

## THE DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC of NORTH KOREA

The government of North Korea is one of the world’s most repressive regimes and regularly engages in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief including arresting, torturing, and allegedly executing those conducting clandestine religious activity; discriminating against and harassing those practicing both authorized and unauthorized religious activity; and mistreating and imprisoning asylum-seekers repatriated from China. USCIRF again recommends in 2011 that North Korea be designated as a “Country of Particular Concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). The State Department has designated North Korea as a CPC since 2001.

### BACKGROUND

**Nationalist Ideology:** North Korea forcibly propagates a nationalist ideology based upon the personality cult surrounding both Kim Il Sung and his son, Kim Jong Il, called *Juche*. All citizens are required to adhere to *Juche*, or face onerous fines or penalties. The government views any other functioning religious belief as a challenge to the regime’s authority. Students must study and memorize the “Ten Principles for the Establishment of the One-Ideology System of the Party.” *Juche*’s ideological education takes precedence over all other academic subjects. The DPRK controls most aspects of its citizens’ daily lives, including religious activity, which is allowed only in government-operated religious federations or a small number of government-approved house churches. Anyone discovered engaging in clandestine religious activity is subject to discrimination, arrest, arbitrary detention, disappearance, torture, and public execution. Many religious believers are incarcerated in *kwan-li-so* (North Korea’s infamous penal labor camps), though the number cannot be verified.

**North Korean Refugees:** The situation for North Korean refugees is dire. Over the past decade, hundreds of thousands of people who have fled to China and South Korea to escape persecution and hunger face harsh conditions and the strong possibility of being trafficked. China routinely repatriates North Korean refugees, which contravenes China’s international obligations. North Korean law criminalizes leaving the country without state permission. The DPRK interrogates asylum-seekers repatriated from China about their religious beliefs and affiliations. The DPRK imprisons and reserves its harshest treatment for those refugees suspected of becoming Christian, distributing illegal religious materials, or having contact with South Korean humanitarian and religious organizations working in China. Former North Korean refugees report that clandestine religious activity is increasing, as are the regime’s attempts to halt its spread.

### RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS

Since 1945, North Korea’s once diverse religious community, including Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, and Chondokoyists (followers of Chondokyo, “Eastern Learning,” a largely Confucian belief system that incorporates elements of Taoism, Shamanism, Buddhism, and Catholicism), largely has disappeared, with many religious leaders and practitioners killed, jailed, disappeared, or fleeing to South Korea. To blunt international criticism, North Korea created “religious federations” in 1998 that were intended to represent religious communities. However, defectors testify that the federations are led by political operatives who conceal the government’s repression of religious activity and maintain religious venues as cultural relics and tourist attractions.

**Restrictions on Christianity:** While the DPRK tightly controls and represses Christianity, in 1998, it authorized some churches to be built. While services reportedly have been held in Christian churches since the mid-1990s, defectors assert that they are heavily monitored and that the sites exist as showpieces for foreign visitors. The government claims that there are 500 approved house churches in the country. There are credible reports that participants in these house churches are individuals whose families were Christians before 1950 and as such, are allowed to gather for worship without leaders or religious materials. Families who are allowed to use their homes as house churches are reportedly segregated in separate housing units.

**Control over the Spread of Religious Ideas:** There continue to be credible reports that unapproved religious materials are available and that secret religious meetings occur, spurred by cross-border contact with religious groups in China. The DPRK views such activity in the border regions as illegal and a threat to national security. Police and border security units

seek to stop the spread of religious ideas and root out clandestine activity. Anyone caught distributing religious materials, holding unapproved religious gatherings, or having ongoing contact with overseas religious groups is subject to severe punishment ranging from labor camp imprisonment to execution. Imprisoning religious believers remains a common practice: an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 prisoners currently languish in DPRK's network of political prisoner camps, some for religious reasons. Religious prisoners reportedly are treated worse than other inmates and subject to constant abuse to force them to renounce their faith.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY**

The U.S. has no diplomatic relations with North Korea and raises human rights concerns in various multilateral fora, as well as through other governments with diplomatic missions in the DPRK. The 2008 North Korean Human Rights Act provides the U.S. with the tools to conduct human rights diplomacy with the country. The Act provides funds to support human rights and democracy programs, expands public diplomacy resources, sets guidelines for monitoring and reporting on U.S. humanitarian programs, and seeks to facilitate resettlement of North Korean refugees to the United States. It also expresses the sense of Congress that a Northeast Asia Security and Cooperation regime should be created, following the model of the OSCE. The U.S. Special Envoy to North Korea, Ambassador Robert King, has held talks with DPRK counterparts over the past year. Despite assurances from Ambassador King, there is no indication that a human rights agenda is a high priority. The U.S. seeks to continue to improve North Korean citizen's access to outside sources of information and provide opportunities for exposure to the outside world, mainly by supporting radio broadcasts.

In addition to continuing to designate North Korea as a CPC and including agreements on humanitarian and human rights concerns in negotiations with North Korea over nuclear security and regional stability, the U.S. Government should:

- Work with regional allies to reach agreements on pressing human rights and human security concerns, including monitoring of humanitarian aid, refugee resettlement, family reunifications, abductions, closure of political-penal labor camps, and the release of innocent children and family members of those convicted of political crimes, and link future economic assistance and diplomatic recognition to concrete progress in these areas;
- Work with regional and European allies to fashion a comprehensive plan for security concerns on the Korean Peninsula that includes agreements on human rights and humanitarian concerns - modeled after the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as set forth in the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2008;
- Ensure that all funds authorized under the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2008 are requested and used to fulfill the purposes of the Act, including assistance to expand public diplomacy, increase the capacity of NGOs working to promote democracy and human rights, protect and resettle refugees, monitor humanitarian aid, and support the mandate and diplomatic missions of the Special Envoy on Human Rights in North Korea; and
- Urge the Chinese government to allow humanitarian organizations greater access to North Koreans in China, address growing social problems and exploitation experienced by these refugees, and work with regional and European allies to articulate a clear and consistent message about China's need to protect North Korean refugees.

**Please see USCIRF's 2011 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on North Korea.**