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Contact: Jennifer Hutchison
Jasculca Terman Strategic Communications for
Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center
312-573-5468 (office); 630-258-8752 (cell)
Jennifer_hutchison@jtpr.com

COMMITTEE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN NORTH KOREA, ILLINOIS HOLOCAUST MUSEUM & EDUCATION CENTER CO-HOST FORUM ON NORTH KOREA'S HIDDEN GULAG

Survivor of North Korean prison camp joins scholars and dignitaries to discuss the horrors of the modern-day concentration camps; calls for dismantlement of camps, end to human rights abuses

SKOKIE, Ill.—November 6, 2013—The Committee for Human Rights in North Korea (HRNK) and the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center co-hosted a groundbreaking presentation today entitled *The Heart of Darkness: North Korea's Hidden Gulag*, to bring awareness to the brutal and often fatal realities of the North Korean gulag system.

Described as “modern day concentration camps,” the North Korean state created a carefully concealed gulag decades ago, forcibly holding 120,000 political prisoners on starvation rations while subjecting them to forced labor, beatings and executions resulting in the death of 20 to 25 percent of the prison population every year. Three generations of a family can be found in the camps. Former prisoners and prison guards who have managed to flee the country have recently begun providing horrific information about what actually takes place in these facilities.

“We are humbled and immensely grateful to know that the Illinois Holocaust Museum has joined our efforts to bring attention to the unspeakable brutality and inhumanity of North Korea’s vast system of unlawful imprisonment,” said HRNK Executive Director Greg Scarlatoiu. “Together, we will strive to dismantle North Korea’s prison camps, uncover their crimes, protect the victims and bring justice to their tormentors.”

The forum began with welcome remarks from Sang-Il Kim, consul general for the Republic of Korea in Chicago, followed by a plenary discussion that provided a brief overview of the history and current status of the North Korean political prison camp system. Jared Genser—managing director of Perseus Strategies and founder of Freedom Now—joined Dr. Kim Tae-hoon—chairman of Lawyers for Human Rights and Unification of Korea—in addressing the international legal implications of North Korea's vast system of unlawful imprisonment. Professor Hyun In-ae—a former North Korean and resident fellow at HRNK—discussed the psychological impact of the North Korean gulag on people living inside the country and the role it plays in the elaborate system of control, coercion and surveillance meant to isolate, punish and exterminate those perceived as disloyal to the regime. Joseph Bermudez—All-Source Analysis, Inc. and KPA Journal—discussed the use of satellite imagery to confirm the existence, location and operation of North Korea’s prison camps.

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Following the plenary session, attendees had dinner and listened to a keynote speech by U.S. Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Ambassador Robert King. King addressed the dire human rights situation in North Korea and the outcomes of the hearings held by the UN Commission of Inquiry on North Korea last week.

The evening ended with a moving discussion between Shin Dong-hyuk, the only North Korean escapee to have been born and raised in a political prison camp, and Blaine Harden, author of "Escape from Camp 14," a book about Dong-hyuk's life. Dong-hyuk shared the story of his life, the first 23 years of which he spent in the camp. He recounted the severe, inhumane treatment suffered by him and his family, and how he was able to escape to South Korea. The discussion was moderated by Melanie Kirkpatrick, author of "Escape from North Korea—The Untold Story of Asia's Underground Railroad."

"The Holocaust didn't happen one hundred, or two hundred years ago. It happened in our recent past, just over six decades ago," said Dong-hyuk. "Humankind said 'never again;' never again will we allow such unspeakable atrocities to be committed, and yet the North Korean prison camps are in existence to this day. The world has just recently begun to learn about North Korea's gulag, but these prison camps have been in existence for almost 60 years."

Through the event, which was translated simultaneously on-site in Korean and English, the Illinois Holocaust Museum and HNRK sought to mobilize opinion to call for the dismantlement of the camps and protection for the prisoners who survive. The forum's discussion included the promotion of effective action and the ways the Chicago and greater Midwest community can be involved.

"It is essential that we affirm the obligation to recognize our shared responsibility to humanity and remain resolute in fostering the promotion of human rights," said Richard S. Hirschhaut, executive director of the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center. "The Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center's partnership with HRNK echoes a unified clarion call that we must stand firm against atrocities that erupt in our midst, and together resolve that such crimes against humanity must come to an end."

This forum is the third in a series hosted by the organization. The first conference was held in Washington, D.C. last year and co-sponsored by The Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights of the American Jewish Committee. A second conference was held in Los Angeles at the Simon Wiesenthal Center at the Museum of Tolerance.

Likely the last international institution of its kind built with the active participation of Holocaust survivors, the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center is the largest facility in the Midwest dedicated to preserving the memories of those lost in the Holocaust and to teaching current generations to fight hatred, indifference and genocide in today's world.

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