



THE PENINSULA

US funding freeze threatens backbone of global efforts on North Korean human rights

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Over the past two decades, the United States has played a uniquely important role in sustaining the global movement for truth, justice, and accountability for the people of North Korea. Today, that movement is in crisis.

In an unprecedented turn of events, the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKDB) and partners across the broader North Korean human rights field were abruptly notified earlier this year that the U.S. was suspending federal funding due to an [executive order](#) freezing foreign assistance. While many have linked the freeze to disruptions in humanitarian aid, the reality is that long-term, on-the-ground human rights work has also been critically affected.

The United States has long been the only government providing consistent and large-scale support for documenting human rights abuses in North Korea. In the absence of alternative funding, this support has enabled the very existence of the entire North Korean human rights movement. Cutting or freezing federal funding threatens to dismantle that infrastructure.

The impact is more than financial. It sends a chilling message to North Korean escapees and victims who have risked everything to speak out against oppression and authoritarianism—that their voices and the justice they seek are suddenly less

important. If the freeze continues, years of work, thousands of survivor testimonies, critical databases, and transitional justice initiatives may be stalled indefinitely or lost altogether.

The U.S. Role in a Movement with No Substitutes

North Korea is among the world's most closed, opaque, and repressive societies. It has no independent media, no civil society, and no legal mechanisms for accountability. The North Korean people do not benefit from domestic NGOs, bar associations filing legal claims, or grassroots organizations documenting state violence. As a result, the work of monitoring human rights in North Korea has always taken place outside its borders—largely through escapee testimonies and defector-led organizations, often based in South Korea.

NKDB is one such organization. Since 2003, it has built the largest private database on North Korean human rights abuses, containing over 88,000 documented cases based on interviews with more than 20,000 individuals. This data informs UN reports, government policy, and advocacy efforts around the world. It also lays the groundwork for a future in which transitional justice for decades' worth of human rights abuses can be achieved. NKDB also provides psychosocial support for North Korean escapees, runs public education programs to depoliticize the issue, and conducts in-depth research on topics from religious persecution to forced repatriation. U.S. funding has been vital in making this possible.

This freeze has also dealt a serious blow to escapee empowerment groups and information dissemination organizations, both of which are essential pillars of a comprehensive strategy on North Korea. These groups help equip defectors to become advocates, bridge-builders, and credible messengers in international forums. Information dissemination groups such as Unification Media Group work tirelessly to break the regime's information blockade, a critical element in fostering change from within. Undermining these efforts weakens a multilateral, strategic approach to human rights — one that recognizes the power of truth, agency, and informed engagement in confronting tyranny.

The abruptness of the funding freeze has caused operational chaos and widespread uncertainty. Within weeks, organizations across the field were forced to lay off staff, cancel projects, and suspend services. Long-term research initiatives are being abandoned midstream. Experts who have dedicated decades to the field are leaving. The institutional memory built over two decades is eroding at an alarming pace.

More alarmingly, North Korean escapees are losing access to therapy and counselling, legal assistance, and reintegration programs they depend on. For victims of severe trauma, like many North Korean escapees, these services provide a critical and essential way toward integrating into South Korean society.

Implications for U.S. Strategy

For years, the United States has advanced human rights in North Korea as not just a moral imperative but a strategic necessity. In opposition to fundamental democratic principles, totalitarian regimes thrive on secrecy, denial, and impunity. Human rights documentation challenges all three.

It provides credible evidence, builds international pressure, and prevents the regime from rewriting its crimes. Following the release of the UN Commission of Inquiry (COI) report, North Korea made notable changes in its approach to certain human rights issues — particularly regarding the rights of persons with disabilities. In 2016, the DPRK ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), a move widely interpreted as an attempt to counter growing international criticism. Just two years later, in 2018, North Korea took the unprecedented step of inviting the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities for an official visit — the first time any UN human rights expert was granted access to the country.

While these steps did not signal systemic reform, they demonstrated that sustained international pressure, grounded in credible NGO documentation, can push even the most closed regimes to engage, however cautiously, with the global human rights framework.

Human rights and security are intertwined. The infrastructure supported by the United States—comprising databases, testimonies, training programs, and survivor networks—is indispensable not only for pursuing justice but also for gaining real-time intelligence on North Korea. In the absence of conventional diplomacy and engagement, through NGOs' interviews with escapees, these sources offer vital insight into the regime's inner dynamics.

Human Rights Must Transcend Politics

This moment of crisis is not limited to U.S. policy. In South Korea, the recent impeachment and removal of President Yoon Suk Yeol has thrown the future of North Korean human rights advocacy into further uncertainty. His administration increased human rights funding, appointed an ambassador for international cooperation on North Korean human rights and a promotional ambassador for spreading awareness on the issue, and even established "North Korean Defectors Day." These efforts gave long-overdue visibility to a marginalized cause.

Yet, the administration also tightly tied North Korean human rights to a conservative agenda, risking the perception that human rights are a partisan issue. This narrowed the conversation and weakened the political independence of civil society. But it also helped shift broader South Korean public perceptions about North Korean human rights. Since 2014, NKDB has conducted annual opinion surveys. In its most recent poll, 65.5 percent of respondents stated they were interested in the North Korean human rights issue, including 68.5 percent of progressives and 72.9 percent of conservatives. Despite the politicization of the issue at the government level, the public understands this is not a partisan issue.

A Call to Action—Before It Is Too Late

Addressing North Korean human rights is not just about documenting past atrocities; it is about preventing future abuses. That demands persistence, and persistence demands leadership, solidarity, and resources. The U.S. policymaking community—across agencies, parties, and branches of government—must act swiftly and decisively. Funding must resume and stabilize, communication must be clear and transparent. The White House must reaffirm North Korean human rights as a strategic priority.

This is a defining moment for both the United States and South Korea, as the choices made today will shape the legacy left for both victims of the past and future generations.

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