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(1916-2014)

Eduardo Mendoza  
(1917-2009)

April 23, 2018

Office of President Moon Jae-in  
1 Sejongno, Jongno-gu,  
Seoul, Republic of Korea  
Via Mail

Dear President Moon,

We respectfully urge you to uphold your country's democratic principles and refrain from violating the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of association of South Korean citizens that have chosen to be vocal and to demonstrate their discontent with North Korea's totalitarian regime. In this instance, we'd like to bring two specific incidents to your attention. These incidents are an outrageous violation of the rights of Korean citizens and represent an alarming shift in the states of fundamental freedoms and democracy in the Republic of Korea.

On April 13, 2018, South Korean cable TV network Channel A, a subsidiary of Dong-A Ilbo, was at a human rights conference filming the speech of the former North Korean Deputy Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Mr. Thae Yong-ho. Mr. Thae defected from North Korea and fled his U.K. posting in 2016, and has since advocated tirelessly for his fellow North Koreans still suffering under the Kim regime. Channel A's reporter and camera crew were able to enter the conference venue without incident. However, when Mr. Thae began his speech, agents from the National Intelligence Service (NIS) stood up to prevent Channel A from filming by blocking the camera. Later on, when a reporter asked Mr. Thae a question about North Korea as he was exiting the venue, NIS agents stopped Mr. Thae from answering the question and forcibly rushed Mr. Thae off against his will, even though Mr. Thae was starting to respond to the reporter. Organizers of the conference informed Channel A that the NIS had warned them to avoid "sensitive" topics, such as the upcoming inter-Korean summit.

In an earlier incident, on April 10, 2018, a dozen policemen stopped Mr. Lee Min-bok as he was on his way to launch balloons over the DMZ border into North Korea, a largely symbolic and also humanitarian activity that is aimed at increasing the opportunities of the North Korean people to obtain outside information that their totalitarian government prevents them from accessing. Mr. Lee is a North Korean defector that, like millions of his countrymen, suffered horrors under the Kim dynasty. After escaping and being granted South Korean citizenship, Mr. Lee has devoted his life to raising awareness about the Kim dictatorship in South Korea, and to providing aid and outside information to North Koreans.

As part of his activism, Mr. Lee has been launching balloons that carry informative leaflets into North Korea for many years without interference from the South Korean government. His leaflets contain educational materials that create an opportunity to liberate North Korean minds from the lies told by the Kim regime by providing a glimpse at life in the outside world. When Mr. Lee protested the hindrance and asked the policemen why he was stopped, the policemen told him that it was for the sake of North-South relations. Mr. Lee was unable to launch his balloons on that day.

What is the policy interest behind your government's decision to prevent all balloon launches? At first sight, it does not seem to be a policy that correctly weighs the government's legitimate interest to protect its national security with the key democratic interest to protect the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of association of all South Korean citizens, especially those who devote their lives to doing something about the horrors occurring on the other side of the DMZ.

We are appalled and alarmed by these two incidents in South Korea. The surprising and extremely concerning actions of the police officers and the NIS agents violated Mr. Lee's and Mr. Thae's right to freedom of expression, a basic human right protected under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. South Korea has been one of the few countries in Asia that has been able to achieve true democracy, and with it, individual freedom. The occurrence of the above incidents would suggest that the current administration is not holding itself to the standard of a liberal democracy, in which individual freedoms are protected and valued, but instead sliding dangerously into authoritarianism, in which civil activism and free speech are routinely suppressed.

The activism of North Korean defectors in South Korea has contributed greatly to the well-being of North Koreans and to the global interest on North-South relations. With help from defector-run groups and charities, many North Koreans have been able to escape living under the oppressive Kim regime and start new lives in South Korea and overseas. Balloon launches such as Mr. Lee's operation are the only hope some North Koreans have of learning the truth about the Kim regime. Likewise, Mr. Thae has courageously used his former high-level post as a North Korean diplomat to speak truth to power and educate the public about the atrocities committed by Kim Jong-un and his co-conspirators. The brave activism of these defectors must not be hindered by the South Korean government, but encouraged.

North Korean defectors, who are recognized as citizens from the moment they arrive in South Korea, should enjoy the same basic rights that people who have escaped tyranny enjoy to criticize and actively try to undermine the dictatorial regimes that led them to leave their home country in the first place. Instead of prohibiting it, Seoul should encourage the principled work of North Korean defectors who, at huge peril to their lives, were able to make it into the democratic part of the Korean Peninsula, and now, as free people, refuse to normalize and forget the horrendous predicament facing millions of their fellow Koreans.

We respectfully urge you to uphold the democratic principles valued highly by the South Korean people and refrain from obstructing future actions of North Korean defector-activists.

Yours sincerely,



Thor Halvorssen  
President & CEO



Garry Kasparov  
Chairman

cc: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea

Permanent Mission of the Republic of Korea to the United Nations

Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Korea

Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations

David Kaye, UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Laurent Meillan, Officer-in-Charge, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Regional Office for South-East Asia

Michael Kirby, Chairman of the UN Commission of Inquiry on DRPK

Sonja Biserko, Member of the UN Commission of Inquiry on DPRK

Marzuki Darusman, Member of the UN Commission of Inquiry on DPRK