

2025 Humanitarian and Development Conference Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In November of 2025, the National Committee on North Korea (NCNK Inc.) convened leading humanitarian practitioners whose organizations were active in North Korea before the COVID-19 pandemic for a comprehensive discussion on the current landscape of U.S.-DPRK humanitarian engagement. Participants examined the regulatory and policy barriers impeding humanitarian operations, assessed organizational readiness for a potential crisis response, and identified strategic opportunities for renewed engagement.

The conference revealed significant consensus among practitioners: while organizations maintain strong institutional knowledge and commitment, years of restricted access have eroded critical relationships with North Korean counterparts. Participants emphasized that streamlined licensing processes and clearer policy guidance from the U.S. government could substantially enhance humanitarian preparedness and response capabilities.

This report summarizes key findings and presents actionable recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders invested in maintaining humanitarian access to the DPRK.

KEY FINDINGS

OFAC Licensing and Regulatory Challenges

Practitioners identified the current Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) general licensing framework as a significant impediment to effective humanitarian operations. Unlike general licenses for other sanctioned countries such as Iran and Syria, the DPRK license requires a letter of preauthorization before organizations can open bank accounts or conduct necessary financial operations.

The current 30-day review period, during which the government may choose not to take action (constituting tacit approval), creates operational uncertainty. Financial institutions require physical documentation of approval, yet none is provided under current procedures. Organizations expressed that both approval and denial letters would provide needed clarity for banking partners and operational planning.

Inaction/delay on license or exemption renewal requests, which can result in expired licenses/exemptions, is directly impacting normal NGO support-raising and/or banking activities. Donations (such as from donor

advised funds or IRA contributions) or business loan applications must be cleared through major financial institutions, and they, as part of their de-risking and sanctions-compliance verification measures, require proof of compliance with all licensing/exemption requirements from NGOs that is impossible to provide in the current context.

Participants advocated for expanding the scope of activities authorized by the OFAC general license beyond traditional humanitarian work to include peacebuilding, human rights programming, K-12 education, agricultural development, and Track II diplomacy, which are essential components of effective humanitarian response.

Special Validation Passport Constraints

Conference participants questioned the rationale for increasingly restrictive Special Validation Passport (SVP) requirements, noting that North Korea's refusal to permit American entry already serves as the primary barrier to travel. For established humanitarian actors with proven track records, it was recommended that SVP processes should be streamlined rather than complicated.

Specific concerns were raised regarding divided families and POW/MIA remains recovery engagement, where current requirements for an "official invitation" lack clear definition. Practitioners recommended establishing defined response timeframes for SVP applications and renewals to improve predictability.

UN Sanctions Exemption Process

Organizations reported that the UN Security Council 1718 Committee sanctions exemption process has been on hold since July 2025, with new applications potentially not processed until January 2026 at the earliest, and possibly extending through March 2026. This affects major organizations, including the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Additionally, there is uncertainty regarding whether [UN Security Council Resolution 2664](#), which provides humanitarian exemptions, applies to the 1718 Committee framework. The lack of a formal feedback mechanism between NGOs and the Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team (MSMT) further complicates operational planning.

CRISIS RESPONSE PREPAREDNESS

Current State of Readiness

Humanitarian organizations are simultaneously prepared and unprepared to respond to a crisis in North Korea. On one hand, they possess institutional experience, established funding mechanisms, professional networks, and unwavering commitment. On the other hand, resources are not pre-positioned, and years of absence have disrupted relationships with North Korean counterparts essential for trust-building and logistics coordination.

Participants expressed confidence that significant resources could be mobilized rapidly once the Trump Administration provided authorization. However, legal uncertainty in U.S. regulations and the maze

representing the North Korean approval processes pose the greatest risk to effective crisis response. Organizations identified the need for clear legal guidelines and designated government contacts for time-sensitive questions.

Anticipated Challenges for In-Country Return

The prolonged absence of U.S. humanitarian presence has created significant unknowns: the capacity of local counterparts, availability of Korean-speaking staff, familiarity of North Korean officials with U.S.-DPRK humanitarian cooperation, infrastructure conditions, and internal travel permissions. Organizations noted that North Korea typically permits U.S. assistance for limited windows, making streamlined approval processes critical.

Practitioners suggested that satellite imagery could support initial assessment tours to identify immediate needs before comprehensive in-country evaluations. Priority areas for assistance include energy, clean water and sanitation, agriculture, and healthcare, particularly maternal health and infant mortality reduction.

STRATEGIC CONTEXT

Geopolitical Considerations

Conference participants noted that Russian humanitarian organizations are increasingly filling roles traditionally held by U.S. actors, strengthening Russia-DPRK ties while eroding American influence. This shift represents lost opportunities for trust-building between the United States and North Korea.

Climate and environmental issues were identified as potential neutral ground for future dialogue, given North Korea's acknowledged vulnerability to climate change impacts. Participants emphasized that an expanded general license covering broader humanitarian and development activities could provide the United States an unprecedented opportunity to reshape North Korean perceptions of America.

Value of Humanitarian Engagement

Beyond immediate life-saving impact, humanitarian engagement delivers substantial benefits in the area of people-to-people interaction. Practitioners shared extensive accounts of how an American humanitarian presence directly counters the negative perceptions often conveyed to North Korean residents about the United States.

Consistent humanitarian engagement builds trust that enables more direct communication about needs and creates relationships not only between Americans and North Koreans, but among North Koreans themselves. This people-to-people connection empowers local communities, builds capacity, and can support internal advocates for greater openness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the U.S. Government

1. **Reform the OFAC General License:** Align DPRK licensing procedures with those for other sanctioned countries by eliminating the preauthorization requirement and providing physical approval or denial letters. Eliminate the reporting requirement and negative approval process with the State Department to align with other U.S. sanctions programs.
2. **Expand Authorized Activities:** Broaden the general license to cover peacebuilding, human rights, education, agriculture, and Track II diplomacy activities that support humanitarian objectives.
3. **Streamline Special Validation Passport (SVP) Processes:** Establish defined response timeframes for SVP applications, simplify requirements for established humanitarian actors, and clarify criteria for divided family visits and POW/MIA remains recovery travel.
4. **Provide Policy Clarity:** Conduct a comprehensive policy review and communicate the administration's direction on DPRK humanitarian engagement to reduce operational uncertainty.
5. **Designate Points of Contact:** Identify government liaisons who can provide rapid guidance on legal questions during time-sensitive humanitarian responses.

For Multilateral Bodies

- Clarify the applicability of UNSCR 2664 humanitarian exemptions to the 1718 Committee framework.
- Establish formal feedback mechanisms between NGOs and the Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team.
- Expedite review of pending sanctions exemption applications when the 1718 Committee hold is lifted.

For Humanitarian Organizations

- Maintain general licenses to preserve operational readiness even during periods of inactivity in North Korea.
- Cultivate relationships with potential intermediaries to support future access.
- Develop crisis response protocols and assessment frameworks that can be rapidly deployed when access is granted.
- Coordinate cross-organizationally on advocacy for licensing reform and policy clarity.

CONCLUSION

The humanitarian community remains committed to supporting the North Korean people and stands ready to respond when circumstances permit. However, current regulatory frameworks and policy uncertainty significantly impede this readiness. Conference participants were united in their assessment that modest reforms to licensing procedures and clearer government communication could substantially enhance humanitarian preparedness without compromising sanctions objectives.

Humanitarian engagement represents a unique example of American soft power, one that saves lives while building the relationships necessary for long-term stability on the Korean Peninsula. NCNK, Inc. urges policymakers to recognize this strategic value and take concrete steps to facilitate responsible humanitarian access to North Korea.

For additional information or to discuss these findings, please contact the National Committee on North Korea.