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 Helping Hands Korea  
 Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights  
 Human Rights Coalition-USA  
 Human Rights Without Frontiers  
 Institute on Religion and Democracy  
 Institute on Religion and Public Policy  
 Intl Korean War Memorial Foundation  
 Jubilee Campaign  
 Korean-American Freedom Fighters Movement  
 Korean Congress for N. Korean Human Rights  
 Korean Freedom Council (KFC)  
 Korean Freedom Alliance  
 Korean War Abductees Family Union  
 Korean War POW Affairs  
 Lawyers for Human Rights & Unification of Korea  
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 NK Watch: Free the NK Gulag\*  
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 NY Commission to Help N. Korean Refugees  
 N. American Religious Liberty Association  
 North Korea Strategy Center\*  
 OneFreeKorea  
 One Step  
 Open Doors USA  
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 Religious Freedom Coalition  
 Salvation Army, U.S.A.  
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 Schindler's Ark  
 Simon Wiesenthal Center  
 Southern Baptist Convention, ERLC  
 The Israeli Jewish Comm. Against the Gas  
 Chambers in North Korea  
 ThINK (There is Hope in North Korea)  
 The Wilberforce Forum  
 United for North Korean Freedom  
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 9689-C Main Street, Fairfax, Virginia 22031

August 4, 2020

His Excellency Moon Jae-in  
 President of the Republic of Korea  
 The Blue House  
 Seoul, Republic of Korea

RE: Suppression of Fundamental Freedoms, and Oppression of Human Rights  
 Activists and North Korean Defectors

Your Excellency:

Our coalition is deeply concerned over the actions taken by your administration to suppress fundamental freedoms in South Korea which has included oppression of North Korean defectors, human rights activists, and organizations. Your actions are eroding the rule of law and undermining democracy and human rights in South Korea, while further emboldening a regime in North Korea which is committing “unspeakable atrocities” and “crimes against humanity” “whose gravity, scale and nature” have “no parallel in the contemporary world.” (Conclusion of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the People’s Republic of Korea, February 2014).

We write to request your administration take the following five actions:

- 1) End your suppression of freedom of expression for South Korean journalists and authors
- 2) Stop threatening religious freedom and the rule of law
- 3) Cease your oppression and intimidation of North Korean defectors and North Korea human rights organizations
- 4) End your repatriation of North Korean defectors
- 5) Be the voice for the freedom and human rights of ALL Koreans as you are constitutionally and morally obligated to do

We include details below on why we are requesting that you take these five actions.

1) End Your Suppression of Freedom of Expression for South Korean Journalists and Authors

We are gravely concerned over the increase in violations of freedom of expression for journalists and authors under your administration’s policies. For instance, veteran-journalist Woo Jong-chang was jailed on July 17, 2020 after a judge sentenced Mr. Woo to eight months imprisonment for “defaming” former Senior Secretary to the President and former Justice Minister Cho Kuk.<sup>1</sup> It is shocking and shameful that a journalist could be imprisoned for libel, especially in such an advanced country as South Korea. This follows the indictment of four journalists from Media Watch, two of whom – journalists Byun Hee-Jai and Hwang Ui-won – were jailed for libel in 2018 for countering JTBC’s “tablet PC” story. Journalist Sung Sang-hoon of *Global Defense News* was arrested on May 13, 2020 for suggesting that the recent death of a Chinese man may have been due to the Coronavirus.<sup>1</sup> Further suppression of free expression has occurred under your administration by making it a “grave crime” for journalists reporting on “fake news” about the Coronavirus and prohibiting any reference that China was the source of the global pandemic.

This trend of suppressing freedom of expression is alarming, especially at a time when citizens must be able to receive information about the global pandemic. While information should be accurate, such suppression is a form of censorship and is inconsistent with a free, liberal, democratic society such as South Korea.

In addition, author Lee Ju-seong, who escaped from North Korea, wrote a book called “Purple Lake” and was subsequently sued for libel. His book was about North Korean special forces involvement in Gwangju in May 1980. He was found guilty and sentenced to 3 years of probation.<sup>1</sup> If the “history distortion” bills introduced at the National Assembly passed before his trial, then he would have had to go to jail for up to 7 years for writing the book, as any mention of North Korean special forces related to the Gwangju incident would become a “crime.” Dr. Ji Man-won, who has been prosecuted for decades for writing about North Korean special forces involvement and other facets of the Gwangju incident, would also face up to 7 years of imprisonment if this bill passes. Understanding history is through fact-based discussions and debates, not silencing all the citizens by criminalizing their research and opinions.

This suppression of freedom of expression is contrary to Article 21 of South Korean Constitution, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. We strongly urge your administration to cease its suppression of free expression to uphold South Korea’s commitments to protect citizens’ right to impart and receive information.

## 2) Stop Threatening Religious Freedom and the Rule of Law

Additionally, the rule of law and religious freedom have been under attack through the treatment of churches and religious members under the pretext of preventing the spread of COVID-19. We are alarmed by your government’s decision to prevent Protestant churches from holding Bible classes, choir practices, or singing or praying loudly.<sup>2</sup> There are also reports that individuals have been investigated by the police for attending a church service, supposedly in violation of a law on infectious disease management.<sup>3</sup>

Most churches have been taking precautions to prevent the spread of COVID through sanitation, masks, checking temperatures, keeping social distance while inside, reducing service times held inside and/or holding services outside. Nevertheless, services have been disrupted in multiple ways. For instance, worship at a Seoul Church was interrupted when the Prime Minister sent over 500 government officials, including clinic workers, police officers, and local district authorities, to disrupt and end the gathering.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, the government officials were greater in number than the worshipers and did not take health precautions, while the worshipers were taking health precautions! This blatant inconsistency in standards regarding COVID – punishing worshipers that were taking steps to prevent the spread while government officials disregarded such care – is religious persecution and a violation of freedom of religion. It is also deeply troubling that your government is requiring churches to keep a record of who attends services, a possible violation of privacy rights and a tactic that could be used to intimidate or target individuals on account of their religion.

This is in contrast to public facilities, such as the subway system used by millions of people on a daily basis. Users of public transportation have not been treated to the same harassment as church members and religious institutions even though they pose a greater risk of spreading COVID. In addition, and even more problematic, is the lack of restrictions placed on other public gatherings that are secular in nature. Other large, face-to-face gatherings – including political rallies, entertainment attractions, movie theaters, amusement parks, restaurants, bars, nightclubs, karaoke rooms, and more recently sports venues, to name a few – have not been subjected to

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<sup>1</sup> Seo Min-sun, [A Defector Author Found Guilty for Writing “Kim Dae-jung Requesting North Korean Special Forces Deployment”](#), No Cut News, 3 June 2020.

<sup>2</sup> [Protestant community protests government’s ban on church gatherings](#), Korea Herald, 9 July 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Kim Moon-Soo, [A Young Energetic IT attorney, Will Fraud in South Korea’s 2020 Election be Uncovered?](#), Kim Moon-Soo TV, Translation by East Asia Research Center, 2 June 2020.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

the same invasive restrictions or public ridicule suffered by churches and their members, despite having proven to be transmission vectors for the Coronavirus.<sup>5</sup>

While we recognize the importance of addressing the potential spread of COVID, the need for preventing the spread of COVID must not be a pretext for restricting and stifling the exercise of freedom of religion. We urge you, as president of a democratic and free nation, to cease the restriction of religious freedom and unfair treatment given to religious meetings and organizations, in violation of South Korean and international law.

3) Cease Your Oppression and Intimidation of North Korean Defectors and North Korea Human Rights Organizations

The oppression of North Korean defectors and human rights organizations has become a pattern of your administration. In July, prominent human rights activists and organizations wrote to you and your government and spoke out publicly regarding the announced decision to revoke the licenses of North Korean human rights organizations, Fighters for Free North Korea and Kuensaem. Despite this public outcry, your administration carried out this plan and revoked their licenses. This action violated South Korean human rights activists' free expression, but also added to the list of violations suffered by the North Korean people. The right to receive information, even across borders, is enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Your actions preventing organizations from disseminating information to the people of North Korea interferes with those rights and freedoms. We are disheartened that a liberal democratic country, such as South Korea, would choose to act in such an oppressive manner towards individuals and organizations seeking to uphold the human rights of the world's most oppressed people.

Continuing this trend of action against human rights organizations, it was announced that the Ministry of Unification plans to conduct office inspections and investigations of the internal records of twenty-five North Korean human rights and resettlement organizations.<sup>6</sup> An additional sixty-four organizations, which work to address North Korean human rights and resettlement, have also recently been required to submit documents to prove that they meet the requirements of not-for-profit civil society organizations.

The targeting of these organizations is not new. In fall of 2017, prosecutors conducted searches and seizures affecting approximately a dozen human rights organizations in South Korea.<sup>7</sup> The prosecutors did not bring any charges suggesting there was no evidence of wrongdoing, but they did leak the names of the organizations to the public, which undermined their reputations and resulted in their losing donations. As a result, at least one organization had to close, the North Korean Human Rights Youth Organization. Separately, your government investigated the bank accounts of donors and employees of a human rights organization, without any prior notification by the government. It was only discovered through a bank notice after the fact. Such acts created an atmosphere of fear, driving donors away and further suppressing free expression. No reason or explanation was given for these government actions.

We echo the concerns raised by others that these inspections lack transparency, are aimed at stifling civil society organizations – particularly North Korean human rights organizations -- and are harmful to liberal democracy.<sup>8</sup> While the examination of organizations by the Ministry of Unification by itself is not necessarily suspect, the targeting of North Korean human rights organizations combined with what is fast becoming a long list of efforts to suppress the voices of human rights activists and defectors by your administration is disturbing and is part of a pattern of suppression by your administration. This includes the investigation of North Korean

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<sup>5</sup> Steve Price, [South Korea Has Flattened The Curve, But 'Normal' Is Still Some Way Off](#), Forbes, 1 April, 2020; [Coronavirus: Seoul's full cafes, Apple store lines show mass testing success](#), The Straits Times, 18 April 2020.

<sup>6</sup> [NKHR nonprofits reject unilateral "office inspections" by MOU](#), DailyNK, 24 July 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Choi Bo-sik, [North Korean Human Rights Organizations Pegged as 'Deep Rooted Evil,' Searched and Seized...Scared, All Kept Silent](#), Chosun, September 16, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> [Non-Governmental Organizations Reject Unilateral "Office Inspections" by the Ministry of Unification](#), Translation by the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 22 July 2020.

human rights organizations, the targeting of defectors through filing criminal complaints, the surveillance of individuals, detaining and physically blocking activists, and raiding the offices of defector organizations.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, human rights organizations have been cut off from government support, the budget of the Committee for the Democratization of North Korea has been cut, balloon launches have been banned at the request of the North Korean government, the North Korean Human Rights Foundation has been shut down, and school textbooks have been changed to support North Korea's false claims that South Korea started the Korean War.

The North Korean Human Rights Record Center, created in September 2016 under the Ministry of Unification with the mission of creating official records on human rights conditions in North Korea, has not published any report on the state of human rights in North Korea.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4) End Your Repatriation of North Korean Defectors

In November 2019, your government repatriated two North Korean men who had sought to defect from North Korea.<sup>11</sup> This case of repatriation illustrates that your government was willing to violate South Korean law and your international commitments regarding North Korean refugees as the Republic of Korea is a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relation to the Status of Refugees and Its 1967 Protocol and the United Nations Convention against Torture, which in Article 3, prohibits the return of a person to another State where there "are substantial grounds for believing that he would be in danger of being subject to torture." North Korea has a lengthy and well documented history of torturing and killing defectors who are repatriated to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Your government sent these two men, constitutionally South Korean citizens, back to such fate.

Most alarming is the justifications given by your government for its disregard for the fate of these two men. The Unification Ministry reportedly stated that the reasons for repatriation were, "[f]irst, they didn't become South Korean nationals since we didn't see their sincere intentions to defect. Hence, our local laws didn't apply to them. Second, the accused escapees posed a threat to our people's safety, which led us to the decision to expel them."<sup>12</sup> Ministry spokesman Lee Sang-min further justified the repatriation to North Korea by stating that, "[w]e also assessed that if they were accepted into our society, they would pose danger to our people's lives and safety as vicious criminals who cannot be recognized as refugees under international law."<sup>13</sup> This decision and justification by your government is alarming for many reasons, especially because these men were never formally indicted or convicted of the crimes they were accused of and little, if any, investigation was performed by your government before they were deported.<sup>14</sup>

#### 5) Be the Voice for the freedom and human rights of ALL Koreans as you are constitutionally and morally bound to do

As the democratically elected President of the Republic of Korea you have both a constitutional and a moral obligation to uphold the freedom and human rights of all Koreans. Your actions suggest instead that you are advocating for what is desired by the Kim Jong Un dictatorship. South Korea has been and should remain a voice and beacon of hope for the oppressed, especially those in North Korea. The failure of South Korea to end its co-sponsorship of an annual resolution in the United Nations General Assembly condemning North Korea's human rights record is a chilling example of the shift towards supporting the Kim dictatorship rather than being

<sup>9</sup> William Gallo, [South Korea Faces Criticism for Crackdown on Leaflet Launchers](#), Voice of America, 22 July 2020.

<sup>10</sup> "North Korea Human Rights Records Center Established to Officially Record Human Rights Conditions in North Korea," YTN, September 28, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Dr. Yeosang Yoon, [Two North Korean Defectors Who Have Been Forcefully Repatriated from South Korea Must Be Protected](#), Database Center for North Korean Human Rights News (NKDB), 11 November, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Choi Si-young, [Due process ignored in deporting North Korean fishermen](#), Korea Herald, 2 December 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Hyonhee Shin, [South Korea expels two North Koreans suspected of killing 16 fishermen](#), Reuters, 6 November 2019.

<sup>14</sup> See NKDB, n.11.

a voice for Koreans who live under one of the world's worst regimes.<sup>15</sup> Through this action, South Korea has ended a decade-long commitment to speak up for the horrific oppression of the North Korean people and now instead aligns itself with North Korea. No one in the world has a greater responsibility to speak out against North Korea's horrific human rights record than you, President Moon, please find the voice to do so.

In addition to the instances of oppression listed in this letter we have included below a non-exhaustive list of individuals and organizations below who have been silenced or oppressed through your administration's actions. We hope that your administration will desist from these acts of oppression and return to its commitment, and obligation, to protect and defend freedom and human rights for both South and North Koreans.

Respectfully submitted by,




Suzanne Scholte  
Chairman



Pastor Heemoon Lee  
Vice Chairman



Rabbi Abraham Cooper  
Vice Chairman



Jason West  
Vice Chairman



Ann Buwalda  
Treasurer



Sue Yoon Logan  
Administrator



Teresa Ost  
Secretary

Enclosures: Partial List of Violations, Arrests, and Harassment of Individuals  
List of Organizations That Have Been Targeted

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<sup>15</sup> [South Korea: Stand with North Korean Victims](#), Human Rights Watch, 3 March 2020.



## Partial List of Violations, Arrests, and Harassment of Individuals

**Byun Hee-jae**, journalist, of media outlet Media Watch was jailed for libel in 2018.<sup>16</sup>

**Rev. Chun Gwang-hun**, pastor, was jailed for violating the Election Law by making a public statement in support of a particular political party.<sup>17</sup>

**Hwang Ui-won**, journalist, jailed for libel in 2018 for countering JTBC's "tablet PC" story<sup>18</sup>

**Hu-Kwang-il**, defector human rights activist, arrested in October 2019 for crossing a police line at a protest.<sup>19</sup>

**Eric Foley**, pastor and leader of Voice of the Martyrs Korea, was reported to the police for sending Bibles to North Korea.<sup>20</sup>

**Jeong Chang-o**, human rights activist, was arrested by the police for throwing a shoe towards president Moon and calling him a communist.<sup>21</sup>

**Dr. Ji Man-won**, researcher, was charged with libel and dissemination of information using information and communications networks, carrying a possible sentence of 4 years.<sup>22</sup>

**Kim Sang-jin**, human rights, charged with threatening the life of Yoon Sek-yeol with 2 eggs in May 2019.

**Kim Se-ui**, journalist, indicted in October 2016 for uploading a cartoon on an internet site and for writing posts on a social media account.<sup>23</sup>

**Koh Young-ju**, journalist, was charged with damages for the crime of libel and spreading "false facts," because he called President Moon a communist. He was found not guilty, but on June 2, 2020, the prosecutor asked for a 1 ½ year jail sentence on appeal.<sup>24</sup>

**Park Jung Oh**, defector human rights activist and leader of Kuensaem, has been under police surveillance and has been interrogated by the police.<sup>25</sup>

**Park Sang Hak**, defector human rights activist and leader of Fighters for a Free North Korea, has been under surveillance by the police under the guise of protecting him from North Korea and has also been questioned by the police.<sup>26</sup>

**Shin In-kyun**, defense analyst, was prevented from appearing on Channel A's program.<sup>27</sup>

**Son Sang-dae**, journalist, charged with libel carrying a possible sentence of 1 year.<sup>28</sup>

**Sung Sang-hoon**, a journalist who runs the *Global Defense News*, was arrested in May 2020 for suggesting a Chinese man who had died had possibly died of the Coronavirus.<sup>29</sup>

**Woo Jong-chang**, journalist, was jailed in South Korea after being convicted of the "crime" of "libel" for announcing "false information."<sup>30</sup>

**Yoon Seo-in**, cartoonist, was indicted in October 2016 for uploading a cartoon on an internet site and for writing posts on a social media account.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Dr. Tara O, [Journalist preemptively jailed for libel in South Korea, a prosperous OECD country](#), One Free Korea, 31 May 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Kim Moon-Soo, [A Young Energetic IT attorney, Will Fraud in South Korea's 2020 Election be Uncovered?](#), Kim Moon-Soo TV, Translation by East Asia Research Center, 2 June 2020.

<sup>18</sup> See One Free Korea, n.16.

<sup>19</sup> [NPK Statement on South Korean Police Arresting North Korean Defector Hu Kwang-il](#), PennMike, Translated by East Asia Research Center, 12 October 2019.

<sup>20</sup> [An American pastor reported to police for attempting balloon launch across inter-Korean border](#), Hankyoreh, 21 July 2020.

<sup>21</sup> [A Citizen Yelled "Moon Jae-in is a Communist," Threw a Shoe After South Korean President Moon After He Left the National Assembly](#), Sisa Focus, Translation by East Asia Research Center, 17 July 2020.

<sup>22</sup> [4 Years Jail for Libel Regarding 5.18 Gwangju Incident? Freedom of Speech to be Set Back Again in South Korea](#), East Asia Research Center, 2 February 2020.

<sup>23</sup> [More Libel Suits to Silence Critics: Cartoonist Yoon Seo-in, Journalist Kim Se-ui](#), East Asia Research Center, 15 September 2018.

<sup>24</sup> [South Korean President Moon Jae-in Sued Mr. Koh Young-ju for Libel for Calling Him a Communist; the Prosecutor Wants to Jail Him; Suppression of Free Speech via Lawfare](#), East Asia Research Center, 6 June 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Choi He-suk, [Ministry seeks police probe of leafleting NGOs, Cheong Wa Dae warns of 'stern' measures](#), Korea Herald, 11 June 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Jeongmin Kim, [Activist Renounces South Korean police protection from North Korean "threats"](#), NK News, 9 July 2020.

<sup>27</sup> [Freedom of the Press Muzzled Again in South Korea: Shin In-kyun, a Youtuber and a Defense Analyst, Prevented from Appearing on Channel A](#), East Asia Research Center, 2 December 2018.

<sup>28</sup> [4 Years Jail for Libel Regarding 5.18 Gwangju Incident? Freedom of Speech to be Set Back Again in South Korea](#), East Asia Research Center, 2 February 2020.

<sup>29</sup> [The Arrest of Yet Another Journalist \(Sung Sang-hoon\) for Saying "Maybe He Died of Coronavirus"; More Suppression of YouTubers Expected](#), East Asia Research Center, 13 May 2020.

<sup>30</sup> [Another Journalist, Woo Jong-chang, Jailed for Libel, Judge Says Cho Kuk Defamed, Rule of Law Continues to Crumble in South Korea](#), East Asia Research Center, 19 July 2020.

<sup>31</sup> See East Asia Research Center, n.22.

**List of Organizations That Have Been Targeted**

**Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights  
Transitional Justice Working Group  
North Korea Strategy Center  
Nochain for Northern Korea  
Lawyers for Human Rights and Unification of Korea  
National Development Institute (NDI)  
Unification Media Group  
Korean War Abductees' Family Union  
Unification Academy  
Network for North Korean Democracy and Human Rights  
Open North Korea (ONK)  
1969 KAL Abductees' Families Association  
Free North Korea Radio  
Citizens' Coalition for Human Rights of Abductees and North Korean Refugees  
Association of the North Korean Defectors  
NK Intellectuals Solidarity (NKIS)  
Center for Liberty and Reunification  
Hanananum  
Committee for the Democratization of North Korea  
NK People's Liberation Front  
Unification Future Solidarity  
Pen International North Korean Writers in Exile Center  
New Korea Women's Union  
Justice for North Korea  
Improving North Korean Human Rights Center**