



Former US Special Envoy: Beneath the Rhetoric on North Korea, Humanitarian Aid and Rights Advocacy Are Still Important Tools



Ambassador Robert R. King served as Special Envoy for North Korea Human Rights at the US State Department from 2009 to 2017. Before his State Department appointment, Ambassador King was Staff Director of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and Chief of Staff to Congressman Tom Lantos (D-California). From September to October 2017, Ambassador King was a POSCO Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center.

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While North Korea’s nuclear tests and missile launches provoke threats between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, private charitable organizations in the United States provide a small stream of health, education, and humanitarian assistance to the people of North Korea. The US government offers modest support to these private organizations and participates in international efforts to promote human rights for the North Korean people.

In a speech to State Department employees in May 2017, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said that by pursuing American human rights “values” the United States is creating “obstacles to our ability to advance our national security interests, our economic interests.” But in a recent talk at the East-West Center, Ambassador Robert R. King, former US Special Envoy for North Korea Human Rights, argued that, on the contrary, “the promotion of humanitarian assistance and human rights in North Korea not only reflects American values but also supports our national security interests. Furthermore, these values have been endorsed in United Nations documents by the vast majority of countries of the world.”

The point here, according to King, is that “humanitarian assistance that targets individuals in need does not directly benefit the regime and its military efforts. Medical assistance programs—for example those focused on treating and preventing the spread of multi-drug resistant tuberculosis—help impoverished individuals without access to treatment. Other targeted activities include feeding programs for young children and pregnant and lactating women.”

King stressed that “humanitarian programs that offer food and medical assistance as well as educational, environmental, and agricultural aid help counter the argument that the United States is hostile to the people of North Korea and provide evidence of American generosity and concern. Contact with Americans involved in such programs also provides information about the outside world and limits the regime’s information monopoly. Educational programs help expose North Korean students to outside ideas and values, and these are an important broadening experience for the next generation.”

However, in August the US government announced a near-complete ban on travel by Americans to North Korea. This was primarily an effort to stop funds that might benefit the North Korean regime, but it was also an attempt to deal with the problems raised when American tourists are detained. Securing an exception to the travel ban is possible, but difficult and limited in duration.

“The ban on tourism makes sense,” according to King, “but the travel ban has also made humanitarian aid and other types of useful engagement more difficult.” For example, this fall American faculty and staff members were unable to return to Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, which is primarily funded by evangelical Christian groups in the United States and other countries. More than 500 North Korean graduate and undergraduate students attend the school’s classes, all conducted in English, and before the ban nearly half of its foreign faculty members and staff were Americans.

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King also described international efforts to promote human rights in North Korea. The United Nations Human Rights Council issued a landmark report on the situation there in 2014, and both the United Nations General Assembly and the Security Council have adopted resolutions condemning North Korea's human rights record. King emphasized that "these statements of condemnation raise questions about the credibility and legitimacy of the North Korean government and help increase pressure from the world community."

He stressed the importance of US participation in these efforts: "As Americans, our commitment to human rights defines who we are. The United States is committed to a set of principles, and it is important that our foreign policies reflect this commitment." In addition, he pointed out that "pressure on human rights is one of the few ways the United States can foster change in North Korea, given that our military options are extremely limited."

Improving access to information is another option. One important way that the North Korean government stays in power is by tightly controlling access to information about the outside world. The United States, South Korea, and other countries direct radio broadcasts to North Korea, and King said that "there is some evidence that

as many as one-third of North Koreans may listen to foreign broadcasts." He added that "South Korean 'dramas,' smuggled in through China on flash drives, seem to be particularly popular. These soap operas help contradict North Korean propaganda that South Koreans live in abject poverty."

The United States has also supported efforts by North Koreans to leave the country. King said the number of defectors has dropped—from almost 3,000 to less than 1,500 per year—since 2012 when Kim Jong-un came to power and tightened restrictions at the Chinese border, where the vast majority of North Korean defectors leave the country. King stressed the importance of helping defectors because "they often maintain contact with family members back home and thus provide a good way to obtain information about conditions in the north and to send information to North Koreans about conditions in other countries."

By contrast, "American tourism to North Korea provides little benefit to the United States," according to King. "It gives travelers the right to boast that they have visited the 'hermit kingdom,' but little else. Tourism to the north is not cheap, and tourism revenues are used for nuclear and missile programs and to purchase luxuries for the leadership."

Another serious downside of tourism is the risk that American citizens will be detained and held by the North Korean regime. The case of Otto Warmbier, the American college student who was detained for 17 months and died within days of his release, brought the seriousness of this risk to public attention. "There is little evidence that the regime detains Americans just to hold hostages, although release of detained Americans has been linked to senior-level Americans visiting the north," King said.

King stressed the importance of "engaging with North Korea by keeping up the pressure on human rights and providing humanitarian assistance where possible. If assistance programs can be designed and implemented in ways that prevent resources from being diverted to users other than the intended beneficiaries, humanitarian engagement has positive benefits."

"In today's dangerous climate, we ought to use every option available to engage North Korea in a positive way," he concluded. "Human rights advocacy and humanitarian engagement stand out among the very limited options available to the United States. Equally important, pursuing human rights and encouraging private humanitarian assistance mean standing up for the values that are so fundamental to Americans' view of the world."



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