

LOS ANGELES – House Concurrent Resolution 77, expressing the sense of Congress regarding efforts of people in the United States of Korean ancestry to reunite with family members in North Korea, authored by Representative Xavier Becerra (CA – 30) and Representative Ed Royce (CA – 39), passed unanimously in the House Representatives last Wednesday, November 28, by a vote of 420-0.

Since the historic summit last year between South Korean President Kim Dae Jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, several reunions have taken place between divided Korean families and more families anxiously await a chance to meet with relatives. However, the hope for reunification remains distant for Korean Americans in the United States that have not yet been allowed to be involved with the selection process for the family reunions. H. Con. Res. 77 calls on Congress and the President to support the efforts of Korean Americans who wish to reunite with their family members in North Korea

Debate on the resolution took place on Tuesday, November 27. During the debate on the House floor, Rep. Becerra made the following remarks:

Mr. BECERRA. Mr. Speaker, H. Con. Res. 77 is a resolution that I authored in conjunction with the gentleman from California (Mr. ROYCE) for the express purpose of expressing our country's and our government's firm support for family reunification opportunities between Americans of Korean descent and their North Korean relatives. Being separated from family at some point in our lives is something that we can all identify with. It is universal and we have gotten accustomed to it with all the travel that we do and separation that goes on between families. That separation is what makes holidays like Thanksgiving, which we just celebrated, a very

special time. These are occasions when families gather to give thanks for their blessings. But unfortunately for many Americans, especially Americans of Korean descent, this separation from family has not been temporary, but prolonged and painful at times.

Nearly one-third of the more than 1 million people of Korean ancestry who live in the United States have relatives, mothers, brothers, grandmothers, uncles, many of whom they have not seen in more than half a century. Nongovernmental travel and communication between Korean Americans in the U.S. and family members in North Korea is difficult if not impossible. The year 2000 was historic because it was the year that marked the first-ever summit conference between South Korean President Kim Dae Jung and North Korean Leader Kim Jong Il in North Korea. Both leaders agreed to resolve humanitarian issues, such issues as exchange visas for families that have been separated for decades.

There have been three reunions to date of family members, the fate and addresses of more than 6,000 members of separated families have been confirmed and more than 3,400 people from North and South Korea have had an opportunity to reunite with relatives in North Korea. The three family reunions have taken place only between South and North Korea

, unfortunately; and these reunions have been closed to date to Korean Americans in the United States

. According to discussions with Korean officials, it is right now unfortunately the policy of trying to help the families from South Korea unite with North Korean family members probably more than anything else because there is such limited time and space available for families to reunite, and there are so many families who are hoping to have that opportunity in the future.

But time is of the essence. We have seen more than 50 years go by since those separations first occurred; and for many family members who reside here in the United States, they now know of family members in North Korea who are in their seventies and in their eighties and in

many cases they are not even aware of what the status and the fate of their family members in North Korea may be at this time.

In the district I represent in Los Angeles, we have a very vibrant Korean-American community. I happen to be the Representative who has within his congressional district most of what is considered Korea Town in Los Angeles. I am committed to making family unification a reality for my constituents and for the people of Korean ancestry who are Americans here. The Korean-American Family Reunion Council has been working tirelessly to collect signatures, more than 100,000 signatures to date, which urge the President of the United States and the Congress to urge the two Koreas to allow Korean Americans to participate in these family unification opportunities and to visit their loved ones.

I have heard many personal stories from Korean Americans who have not seen their family in decades. The gentleman from California (Mr. **ROYCE**), I and other colleagues had in an interparliamentary session in South Korea to meet with our South Korean counterparts, we had an opportunity to hear from them on this resolution, on this particular provision, and they indicated their support in having the United States advocate to have Korean Americans participate in those family unification efforts. But, despite those efforts, right now we currently see that there have been stops and starts in the inter- Korean talks that have been taking place, but we must still support these efforts.

Especially in these times of uncertainty in the world, it is vital that Congress support efforts to strengthen family bonds and build civic ties. Certainly since September 11, the community of nations has worked earnestly to bring the people of the world closer together, to break down

barriers, and to help peoples live in peace as brethren.

I hope to convey a message to the two Koreas and to the people of the two Koreas that we wish to work with them as they work to reunify, and we also hope that the Korean Americans of this country will have an opportunity to participate in those family reunification efforts.

Following the debate, Rep. Becerra hosted a conference call with leaders from the Korean community in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., to discuss the resolution. When asked why he decided to lead the charge for Korean unification, Rep. Becerra said, "There was clearly a need. As someone who represents a large portion of the Korean-American community, I am intimately aware of the issue. Having visited Korea and taken part in two interparliamentary exchanges, I have seen the desire and the enthusiasm of the Korean people to see progress between the two Koreas. And certainly, it bodes well for the future of the United States to work for a more productive and safe relationship between the U.S. and the two Koreas."

Myong "Mike" Hong, president of the Los Angeles chapter of the Advisory Council on the Peaceful and Democratic Unification of Korea, was present at last Tuesday's conference call and was more than pleased with the bill and was overjoyed upon learning of its passage. "His [Rep. Becerra] work has given hope to many of the Korean Americans who have been separated for so many years from their loved ones," Hong said. "This is definitely a good beginning, and it has inspired us to work harder to get the Senate to pass a similar bill so it can become the law of the land."

Suk Hee Kang, a member of the Advisory Council on the Peaceful and Democratic Unification of Korea, was present for the conference call and was more than appreciative of Rep. Becerra's efforts. He also was overwhelmed with joy upon hearing the news of vote and sees this as a major victory in the crusade to bring Korean families together. "This is one victory where we all worked together and made it happen," Kang said. "I am so appreciative of Congressman's Becerra's efforts on this issue."

Rep. Becerra was pleased with the outcome of last Wednesday's vote, but stressed that there is

still much to do. "This vote was a crucial first step in the crusade to reunify families who have gone far too long without seeing each other," Rep. Becerra said. "There are too many people in this country who came as immigrants and have sacrificed so very much – to not let them have every opportunity to see family would be a sin, and I will be a pro-active participant in anything that the Congress can do to allow people to be with their families."