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DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA

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Open Doors International
Red Eagle Enterprises
Religious Freedom Institute
Save the Persecuted Christians Coalition
St. Charles Institute
The Federation of NK Defectors' Organization
The Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church of America
Union Councils for Soviet Jews
Vietnamese People's Evangelical Fellowship

Introduction

1. A coalition of international organizations submits the following report focused on freedom of religion or belief. Several of these organizations maintain ECOSOC consultative status with the United Nations. The information contained in this report was obtained through research and first-hand accounts from these organizations.
2. This report explains why North Korea must ensure that the right to freedom of religion is fully respected and protected within its borders, as well as prevent and end all forms of religious persecution by the State, including the imprisonment, torture and execution of Christians and those belonging to other religious groups.

(a) Freedom of Religious Belief

3. North Korea is a party to the ICCPR, and Article 68 of its Constitution nominally allows citizens the freedom of religion. The government acknowledges that there are religious believers in the country and maintains a number of officially run churches. However, the Constitution qualifies the right to freedom of religion by not permitting religion to "attract foreign intervention or disrupt the state's social order." In practice, the government completely suppresses religious beliefs that could compete with

citizens' belief in the Juche ideology and absolute loyalty to the regime's leaders.¹

4. Five state-controlled churches—three Protestant churches, one Catholic church, and one Russian Orthodox church—exist in Pyongyang, but they are deemed to be sham churches, filled with state employees, that keep up the façade for foreign visitors that the government tolerates religion.²
5. The government severely punishes anyone engaging in religious activity or having a spiritual life, sentencing them to prison camp or the death penalty. The North Korean government is especially harsh towards Christianity because it is associated with the United States and is viewed as a subversive tool for foreign intervention.³ The government teaches children from a young age to worship the Kim family, and to despise American imperialists and foreign missionaries.⁴ Government propaganda describes Christians as “deceitful and evil people to be avoided at all cost.”⁵
6. The government places all citizens into three social classes under the “songbun” system, categorizing them based on their loyalty to the regime. A person’s “songbun” class determines access to necessities and life opportunities, including food, education and health care. Christians and their family members are typically in the lowest “hostile” class.⁶ In addition, people are punished for praying, singing hymns, worshiping, possessing Bibles or crosses, or coming in contact with missionaries or Christians from foreign countries.⁷
7. Various sources estimate that there are between 200,000 to 500,000 Christians in the country.⁸ Of those, 50,000 to 70,000 are imprisoned in labor camps or concentration camps.⁹ The government imprisons not only citizens who are discovered to be Christian, but also their families for several generations under a “guilt-by-association” policy.¹⁰ Prison guards were told that “Christians were

¹ *Christian Solidarity Worldwide*, “Total denial: violations of freedom of religion or belief in North Korea,” Sept. 2016, 6-7.

² Hollie McKay, *Fox News*, “North Korea: How Christians survive in the world's most anti-Christian nation,” Aug. 18, 2017, available at: <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/08/18/north-korea-how-christians-survive-in-worlds-most-anti-christian-nation.html>; Korean Bar Association, “Report on Human Rights in North Korea,” 2014, 103.

³ *Aid to the Church in Need*, “Religious Freedom Report 2016: North Korea,” available at: <http://religious-freedom-report.org/report/korea-north/?pdf=true>.

⁴ John Choi, *Open Doors*, “North Korean Believer: Why The Country’s Children See The Cross As An Evil Image,” 19 March 2018, available at: <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/north-korean-believer-why-north-korean-children-see-the-cross-as-an-evil-image/>

⁵ Robert Kenna, *Open Doors*, “When You Pray For The North Korea Summit—Remember These Three Stories,” 7 June 2018, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/pray-for-north-korea-summit-secret-church-trump-kim-jong-un/>.

⁶ *Aid to the Church in Need*, “Religious Freedom Report 2016: North Korea,” available at: <http://religious-freedom-report.org/report/korea-north/?pdf=true>.

⁷ *Report on Human Rights in North Korea* (2014), Korean Bar Association, 2015, 114-116.

⁸ *Yonhap News Agency*, “Some 500,000 religious persons underground in N. Korea,” 24 March 2017, available at: <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/search1/2603000000.html?cid=AEN20170324009600315>.

⁹ Open Doors International estimate; (“It is estimated that there up to 70,000 Christian prisoners in concentration camps in North Korea” – Hollie McKay, *Fox News*, “North Korea: How Christians survive...”)

¹⁰ Robert Kenna, *Open Doors*, “When You Pray For The North Korea Summit—Remember These Three Stories,” 7 June 2018, available at: <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/pray-for-north-korea-summit-secret-church-trump-kim-jong-un/>; *Christian Solidarity Worldwide*, “Total denial: violations of freedom of religion or belief in North Korea,” September 2016, 8.

reactionaries” and directed to annihilate or “wipe out the seed of reactionaries.”¹¹

8. Numerous North Koreans have witnessed detainees at prison camps being tortured and murdered on the basis of religion. One person testified to seeing a woman killed for her religious faith, and another saw seven people tortured for participating in Christian meetings. Other witnesses saw five people accused of reading the Bible being sent to the “total control zone,” where prisoners are considered “ideologically irredeemable” and expected to die, or simply executed. Another prisoner was arrested because she had practiced Christianity before she was caught and returned to North Korea; she later disappeared.¹²
9. North Korean defectors have also reported seeing Christians crushed by steamrollers, used to test biological weapons, or crucified over a fire. It is estimated that more than seventy-five percent of Christians die in these concentration camps.¹³
10. North Korea’s persecution of Christians extends outside its own borders to foreign nationals as well. In 2014, a Korean church deacon living in China was kidnapped by North Korea’s State Security Department and sentenced to fifteen years of labor in a political prison camp, where he is still detained. He had been involved in a program that evangelized to North Korean defectors and sent them back to the country. North Korean officials also arrested others connected to the program, and publicly executed three of them in 2015.¹⁴
11. In January 2015, Pastor Hyeon Soo Lim, a Canadian citizen from Toronto, was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment in a labor camp after being charged with attempting to use religion to overthrow the regime. He dug holes in frozen mountainsides during the winter and broke up pieces of coal by hand. After two years and seven months, in August 2017, he was released on sick bail. Pastor Lim believed that he was treated exceptionally well in his labor camp because he was a Canadian citizen; had he been Korean, he would have been executed.¹⁵
12. In April 2016, Pastor Han Chung-Ryeol, a Chinese national, was brutally murdered after he left his church building in response to a phone call. Pastor Han had ministered to North Koreans and assisted defectors from his church in Changbai, China, which was located near the border to North Korea. Chinese and South Korean intelligence officials had previously warned him that the North Korean government was targeting him, and a number of the North Korean converts he led to Christianity had also been imprisoned, executed, or disappeared.¹⁶
13. Chinese authorities found surveillance videos of three suspected North Korean agents crossing the border before and after Pastor Han’s murder, and asked North

¹¹ North Korea: A Case to Answer - A Call to Act, *Christian Solidarity Worldwide* 53-54, 64 (2007), available at: <https://www.csw.org.uk/2007/06/20/report/35/article.htm>.

¹² *Report: Inquiry on Crimes Against Humanity in North Korean Political Prisons*, War Crimes Committee of the International Bar Association (2017), 75-76.

¹³ Hollie McKay, *Fox News*, “North Korea: How Christians survive in the world’s most anti-Christian nation,” 18 August 2017, available at: <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/08/18/north-korea-how-christians-survive-in-worlds-most-anti-christian-nation.html>.

¹⁴ *Christian missionary recounts escape from North Korea*, Daily NK, 11 July 2017, available at: <https://www.dailynk.com/english/christian-missionary-recounts-escape/>.

¹⁵ Philip Ling & Rosemary Barton, *CBC News*, “Pastor Hyeon Soo Lim believes he wasn’t executed or tortured in North Korea because of Canadian citizenship,” 27 August 2017, available at: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/north-korea-pastor-lim-barton-interview-1.4261279>.

¹⁶ *Voice of the Martyrs Blog*, “Martyred by North Korean Assassins,” 18 April 2017, available at: <https://vom.com.au/martyred-north-korean-assassins/>.

Korea for their extradition. In response, North Korean officials sent a letter stating that they had arrested a deacon from Pastor Han's church, Zhang Wenshi, who was accused of conspiring with Pastor Han to evangelize to North Koreans, smuggle them out of the country, and overthrow the regime. They sentenced Mr. Zhang to fifteen years of hard labor.¹⁷

14. Several Americans with religious ties have also been arrested and sentenced to prison camps. In October 2015, Kim Dong Chul, a Korean-American pastor, was arrested and charged with spying for South Korea.¹⁸ A North Korean defector who had encountered Mr. Kim testified that he had introduced himself at churches in China and the US as a Christian missionary helping North Koreans.¹⁹ He was sentenced to ten years of hard labor for his alleged espionage, and fell ill during his imprisonment.²⁰
15. In April 2017, Kim Sang Duk, an American accounting professor at Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST), was detained at the airport as he was trying to leave the country. PUST was founded by evangelical Christians in 2010, and many of the professors are Christian as well. Outside of teaching at the university, Mr. Kim had been volunteering at an orphanage. When arrested, he was accused of committing "hostile acts" towards the state.²¹
16. A second professor at PUST, Kim Hak Song, who is a U.S. citizen and Christian, was on a train from North Korea to China when he was arrested in May 2017 and charged with committing "hostile acts" towards North Korea. When he asked what his hostile acts were, the North Korean officers told him that his crime was "prayer."²² Though all three detained Americans were released in May 2018, the persecution in North Korea of its own citizens has not abated.
17. For these reasons, North Korea has led Open Doors International's World Watch List of countries where Christians face the most intense persecution for the past seventeen years.²³

(b) Recommendations

¹⁷ Hyung-Jin Kim & Gerry Shih, *Associated Press*, "Missionaries at border spread Christianity to North Korea," 5 April 2018, available at: <https://apnews.com/d04acf4a138545b692ebd530d832c218>.

¹⁸ *World Watch Monitor*, "North Korea-held US-Korean 'spy' said to be pastor," 14 January 2016, available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/north-korea-held-us-korean-spy-said-to-be-pastor/>.

¹⁹ Bob Ditmer, *Church Leaders*, "Update: North Korea's Three American Hostages Are All Christians," 9 May 2018, available at: <https://churchleaders.com/news/325003-north-koreas-three-american-hostages-are-all-christians.html>.

²⁰ Dagyum Ji, *NK News*, "Returning detainee says he did 'a lot of labor work,' fell ill in North Korea," 10 May 2018, available at: <https://www.nknews.org/2018/05/returning-detainee-says-he-did-a-lot-of-labor-work-fell-ill-in-north-korea/>.

²¹ *World Watch Monitor*, "North Korea detains another Korean-American 'Christian'," 24 April 2017, available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/north-korea-detains-another-korean-american-christian/>.

²² Bob Ditmer, *Church Leaders*, "North Korean Prisoner Says His Crime Was Prayer," 6 June 2018, available at: <https://churchleaders.com/news/326801-north-korean-prisoner-says-his-crime-was-prayer.html>.

²³ *Open Doors*, "World Watch List," available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/WWL-2018-Compilation-3-Persecution-Dynamics-of-countries-ranking-1-25-WWR.pdf> (password: freedom).

18. In light of the aforementioned, the undersigned organizations suggest the following recommendations be made to North Korea:

- a. Cease all restrictions on the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and ensure that the right to manifest one's religion in private or in public is fully protected and realized;
- b. Remove criminal prohibitions on religious or belief communities operating on an unregistered basis, as international human rights law does not allow the enforcement of any such alleged obligation;
- c. Cease all restrictions on the production and reproduction of religious literature and materials without being subject to oppressive censorship regulations and controls;
- d. Invite the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief to visit the country and fully cooperate with the Special Rapporteur's requests;
- e. Eliminate all impediments to freedom of religion and belief at administrative and juridical levels;
- f. Cease all intimidation and threats to religious leaders and members of religious communities;
- g. Immediately release all prisoners of conscience, including prisoners held for religious affiliation, including relatives being held on the basis of "guilt by association"; and
- h. Rescind intrusive governmental practices, including monitoring and raiding, which infringe upon the right to freedom of religion or belief.



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