have in Iran. At least there are some hopeful uprisings in the grassroots there.

I take your point with the less than sophisticated economy. It was demonstrated just a few moments ago in the percentage of people who you said had cell phones.

Dr. Robert R. King: The other thing that's interesting is that in Iran people can call out. When our radio broadcasts have gone into Iran, people inside Iran have called out and are rebroadcast. That never happens in North Korea.

Mr. David Sweet: Exactly. Yes, people make it out of Iran.

Dr. Robert R. King: Yes.

Mr. David Sweet: Since you mentioned China, could you give us an update on what you know with regard to how North Korean refugees are being treated in China right now? What's the situation in that regard?

Dr. Robert R. King: The situation of the refugees is quite difficult. It is very difficult to get out of North Korea. The border with South Korea is heavily guarded and mined. The result is that the only way out is through China.

The Chinese have generally tended to return people who have been captured after they have escaped from North Korea and crossed the border into China. We have urged the Chinese to observe their obligations to allow people to leave. When refugees are returned, they are punished. It's a fairly serious problem. There are frequent reports in the press of refugees being returned.

Mr. David Sweet: Finally, Mr. King, Kim Jong-il is gone. Kim Jong-un is now there. Do you have any intelligence that there's any room for hope in this regard?

Dr. Robert R. King: This is a system that is set up to have one man in charge. There's no indication that the change in leadership has changed anything in terms of the nature of the dictatorship there.

Very clearly the new leader is from a different generation. One of the things I found interesting is that we found out he has a wife, who appeared with him in public on a number of occasions. We've never found out information like that about other North Korean leaders. Whether these are significant changes or whether they are simply appearance changes, we're watching carefully and hoping to see.

● (1330)

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you very much, Mr. Ambassador.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Marston, please.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Welcome, Ambassador. I'm pleased to have you here.

In March next year the UN special rapporteur, who is doing a special review of the human rights situation in North Korea, is going to be releasing a report. Do you see that having any impact? The impression we get is that not a lot reaches this regime in the sense of influencing it for true change. Do you think there's any hope for this?

Dr. Robert R. King: As with a lot of UN mechanisms, it's cumulative. We need to continue to press the North Koreans to deal with their human rights obligations. We're now on the second of the special rapporteurs on North Korean human rights, and a number of reports have been issued over the years. Those reports provide useful details, information, and documentation on the problems in North Korea.

One thing that I thought was encouraging is that three years ago the North Koreans participated in the universal periodic review in Geneva in the Human Rights Council.

The idea behind the universal periodic review is that every country in the UN will make a presentation on its human rights record and then hear comments from other countries. North Korea, which has one of the worst records, nonetheless felt that it needed to participate in that process. They came, they made a presentation, and they asserted that there were no changes that they needed to make. They said that human rights in North Korea were all good.

However, in fact, changes were made in their legislation. Whether this translates into changes in practices is another matter. There is an issue of legitimacy, and in order to be legitimately accepted, a country recognizes that it needs to do something on its human rights record, so I think it's helpful and useful that we continue to press on these issues. I don't think we're going to see quick, dramatic change, but I'm hopeful that we'll eventually see progress.

Mr. Wayne Marston: It has been reported to us that you have had some thoughts about some diplomatic and policy options that could be used to pressure certain entities. Would you like to expand on that a bit?

Dr. Robert R. King: We have pressed the North Koreans and made it clear to them that if they want to have a normal diplomatic relationship with the United States, it will require a recognition of human rights. I think we've tried to make that point to the North Koreans on the occasions when we've been able to talk with them about these issues. On a couple of occasions I've had discussions with the North Koreans in which we talked about some of these human rights issues and their importance. We've engaged in dialogue with the Chinese government on human rights. China is certainly not as far along on its human rights record as we'd like to see—

Mr. Wayne Marston: We all feel the same.

Dr. Robert R. King: —but they've made some progress, and I'm hopeful that if we continue to press the North Koreans we'll make progress there as well.

Mr. Wayne Marston: We have to recognize it when any of them move the line at all, because it's such an important issue.

Do I have any time left?

The Chair: You do. You have a minute and a half.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Good.

About four or five years ago I was on the DMZ, and we backed up onto the line for a photo. When we did, two of the North Korean guards came charging up the hill, looking at us through binoculars. The thing that struck me was how fragile-looking these men were. They looked like 14-year-old boys, and I thought that if this is how they feed their army, how in the world is their population even surviving? Has this improved at all?

● (1335)

Dr. Robert R. King: No. North Korea does not have an economy that provides enough food for its population. The North Koreans and the South Koreans have basically the same genetic makeup, yet a North Korean who is 18 years old is five inches shorter than a South Korean of the same age. Keep in mind that those soldiers you saw at the DMZ are the biggest and toughest and strongest that they have.

Mr. Wayne Marston: There is no comparison at all.

Dr. Robert R. King: Yes, the difference between North Korea and South Korea is dramatic.

Mr. Wayne Marston: It was shocking to see. It really touches you. Even though they're very aggressive people, it's sad to see people living in that state.

Dr. Robert R. King: South Korea has a population twice the size of North Korea's—it's almost 50 million, as opposed to 24 million in the north—but the difference in the gross domestic product between North Korea and South Korea is also dramatic: South Korea's GDP is 20 times the size of North Korea's. This tells you something about the problems there.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Thank you.

Dr. Robert R. King: Thank you.

The Chair: We turn now to Mr. Albrecht.

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Your Excellency, for being with us today. Certainly your comments about the current situation in North Korea are very troubling. I don't think any of us can possibly imagine what conditions must be like there.

The subcommittee, prior to my being part of it, had recommended that a commission of inquiry be set up to go into North Korea. Recently we had officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade here at our committee. It was pointed out to us that there are a number of factors that would probably not promote the idea of an inquiry being successful. First of all, what additional information would be gained in addition to what the rapporteur is collecting? Second, we know that North Korea would not grant access to a commission of inquiry. Third was a concern that even with a request to the U.N. to grant such an inquiry, the other bodies there would probably use their veto power to not allow it to happen.

There is a report coming up from the special rapporteur that I understand is to be released in March 2013. I'm wondering, Mr. Ambassador, what your expectations are. I know that it's hard to speculate. What are your expectations in terms of the utility of that report? Will it help us move forward in addressing the issues we're facing in North Korea?

Dr. Robert R. King: As I mentioned, there are two special rapporteurs who have reported on North Korea under the United Nations procedures. One of them was an Indonesian law professor, Vitit Muntarbhorn. He served for the first four or five years there was a special rapporteur. He was succeeded a couple of years ago by Marzuki Darusman, who is a former Indonesian government official who was, I think, the justice minister and was also involved in the human rights commission there.

I think the value of the reports these men have produced is in the fact that they are independent observers who have background and stature and recognition, and they are identifying serious human rights violations in these countries.

You mentioned the difficulty of their being allowed to enter North Korea. Both of them have requested permission to visit North Korea. They have been ignored or denied. They nonetheless have continued. They've met with refugees in South Korea. They've met with Japanese government officials. They've met with others in many other areas. The credibility of the reports they have produced is an important element in calling attention to the human rights violations there.

There will be a report by the special rapporteur presented in March in Geneva, as you mentioned. There will also be one presented next week in New York at the General Assembly.

I think these reports are important. They haven't produced dramatic change, but we need to continue to press on human rights even though we don't get immediate positive results.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: On that point, I just want to say that I admire your and other people's perseverance and patience with the very slow progress being made.

If you were to outline three or four steps the international community could take or that Canada itself could cooperate with the U.S. and other allies in taking, what are some key elements, in addition to some things you have mentioned—sanctions, and so on—that could bring a positive change about?

● (1340)

Dr. Robert R. King: In dealing with human rights, one thing we need to do is make sure on the one hand that we continue to criticize and call attention to the problems. We need to continue doing that. On the other hand, I think there is merit and value in engaging the North Koreans and in trying to do some of the kinds of things the University of British Columbia is doing. We need to try to give North Koreans an idea of what it's like to be in a free society like Canada. I think this provides an opportunity for people to see what it means to have access to these human rights, and that affects what goes on in the country.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: On the point of the professors visiting UBC, that was new to me. I'm wondering how comfortable the government of North Korea is granting people of that stature access to foreign countries. Are there not fears of defections and so on? What's the track record on that?

Dr. Robert R. King: It's important for North Koreans to have some sense of how the world works. If North Korea is going to improve its economy—and they indicate they want to improve the economy—and if they're going to attract foreign investment, they need to have people who understand western economies and western business practices, so I think it's valuable and useful from the point of view of the government to see those kinds of things.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: But understanding the restrictions on information flowing in and out, I'm surprised that.... Is there no restriction on people coming from North Korea to other countries for exchange purposes or whatever?

Dr. Robert R. King: There are limits on people who are allowed to leave North Korea. You have to have permission. Only certain people are allowed to go. There is usually an effort to have someone keep an eye on them. You never meet with a North Korean alone; you always meet with two North Koreans, and they report on you. I think that's part of how that process works, but I think it's worth doing.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Thank you.

The Chair: We move now to Madame St-Denis, *s'il vous plaît*.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lise St-Denis (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, Lib.): I want to come back to the results of those programs.

You say that Canada should continue with those programs. Are there any reports on how North Koreans react when they come here? We, in the western world, will say that they come here to see what we do and that this is good.

Let's take, for example, the Montreal Hasidic community, which is in the middle of the city. Its members see everything that goes on around them, but are completely unaffected by our ways of doing things.

So we don't know how North Koreans react. We are asking ourselves the following question: Do they react positively? Do they want to leave the country or are they completely unaffected by those programs?

[*English*]

Dr. Robert R. King: We have some experience with the former Soviet Union, and there were a number of occasions when Soviet citizens came to the United States to study. The effect was dramatic in terms of changing their view of the world. All of them went back to the Soviet Union, and some of them went back to work for the KGB, but they all had a different view of the United States because they had been in the United States studying.

Over time, we have seen what has happened to those people, particularly since the Soviet Union disappeared in 1991, and the effect of these people having some sense, some idea of what was going on outside, was extremely useful, extremely important. I think it's important that we do this.

Here is another example: one of the people who visited the United States and spent some time looking at different parts of our country was the last white president of South Africa. As a young man, he came to the United States, where race relations were very different from what they were in South Africa. I'd like to think that the effect of seeing what happens.... Our record on race relations is certainly not without its flaws; nonetheless, he went back to South Africa with a different view of the world. I don't think that people who come to Canada or the United States from a country like North Korea are going to go back and not be affected by what they see.

● (1345)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lise St-Denis: Do I have time for another question?

The Chair: You still have two minutes.

Ms. Lise St-Denis: I will change the subject a little bit.

Will the recent rise in the tensions between China and Japan negatively affect the multilateral efforts to prevent an agreement on nuclear weapons in North Korea? In other words, will it undermine those efforts?

If so, in what way, especially when it comes to human rights, will that affect the international approach when it comes to the United States' commitment regarding North Korea?

[*English*]

Dr. Robert R. King: The territorial differences are very complicated, but it's extremely important in terms of what we have been doing with North Korea to work together with other countries. The principal countries that have been involved are the so-called six parties—North and South Korea, as well as the United States, China, Japan, and Russia. These six countries represent the countries with the strongest interest in stability in northeast Asia, but other countries can play, and have played, an important role in helping defuse situations in that part of the world.

I think Canada is one of the countries that can play a role, and it would be helpful to have Canada playing a role in that process.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lise St-Denis: Given the serious human rights violations being committed in North Korea, what is the American government position on whether the international community should bring up the responsibility to protect doctrine?

The Chair: Could you repeat the last part of your question?

Ms. Lise St-Denis: Should the international community bring up the responsibility to protect doctrine?

[*English*]

Dr. Robert R. King: Responsibility to protect is something that in international law we've tried to use, but it has to be used delicately when other sovereign states have interests at stake.

The responsibility to protect in North Korea is important, but how far we go and what we can do is significant as well. North Korea and South Korea have come to blows on occasion, and we need to deal with human rights in a way that doesn't create provocations on either side that will cause difficulties. I think it's an issue we have to work with, and we have to work carefully with other countries and through the United Nations.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lise St-Denis: Okay, thanks.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mrs. Grewal is next.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Mr. King, thank you very much for travelling to Ottawa and meeting with our committee to discuss our shared deep concerns about the human rights situation in North Korea. It is also really very troubling. In North Korea we have an authoritarian state with a government that denies freedom of speech, press, assembly, association, religion, movement, and whatnot. We have reports of extrajudicial killings, disappearances, arbitrary detention, and torture.

You have really travelled the globe extensively, meeting with government officials and legislators around the globe. Is there any consensus on how we can really move forward and successfully tackle human rights situations and abuses in DPRK?

● (1350)

Dr. Robert R. King: Human rights are something that one continues to work on without making dramatic breakthroughs in most cases. I remember very well trying to deal with human rights issues involving the former Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s.

The progress we made in terms of refuseniks being allowed to leave the Soviet Union was difficult. I can remember the American Congress meeting with the wives of some of these refuseniks who were imprisoned in the Soviet Union.

The main thing we need to do is make sure that we do not abandon our commitment to human rights. We need to continue to press on these issues. We need to continue to keep them in the forefront, and eventually we'll begin to make progress. I see the way things have happened in Russia. We're still not at the point we'd like to be in terms of human rights there, but we've made great progress from where we were earlier.

The same thing is true in China. The same thing is true in many other places. We still have a much greater distance to go in the case of North Korea, but I think we need to continue to press, to continue to keep this in the forefront.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Refugees and press reports indicate that there is a vast network of forced labour camps in North Korea. I understand you had the opportunity to visit there last year, to travel to Pyongyang to meet with North Korean officials. Did you have an opportunity during this visit to bring up the issue of these camps?

Dr. Robert R. King: The primary purpose for my going to North Korea was to talk about the possibility of the United States providing humanitarian assistance. As I mentioned, North Korea is a country that isn't able to grow enough food to feed its population. The United States has a policy of basing humanitarian assistance on need and not on politics. One of my purposes in going to North Korea was to be able to conduct an assessment of the need in North Korea.

A second concern and consideration for the United States is that when we provide humanitarian assistance, we want to be assured that the aid we provide will get to those who are most in need. My discussions with the North Koreans were focused on those issues. We were able to reach some agreements that we thought were helpful. We were able to conduct an assessment that we thought was productive.

We ran into difficulties when the North Koreans abrogated agreements that they had reached with us in other areas and we didn't have credible assurance that the aid would be delivered to where it was needed. We ultimately ended up suspending the aid.

However, we were able to have good discussions with the North Koreans on providing humanitarian assistance. We were able to begin discussions on human rights issues that I thought were useful and productive. The relationship has suffered a little bit since then, and we haven't been able to continue in some of those areas, but I'm hopeful that we'll be able to do that sometime soon.

The Chair: That's the last question, Ms. Grewal. You're out of time.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: In your opinion—

The Chair: Sorry, that has to be the last question. You're out of time.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jacob, go ahead.

Mr. Pierre Jacob (Brome—Missisquoi, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Ambassador, thank you for joining us this afternoon.

You have unfortunately painted—and rightly so—a fairly gloomy picture of human rights in North Korea. In your opinion, what would currently be the most important and urgent issues regarding human rights?

[*English*]

Dr. Robert R. King: It is hard to identify a particular human right that's more important than others. It seems to me that, when we have to prioritize, freedom of information is one of the most important, because it's only when people have information that they're able to understand what the issues are in other parts of the world. They're able to understand how others have resolved these issues. So I would probably suggest that we need to put a focus on freedom of information and increasing information flow, while continuing to work on other issues: rule of law, juridical procedures, these kinds of things.

● (1355)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you.

You have been to North Korea. You said that professors came to British Columbia through an exchange program.

Is that a bilateral exchange program? Do any observers go to North Korea to truly get an idea of what is happening in the country?

[*English*]

Dr. Robert R. King: North Korea is a difficult country to visit, but there are tours that are offered. Some people go and will actually have an opportunity to visit North Korea as a tourist.

There are other groups that visit, a number of NGOs. There are American NGOs and Canadian NGOs that provide humanitarian assistance and that visit North Korea. They are allowed to visit hospitals and medical facilities, where they provide assistance and advice.

There is a very interesting university called the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, PUST. It is an organization funded largely by South Korean and Korean-American and other groups that provides instruction in science and technology and business in English. The faculty is largely composed of people who volunteer. The groups involved in this are primarily Christian groups. There are people who go and instruct in mathematics and in science and in business topics. They are one of the universities in North Korea that functions in North Korea. The student body is selected by the North Korean government, but all of the instruction is in English and the teachers there are teaching them topics that you'd teach in a Canadian or American university.

So there is some effort in terms of people going into North Korea, and I think these are all positive. It's seen by North Koreans as being positive because they need information in these areas.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you.

Do I have any time left?

The Chair: Yes, you have one minute.

Mr. Pierre Jacob: How could Canadian human rights initiatives in North Korea be useful in the framework of a coordinated international strategy?

Do you think Canada could take any specific measures in that area?

[*English*]

Dr. Robert R. King: I think Canada can play an important role in this regard. As I mentioned, I think Canada and the United States and other democratic countries share a common set of values, and I think this common sense of priority for human rights and democracy and so forth is important. I think it helps if we coordinate and cooperate and work together.

One of the things I have tried to do in my position is meet periodically with representatives of the other governments that share these same values, talk about what we are doing, and learn what other countries are doing. I think it's useful for us to do this.

We had meetings in Brussels primarily focused on the European Union, but there were Canadian representatives who participated in that session. I think it's helpful, because many countries have special skills or NGOs who have special experiences, and I think it helps.

The Mennonite Central Committee, for example, is an NGO that functions both in the United States and in Canada. It is the Canadian arm of the Mennonite Central Committee that has taken the lead in dealing with North Korea. It's easier for the Canadians to deal with North Korea than for the Americans, for obvious reasons. In cases like this there are many areas where we can work together and where cooperation enhances what we can do individually.

● (1400)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Jacob.

Mr. Pierre Jacob: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: With the indulgence of the committee, as the clock is not yet at 2:00, I would like to allow Mr. Devolin one question. Would that be acceptable?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Mr. Barry Devolin (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and committee members. Thanks for being here, Ambassador.

For those of us who would like to see an improvement in the quality of life and the human rights of the people of North Korea in the near future—not after regime change, but in the near future—do you think we'd be better off to spend our time and effort trying to influence the Chinese, who obviously directly deal with North Korean refugees who cross into China, and try to persuade the Chinese to have an influence on the North Koreans? I'm presuming that the Chinese might be the only people the North Koreans listen to.

Would we be better off spending our time trying to persuade the Chinese to get things done, rather than our trying to persuade the North Korean regime directly?

Dr. Robert R. King: I would argue, as an American president said, "You have to be able to walk and chew gum at the same time." I would suggest that we could do both. We need to press the Chinese. We need to urge the Chinese to allow refugees who want to leave North Korea to leave. We need to urge the Chinese to press the North Koreans to make progress on human rights issues. At the same time, we need to continue to work with the North Koreans as well. I'd say we need to do both and we ought to try to do both.

We have pressed the Chinese on many of these issues. We continue to urge Chinese cooperation on these human rights issues. We continue to press the North Koreans on them as well. The Canadian influence would be useful to have on both fronts.

The Chair: Is there any evidence that trying to have an influence on China has borne any fruit? Can you point to any success that we've ever had in that regard?

Dr. Robert R. King: With human rights, we're looking at the long term. I think we've made progress with China. Today China's involvement in the international community is much more positive than it was 10 or 20 years ago. With all of these things, it's an ongoing struggle. We need to continue that effort.

Yes, I think there's been progress in China. I think as we continue to press the Chinese on North Korea, there will be progress there as well. I don't think the Chinese have a great deal of influence with North Koreans, though they have more influence than we do, but I think we need to continue to urge the Chinese and the North Koreans to make progress.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ambassador. We are very appreciative of your time and of the quality of what you presented to us. I think this will be very useful to us.

With that, I would ask the members of the committee to rest. I want to discuss Monday's meeting and potential changes. I think we should do that in camera, so let's dismiss our witness with our thanks and suspend to go in camera. We should be done within two or three minutes.

Dr. Robert R. King: Thank you very much. I appreciate the opportunity to be here.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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