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Congresswoman Betty McCollum
Statement for the Record
Sentencing of Two Americans in North Korea
June 15, 2009

Ms. McCollum: Madam Speaker, I rise today to call for the immediate release of two U.S. journalists, Laura Ling and Euna Lee, sentenced to twelve years hard labor in North Korea.

On March 17, 2009, Laura Ling and Euna Lee were arrested by North Korean officials while investigating the plight of North Korean refugees fleeing to China. The North Korean government accused the two women of committing hostile crimes against the Korean nation and illegally crossing the North Korean border. On June 8, after a four-day trial conducted largely in secret, Ms. Ling and Ms. Lee were sentenced to twelve years of hard labor in a North Korean prison camp.

North Korea's blatant disregard for due process and human rights in the treatment of these two women is unacceptable. International human rights organizations have unanimously declared their conviction the result of inflated accusations and a "sham trial". Despite being party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, North Korea's judicial system fails international fair trial standards for transparency, independence, and conviction based on recognized criminal offenses. Unfortunately, the arrest and conviction of these two American journalists is but one example of the oppression under which North Koreans have suffered for too long.

Ms. Ling and Ms. Lee's sentencing to prison labor camp is also a disturbing violation of human rights and humanitarian standards. The State Department reports that conditions in North Korean prison camps are harsh and life threatening, with beatings and torture a regular occurrence. Three months of detention have already exacerbated Ms. Ling's medical condition and caused significant trauma for Ms. Lee's young daughter and family. Sentencing these two women to twelve years hard labor is a severe breach of international humanitarian standards. Ms. Ling and Ms. Lee should be released immediately.

The draconian sentence handed down to the two American journalists raises serious concerns about United States-Korean relations. It is deeply disturbing that North Korea would consider using these women as a negotiating tactic to avoid punishment for its latest nuclear tests. If North Korea truly wishes to ensure its national security, it should begin by releasing Laura Ling and Euna Lee and participating in the global community as a fair player.

Madam Speaker, I call on my colleagues and the Obama Administration to work for the swift release of these two women back to their families.

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