



Dear Friends:

It's a great honor for me to send you a congratulatory message on the occasion of the first North Korea Freedom Week to be held in Seoul. I have had the honor of speaking at all the previous Freedom Week rallies in Washington, and I greatly regret that I cannot be with you in Seoul.

I have said many times that the most important new development affecting the struggle for freedom and human rights in North Korea has been the growth of the community of North Korean defectors who are now living in South Korea. Now numbering more than 17,000 individuals, the defector community has become a critical asset in the struggle to liberate the people of North Korea.

They serve three vital functions. First, they are helping to open up the closed system of North Korea by facilitating the two-way flow of information. They have reached back into North Korea, both informally by phoning and sending remittances to family members, and more formally through defector networks that enable students and others to develop channels of communication with counterparts inside. And the information they regularly bring out is now being accepted as credible and reliable by the mainstream media and others who follow developments in North Korea.

Second, they connect the oppressed and isolated people of North Korea to the outside world, giving voice to the voiceless society they have left behind and interpreting that otherwise unknowable society to South Korea and the international community.

And third, as people who now live in the South but who have roots in the North, the defector community is helping pave the way for the eventual integration of the now destitute, isolated, and closed society of North Korea into a future dynamic, open and united Korean peninsula. As they gain education and professional skills, they will be able to help North Korean society rebuild after three generations of suffering under a terrible totalitarian system.

But the defectors cannot succeed by themselves. They will need allies in working to liberate North Korea. Toward that end, I urge you to build coalitions of solidarity with South Korean groups and others who have been part of a growing global movement for human rights in North Korea. It is vitally important that the new defector organizations reach out to these friends and supporters in the struggle to free North Korea.

The National Endowment for Democracy is proud to provide material, moral, and political support to the organizations now being built by defectors from North Korea. You have taken a great risk in escaping from North Korea. This demonstrates courage, determination, and will. The challenge before you now is to develop the technical skills and political allies that will be needed to accomplish the great task before you. I have full confidence that you will be able to meet this historic challenge.

Sincerely,

Carl Gershman