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Bird Marella Wins Landmark Habeas Corpus Ruling for Marine Corps Veteran Targeted for Assassination by North Korean Regime

After a seven-year battle to prevent the extradition of a U.S. Marine Corps veteran targeted for assassination by the totalitarian regime of North Korea, partners Ekwan Rhow and Christopher Jumin Lee, along with co-counsel Naeun Rim of Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, LLP, secured a historic victory for their pro bono client Christopher Ahn.

On April 8, 2026, the Honorable Fernando L. Aenlle-Rocha of the Central District of California granted Bird Marella's habeas petition, enjoining Mr. Ahn's extradition to Spain. The order marks the first time in U.S. history that a federal court has denied international extradition on humanitarian grounds. The court also found that extradition would violate Mr. Ahn's constitutional rights given the credible threats to his life, and that the government had failed to establish probable cause and dual criminality.

Read the opinion here.

Mr. Ahn is a human rights activist who had previously provided support to high-profile defectors seeking to escape the oppressive North Korean regime, including Kim Han-Sol, the nephew of dictator Kim Jong-Un. In February 2019, Mr. Ahn entered the North Korean embassy in Madrid, Spain to assist embassy officials who were planning to defect. He was subsequently arrested and taken into U.S. federal custody pursuant to an extradition request by the Spanish government. Bird Marella obtained his release on bail, overcoming the strong presumption against bail in international extradition cases.

His case drew widespread public attention, including a feature on CBS News' *60 Minutes* and coverage by CNN, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the BBC. The North Korean regime publicly demanded Mr. Ahn's extradition to Spain, singling him out by name in official diplomatic communications. In a striking contradiction pointed out by both the media and the Court, the FBI had warned Mr. Ahn on multiple occasions that North Korean agents had targeted him for assassination — even as the Department of Justice pursued his extradition to Spain, where the threat would be far easier to carry out.

Mr. Ahn's defense team was composed entirely of Korean and Korean-American trial lawyers, including Bird Marella partners Ekwan Rhow and Christopher Jumin Lee and co-counsel Naeun Rim of Manatt. Bird Marella also worked with an extensive network of supporters, including Korean

community organizations, North Korea experts, and elected representatives in both the United States and Korea.