

Statement of Rep. James A. Leach
Chairman, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific
Hearing on “North Korea: Human Rights Update
and International Abduction Issues”
April 27, 2006

I am pleased to convene this joint Subcommittee hearing with Chairman Smith. While these proceedings represent our fifth hearing focused on North Korean human rights issues, and our third timed to coincide with the annual events of North Korean Freedom Week, today’s schedule contains two notable firsts.

First, we are pleased to welcome Mr. Jay Lefkowitz in his inaugural appearance before the Congress as Special Envoy for Human Rights in North Korea. That position was created when President Bush signed the North Korean Human Rights Act into law eighteen months ago. The Act, which was a key legislative initiative of this Committee, was intended to promote human rights, humanitarian transparency, and refugee protection for the people of North Korea. As emphasized in our last two oversight hearings and a February letter to Secretary Rice, many in Congress have been dissatisfied with the pace and extent of the implementation of that law. As of today, the United States still has not accepted a single North Korean refugee for domestic resettlement, notwithstanding the requirements of Title 3 of the Act. Similarly, the Administration has not requested a specific appropriation for any of the activities authorized by the Act. We hope that Special Envoy Lefkowitz will have more encouraging news to share on these fronts, and we look forward to hearing his plans for the months ahead.

Second, this is the first Congressional hearing to focus on North Korea’s abduction of foreign citizens. We are fortunate to have such a notable panel of witnesses, all of whom traveled from overseas to be here today. A longstanding subject of speculation and denial, the abduction issue was suddenly thrust upon the

attentions of the world in September 2002, when Chairman Kim Jong Il unexpectedly admitted to Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi that North Korea had been responsible for kidnapping 13 Japanese citizens during the 1970s and 1980s. Of that number, five living abductees returned to Japan the following month, while North Korea claimed that the other eight had died. Among those eight was Megumi Yokota, who was only 13 years old when North Korean agents kidnapped her in November 1977. Those admissions provoked widespread outrage among the Japanese public, which has subsequently focused on securing a credible accounting from North Korea, and on allowing the North Korean family members of the returned abductees to join them in Japan, neither of which has yet occurred.

Although they have not received the same level of public or governmental attention as the Japanese cases, South Korean abduction victims are far more numerous. Of the tens of thousands of South Koreans forcibly taken to the North during the Korean War, the South Korean government estimates that approximately 600 POWs are still alive and held in North Korea, in violation of the 1953 Armistice Agreement. Many South Korean civilians have been abducted to the North in the years since the war, and Seoul estimates that around 485 remain there today. They have included fishermen and sailors kidnapped at sea, hijacked airline passengers, students, teachers, and others. More recently, North Korean agents apparently have abducted South Korean pastors working to assist North Korean refugees inside China, including one U.S. permanent resident, Rev. Kim Dong Shik, in January 2000. Last April, the Seoul Central District Court reportedly convicted a North Korean agent for his involvement in Rev. Kim's kidnapping.

Reports from defectors and returned abductees have indicated that North Korea may be holding abductees from as many as twelve countries. The abduction of foreign citizens – and particularly of children – contravenes the most basic tenets

of a civilized society. These kidnappings are not primarily national, international, political, or strategic issues; they are issues pertaining most fundamentally to the human family. Every abductee was a person – a son, daughter, mother, father, brother, or sister – whose absence is painfully felt by those left behind. On that basis, the American people stand in complete solidarity with the abductees and their families, who so deeply desire to be reunited. That solidarity was the basis for the overwhelming House vote last July in favor of House Concurrent Resolution 168, which calls on North Korea to release all kidnapping victims and POWs, and to provide a full accounting for all other abducted foreign citizens.

One recent, unexpected convergence in the abductions saga has led some to hope that perhaps efforts to resolve these abduction cases could present an opportunity for humanitarian cooperation between South Korea and Japan, at a time when other deeply felt issues of history threaten to overshadow the shared interests of two of the United States' closest Asian allies. It was reported earlier this month that DNA tests indicate that the father of the daughter born to Japanese abductee Megumi Yokota in North Korea was likely Kim Young Nam, a South Korean citizen who was 16 when he disappeared from a South Korean beach in 1978. North Korea's criminal acts have entwined the fates of those families, who share a grief more primal than any nationalist ideology.

Because we are subject to fairly rigorous time constraints today, I would appreciate whatever efforts my colleagues could make to keep their own opening remarks appropriately brief. We note with gratitude the presence of so many esteemed visitors, including former abductees, family members, and parliamentarians. I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses.

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