DEFENSE FORUM FOUNDATION
Congressional Defense and Foreign Policy Forum

“Knocking Down North Korea’s Information Wall: How Defectors are Spreading the Truth to North Korea”

WELCOME AND MODERATOR:
SUZANNE SCHOLTE
PRESIDENT, DFF

SPEAKER:
Kim Seong Min
Founder and Director, Free North Korea Radio
Award Winning Human Rights Activist

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B-340 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
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Suzanne Scholte: Good afternoon, I'm Suzanne Scholte, President of the Defense Forum Foundation and it’s my pleasure to welcome you to today’s Congressional Defense and Foreign Policy Forum. For those of you who are attending for the first time, DFF’s Defense and Foreign Policy Forum is a bipartisan program established to provide congressional staff the opportunity to hear from expert speakers on critical issues facing the United States and our allies. We are very proud to have long enjoyed strong participation and sponsorship from both Republican and Democratic Members of Congress, and hope that those of you who are here for the first time will become regular attendees.

We always promise you an excellent speaker, critical topic, and the chance to ask your questions. Our most recent forums have focused on ISIS and the war on terrorism, and China’s growing capabilities and rising naval presence. But one of our passions at DFF, in addition to focusing on national security issues is, how can we best promote freedom and democracy abroad? For nearly twenty years we have partnered with the people best capable to do that, those who have escaped from tyrannical regimes.

One of our most successful partnerships has been with those who have escaped from North Korea as we were the foundation that hosted the very first North Korean defectors back in 1997. They were the first people that had ever spoken out in the United States about the human rights tragedy occurring in their homeland. These defectors were the first to bring their testimonies to the United States so that we would understand the horrific things that were happening in North Korea. Our speaker today has been one of the bravest, most outspoken, most active defectors. Kim Seong Min, the founder and director of Free North Korea Radio. Kim was born in 1962 at Heechon, Jagang Province, but raised in Pyongyang as the son of a famous Poet. He enlisted in the Army. After ten years of military service, Kim attended Kim Hyung-jik Teachers’ College where he majored in Literature. Kim was assigned to work as a propaganda writer at the Military Training Station No. 620 Art Propaganda Squad, but he decided to defect when he found out he had family in South Korea, and had become increasingly disenchanted with the Kim regime.

He fled to China in 1996 but was arrested and repatriated. The Chinese border guards that had arrested him joked that they knew when they sent him back, forced him back against his will, into North Korea, that he would be subjected to execution, because they knew he had served in the military. And that’s exactly what he was was going to be subjected to. When he was forced back to North Korea, he was sent by the North Korean security guards to Pyongyang to be publicly executed. While traveling from Onsong to Pyongyang by train, to face execution for leaving the country without government permission, he jumped to escape again to China. In China, he worked as a laborer at a coal factory, while he hid his background as a North Korean, until he was able to reach a family member, an uncle in South Korea, who helped him escape to South Korea. In South Korea, he attended Yonsei University and Graduate School at Joong Ang University and received a Master of Arts. After serving in leadership roles in North Korean defector associations, including the North Korean Defectors General Association, and the North
Korea People’s Liberation Front, he founded Free North Korea Radio, which has broadcast a daily radio show via shortwave to North Korea every day since 2006. It has become the most popular single program ever broadcast to North Korea [according to defectors]. Kim is the recipient of both the 2009 Asia Democracy and Human Rights Award from the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, and the 2008 Media Award from Reporters Without Borders. He has also come to be my little brother, so I’m very honored to introduce to you, my “Dong Sang”, Kim Seong-Min.

Kim Seong-min: (through a translator) Thank you everyone. When Suzanne speaks, of course, I can’t understand all of the English, but I think she speaks better than most anchors on CNN News. (Laughter) Usually, when I speak, I just speak from my head, but Suzanne told me I am speaking in front of very important people so I took care to write it all down. First of all, I would like to thank you all for your interest in North Korea, the world’s only three generation totalitarian dictatorship, and the people who are suffering under his regime. Today, I will take this opportunity to explain to you the current status of North Korea and what we can do to help end the dictatorship that reigns there.

External information to North Korea comes in through a variety of routes. The two main routes are, first, word of mouth, and, second, through equipment, such as radios and USBs. Although word of mouth is usually limited to news and information that is linked to the North Korean peoples’ interests, it has the advantage of spreading spontaneously. Such word of mouth and rumors go through various travelers who cross the borders of China, Russia, and North Korea, including various retail shoppers as well as tourists who go into North Korea. This information includes news on famous celebrities as well as various episodes and accidents that happen around the world. The important thing about this news is that it allows the North Korean people to compare their own situation with the rest of the world.

In a recent development, cell phones are now being used by over 5,000 of the 30,000 North Korean defectors to reach people in North Korea, another important way of sending news into North Korea. North Koreans are also using various equipment to get information, including radios, USBs, and flash drives that allow information in the form of visual media and auditory recording to be sent into North Korea. The North Korean regime is no longer able to control the influence of South Korean television in North Korea, as they were able to do before. There has been an increasing amount of South Korean TV programs that have been allowed into North Korea. There are even regions in North Korea which are able to receive the broadcast of South Korean TV shows. Through such channels and routes, various types of media and information are currently being channeled into North Korea. However, although these programs have a lot of commerciality attached to them, there is very little in the form of a concrete purpose for them. In order to overcome such difficulties, various NGOs form and create their own visual media to send into North Korea, but they are often faced with financial difficulties in doing so. To give
you a recent example, the movie, *The Interview* (which I’m sure a lot of you have heard of) has had more than a million copies distributed to North Korea through our volunteers. As well as an electronic book *Who is Kim Jong-Un?*, which has been sent into North Korea through an NGO.

Up to now, I have given you broad strokes, the various routes through which North Koreans are able to receive outside information. Now I will tell you more specifically about Free North Korea Radio (FNKR) which is the organization I work for. FNKR was started 10 years ago. Although FNKR is a significant source of information to North Korean defectors, there was an agreement between South and North Korean regimes in 2004 that ended broadcasts into North Korea from South Korea. However, despite such difficulties, we, the defectors, decided that perhaps if the government isn’t doing it, then it is up to us to continue the effort. Although I was a poet in North Korea, and I hoped to be a poet when I came to South Korea, I felt a calling and decided to commit myself to this initiative. Many people discouraged this action stating that if the South Korean Government is giving up, then why should you take it upon yourself to continue it? Other people also said that there are other alternative broadcasts, such as Voice of America or Radio Free Asia, and why should the defectors take it upon themselves to continue the effort? Others were more direct in their opposition. There have been agents from North Korea, as well as extreme leftists and North Korean proponents in South Korea, that have criticized me as well as threatened me. Once I was kicked during a demonstration and had to be hospitalized because I lost consciousness. Despite the hundreds of threats, and the delivery of an axe stained with blood, and a dead rat sent to me through [the] mail, I have stood firm in my belief that what we are doing is the right thing to do, and that the defectors are the best people to continue the effort to send free broadcasts into North Korea. The reason is [because], although most people know that the reason the North Korea regime can exist is because of the regime’s ability to control and prevent information from getting into North Korea, while most people know this, no one understands better than the defectors, who have experienced this firsthand, what kind of psychological effects that this sort of prevention of information has on the North Korean people.

Also, while millions of North Koreans have starved to death — and are still starving — no one, other than the North Korean defectors themselves, know that what these people need isn’t bread, but truth and intellectual information that can wake them from the lies that they are living. With such desperation in my heart, I have continued FNKR. Come this December, we will reach our ten-year anniversary. During the process, I have received various awards, including the Reporters without Borders Award, and the Taiwan Foundation Democracy and Human Rights Award. However, I still believe the greatest award I have received is the interest and the love that we get from the North Korean people.

I’d like to introduce to you a couple of episodes. In March 2006, a North Korean couple visited our radio station. They said they were agents stationed in Europe by the North Korean regime and that hearing FNKR was what gave them the determination to escape the regime and come to
South Korea. The wife came to us and said that we were what really gave her the courage to come out of North Korea. She eventually became an employee at our radio station. Another memorable episode came when we were airing a show called, *Warnings to the Followers of the Dictator*. When we ended the program in order to air a new program, we actually got a call from North Korea! The caller stated: “This is the program we listen most avidly to and that we look forward to the most. Why are you stopping this? If this is a significant broadcast, shouldn’t you be airing it repeatedly?” When I heard the voice of this woman from a countryside in North Korea, this is what really gave me the courage and determination to continue. This has been motivation and the drive that has allowed me to continue the initiative up to this day.

At Free North Korea Radio, we also do a piece called, *News About Pyongyang from Seoul*. This program’s goal is to let North Koreans know the information that the North Korean regime seeks to hide from them. The information we report comes through the various reporters that we have within North Korea which amount to 30 in ten different cities. Among the various broadcasts aimed towards North Korea, we have the most “boots on the ground”, meaning reporters in North Korea, and we are certain that we are the one that get the news the fastest and in the most accurate fashion.

We were the first media in South Korea to carry the news that Jang Song Taek, a prominent member in the North Korean Worker’s Party, was executed, and then aired the news to the North Korean people. We are also the first media source to air the news that North Korea is changing their currency policy. We carried that news to the North Korean people a day before the North Korean regime made the official announcement.

Through FNKR’s network, in addition to important news, we were able to get the database of the 2.7 million records of all the residents of Pyongyang, various announcements on policy statements that the North Korean government has made, as well as numerous classified documents that they are trying to hide from the North Korean people. In our hands are also various books that the North Korean regime has banned and/or are scrutinizing, as well as 2,000 various research theses and papers, as well as the recently prepared propaganda materials designed to deify Kim Jong-Un and to brainwash the North Korean people.

(Shows radio) Threatened by our activities, the North Korean regime is making efforts to jam our radio program in order to prevent our broadcast from reaching North Koreans, and the Chinese government has also banned our shows within their border regions. Our activities are only made possible by the various inside reporters within North Korea. And we believe the fact that we have such valuable assets on the ground, willing
to risk their lives to help us, is evidence of how important and significant our broadcast is to the North Korean people. Furthermore, we vow to strive towards an even greater scope of activity in order to claim the greatest reward possible: the unification of the two Koreas.

Unfortunately, many NGOs and initiatives working for freedom in North Korea, including FNKR, have been sidelined by the South Korean government, as well as threatened and attacked by extreme leftists and proponents of the North Korean regime working within South Korea. Although the American Government was once a huge supporter and proponent of these activities, they are now decreasing their support. Some people ask, “Why should the American people and their tax dollars be used to help North Korean defector NGOs?” And I like to answer them,

“It is because the various problems that the American government and the American people face, including the nuclear threat, illegal drugs, terrorism, counterfeiting and kidnapping carried out by the North Korean regime, can only be eradicated when the entire country becomes a democracy. And in order for the North Korean regime to fall and the country to turn into a democracy, it is critical that the inflow of information to North Korea is carried through by people like us, North Korean defectors, which is more important than war or force.”

We defectors, when we are being educated in North Korea, learn to call Americans not Americans, but “American Bastards,” and the US is not the United States, but “United States – The Country of Wolves.” It is only when we escape North Korea, that we learn America is the hope for North Korea and the North Korean people. We also learn that America is dedicated to keeping world peace and human rights throughout the world. I’d like to take this opportunity to say that the United States government will continue to be a strong ally for the pursuit of human rights in North Korea.

This is a personal story, and I’m going off the script here, but I know that even in the U.S. there are people who criticize FNKR and oppose the work that we do. However, I’d like to remind you all, that despite such opposition, I value very highly all of the support that the Americans are providing to our initiative right now. For example, in my office, I have a picture that I took with President Bush in a large frame, as well as various pictures that I have taken with other supporters throughout my time in the U.S. And, I’d like to promise you all that, when our mission is complete, the two Koreas unite, and the North Korean people are freed from their despotic regime, I will tell each and every one of them the names of the people who have helped me, and helped the rest of the Koreans to come to this place, and to convey my thanks for all of you.

As a last remark, I would like to introduce to you the opening words of the Free North Korea Radio broadcast. These opening words were part of the Washington’s Statement for North Korea
Freedom, which was announced during North Korea Freedom Week 2015, which was organized by Dr. Suzanne Scholte. This program was part of what the South Korean government broadcast against North Korea recently, due to provocations from North Korea when it placed mines in the DMZ area. Normally these words would be read aloud with good background music, and read by a North Korean defector who has a beautiful voice, but today you’ll just have to deal with me.

“Kim Jong-Un did not become the leader of North Korea through a democratic process. He is a parasite who depends on a three generation hereditary dictatorship, and the brainwashing by his regime turns the North Korean people into slaves and rule based on his father. He is the bane of all North Korean people. Therefore, we will never recognize the North Korean regime. Today, the many problems of North Korea, including the violation of human rights, the nuclear missile program, the various kidnappings, drugs, counterfeit dollars, and inhumane treatment of its laborers, all stem from the hereditary dictatorship that Kim Jong-Un is a part of. Therefore, we at FNKR believe that tearing down the Kim regime is the best method and the foremost mission we have in order to achieve the free unification of North and South Korea.” (APPLAUSE)

Thank you. Up to here, I’ve been reading off of my script, but there is one more thing I would like to add. Many people who take interest in North Korea, think that North Korea has changed a lot throughout the past decades, and they credit us and other various broadcasts with how we provide North Korea with information for such change. In contrast, though both the South Korean and the US government claim that they have done a lot to bring about change in North Korea for its people. I do not think their efforts have been as instrumental as they claim. In my view, the Six Party Talks are not as promising, because Kim Jong Un continuously states he will never give up his nuclear arsenal, and we should never expect change in his attitude. Therefore, the crux of the North Korea problem does not lie in its nuclear arsenal or military force. Rather, it stems from the fact that the people of North Korea are enslaved and the best way to counter that is to provide information to North Korea, so that they can wake up from the brainwashing and propaganda that they have been subject to. Therefore, we buy radios and then get them into North Korea. We also send these larger radios which have a wider frequency receiving rate. We also produce many electronic books aimed toward letting [the] North Korean people know the true state in which they are living. However, the work of all these operations is being done by less than over 200 North Korean defectors. All of the money that goes into these operations is also very, very small. If the US government would just give the amount of money that would equal the price of one F-16 fighter to us, we believe that will have a much greater effect in changing the lives of the North Korean people.

We are the ones who experienced first-hand the struggles that the North Korean people are going through right now. We are the ones who have direct contact with them right now.
(Shows cellphone) This is currently the most up to date cellphone in North Korea, and I brought it here because Dr. Scholte asked me to bring it to you. But, when I got that request, it was only 6 days before I came here. If one was to try to acquire such a phone within only 6 days of notice, I believe it would be impossible for even agents of the Korean Intelligence Service (NIS) as well as the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency). We were the first media to report videos such as the public shooting execution of the North Korea people, as well as other various violations of human rights. The only reason that was possible was because we have people inside of North Korea, and the news that they are reporting has to do with their own families and friends.

I’d like to ask if there are any reporters here, because I am going to show you a video sent from inside of North Korea and you cannot report this. This inside reporter sent a video of a person singing…(Shows video…on cellphone). She’s not very good at singing. This may not seem like much, but the importance of this lies in the fact that it was the people who recorded this video and it was the people who sent it to us. If you look closely at the video, you will see that the woman singing has a phone in her hand, and that the person recording the singing is also doing so with a phone. Because FNKR has people inside North Korea who are able to send such raw information, it is almost like having YouTube within North Korea, where information is available that is not processed by the North Korea regime’s orders. It is the people themselves that are sending this information.

Right now, we are only able to have about an hour’s worth of bandwidth/broadcast into North Korea, and this saddens me greatly because when we had the support of the US government, we were able to broadcast for up to 6 hours a day. The difference in broadcasting time is the difference in the impact that I can make to my people and alleviate them from the sufferings they are going through right now.

Sitting in this room right now are many people who have helped me and this initiative in the past and I would like to thank them. I would like to take this opportunity to remind you once more of the desperation that me and my people have in our hearts when we engage and continue in the efforts we are doing right now. I would also like to take this opportunity to ask you all to take continued interest in North Korea and the North Korean people, and to provide unyielding
support in the future for this initiative and for the lives of the people of North Korea. Thank you so much. 감사합니다.

(APPLAUSE)

(Question and Answer Session)

**Dr. Scholte:** For the questions, I want to call on any congressional staff first. I know we have a lot of reporters here, and we would be happy to take your questions right after the program, but the congressional staff need to leave soon. To start, one thing I want to point out, because I’m not sure if this came over clearly, is after the latest hostilities between North and South Korea, the North agreed to go into negotiations, and many of us believe it was because South Korea started playing FNKR’s programs on the loud speakers at the DMZ. They started six days of broadcasting from the loud speakers. They turned the loudspeakers on that they had shut down in the DJ Kim era. For three days, they played K-Pop, very popular South Korean music, but then they switched to the FNKR program. The FNKR program Kim was citing was the declaration that the North Koreans made here in Washington during North Korea Freedom Week which criticized directly the North Korean regime. So, a lot of people believe that there is a direct link between the fact that they started playing the FNKR program on those loudspeakers, and the North Koreans just could not tolerate that, because they knew it was their own people criticizing their regime.

But the first question I know that people are very interested in, is this: “Can you explain the cellphone technology? Because I don’t think people understand… If we could call into North Korea, that would change everything. So if you/he could explain the cellphone technology in North Korea?”

**Kim Seong-Min:** So, to first give you a little background about the cellphone technology in North Korea, the telecommunication service is provided by Orascom, an Egyptian company which the North Korea regime has a contract with. The system is closed so that you cannot call into the system from outside North Korea. We have another kind of phone, which is smuggled into North Korea through China, and these phones only work within the reach of North Korea’s telecommunication radio waves.

**Congressional Staff member:** “You mentioned that you can only afford one hour of broadcast per day, this seems like a very valuable one hour. What type of content do you focus on for that one hour?”

**Kim Seong-Min:** First of all, you are right, it is a very short span of time. But in order to maximize the timespan that we have, we try to focus on messages directly from defectors themselves, such as soldiers who have defected [from] North Korea, college students who have
defected, and the messages they are sending are directly to the North Korean people. To give you a little more information, we have about 120 programs that we did in the past, and most of these came as very shocking information to the North Korean people. We would love to have more time to share more content as it could truly be very eye opening to the North Korean people.

Scholte: “Could you name some examples of those 120 programs?”

Kim Seong-Min: First of all, we have *Pyongyang News from Seoul*, where we report real news from North Korea and try to expose all of the existing propaganda and provide the North Koreans with an unadulterated form of information. It is very likely that in North Korea, people are unaware of even the things that are happening right beside them due to the control of the information by the North Korean government. We also have a program called, *Warnings to the Followers of the Dictator*, where North Korean defectors come on air and provide real first-hand stories of how they were mistreated and beaten by agents of the government, police force, and other various security personnel. This is the program that the North Korean government hates the most, and we get the most threats from them about it, because it lays bare all of the brutalities that take place within the regime reported by the people that experienced these mistreatments first-hand. We also have a program called, *24 North Korean People’s Army*, where we team up with an NGO formed by former North Korean soldiers who have defected, and we engage in a conversation between the two parties which then is aimed towards the soldiers in the North Korean army. We also have *Current Affairs*, where we point out and criticize Kim Jong-II and Kim Jong-Un for issues like, how many women they have, and how they mistreat them. We also have a program called, *Lecture on Human Rights*, where the staff write pieces and lectures about human rights and how they are being violated in North Korea.

As you can see, it is hard to fit all of these into 60 minutes, so sometimes we don’t get to share all of these programs. Unfortunately, despite the content that we have, the South Korean government says that they cannot help with our broadcast because during the Roh administration, they entered into an agreement with the North Korean regime to stop any sort of broadcasts of this kind. Therefore, even when some of our broadcasts are used, such as in the recent provocation by North Korea, it is only used in a very limited political scope. The reason I defected myself is because I heard at the time, the various media and broadcasts that were aimed toward North Korea, and I was able to hear about South Korea. I know how important and crucial these broadcasts are. That’s why, though we know of other media outlets and broadcasts, we believe that it is we, the defectors, who have experienced North Korea’s atrocities first-hand and know what the North Korean people want to hear and know how to approach them most effectively. We believe what we are doing is of crucial importance. That’s why, once again, I would like to ask for your continued support and interest because what we are doing is so, so important.
**Scholte:** I want to mention that DFF also does programming from America. We have a couple of programs that we prepare to air on FNKR such as *Coming to America*, which is interviews with defectors who are living here, *Hello, from America*, which is Korean-Americans sending greetings back to their grandparents, since most Korean Americans trace their ancestry back to North Korea. We do these programs in order for North Koreans to understand what America is really about, which is something that a lot of North Korean Defectors appreciate, even more than a lot of Americans.

Thank you all so much for being here, I hope you all become regular participants, and thank you again to Kim Seong-Min. (APPLAUSE)