

North Korea: Human Rights Ground Zero: David Hawk Prepared Testimony

January 27, 2004 In the course of my research into the political prison camps in North Korea, two matters arose that will be of particular concern to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom: first, confirmation that probably substantial numbers of religious believers were incarcerated in North Korea's infamous kwan-li-so political penal-labor colonies; and second, North Koreans forcibly repatriated from China are brutally punished if the DPRK authorities believe that the repatriated Koreans came in contact with South Korean Christians while in China. Life Time Sentences at Hard Labor in Prison Camps It has long been asserted by South Korean scholars and researchers that, at the outset of the DPRK regime, and again following end of the Korean war, large numbers of Korean Christians in the North (who had not fled south before or during the Korean conflict) and other religious leaders were either executed or sent off to political concentration camps. Indeed, the 2003 White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea, published by the Korea Institute of National Unification (KINU), provides a 1972 statement by Kim Il Sung saying as much: "(We) cannot carry such religiously active people along our march toward a communist society. Therefore, we tried and executed all religious leaders higher than deacon in the Protestant and Catholic churches. Among other religiously active people, those deemed malignant were all put to trial. Among ordinary religious believers, those who recanted were given jobs while those who did not were held at concentration camps."¹ One of the six former kwan-li-so prisoners I interviewed for Hidden Gulag, Mr Kang Chul Hwan², who was held at Camp No. 15 (Yodok) for ten years, from 1977 to 87, told me that when he first entered Yodok, there were "many" Christians there. But they were old and most had died by the time of his release. This obviously does not allow quantification, but it does serve as an eyewitness confirmation of Kim's assertion - from the ground up, as it were. Religious Component to the Severe Punishment of Repatriated North Koreans As is well known, stemming from the famine conditions in the mid 1990s and the breakdown of the production and distribution system in North Korea, large numbers of Koreans - the estimates range from tens of thousands to 300,000 -- fled across the Yalu and Tumen rivers and tried to meld into the large, some two million person, ethnic Korean community in the area of northeast China sometimes formerly known as Manchuria. There are also large numbers of South Koreans in this area of Northeast China: businessmen, students, tourists, humanitarian aid workers along with South Korean Christian pastors and missionaries, many of whom are active in support of the North Korean escapees. Some of these South Korean groups, Christian and more secular, assist desperate North Koreans in seeking asylum in the Republic of Korea. This includes an underground railroad that sends North Korean asylum seekers on an arduous trek from Northeast China down through southern China, further south through Vietnam, Laos or Burma into Cambodia before transit to Bangkok and a flight to Seoul, where asylum is claimed upon arrival in South Korea. As is also well know, Chinese police conduct sweeps along the Chinese side of the North Korea border picking up Koreans and turning them over DRPK authorities. The second part of my report, Hidden Gulag, details the interrogations and punishments to which North Korean are subjected upon repatriation. The severe punishments convince many of the repatriates that they have no secure future in North Korea. And many of these persons upon release from various North Korean prisons or detention facilities again flee to China. I was able to interview in Seoul more than a dozen North Koreans who had fled DPRK a second or even third time and had eventually obtained asylum in South Korea. Uniformly, according to their consistent testimony, during interrogation upon repatriation, among other questions by both North Korean police forces, the regular police, called In-min-bo-an-seong and the more political, Kuk-ga-bo-wi-bu, inquire if that person had any contact with South Korean Christians while in China or if he or she had attended any church services while in China. Convinced that an admission to that effect would result in either execution or being sent to a long term or lifetime sentence at hard labor in the NK gulag, the repatriated Koreans deny any such contact with South Korean Christians while in China. However, such denials are often not credible to the North Korean police interrogators, who then try to literally beat the truth out of the repatriated persons. One person I interviewed, a former repatriated Korean previously detained at the Onsong Jip-kyul-so detention facility, spoke of two women at Onsong who confessed to converting to Christianity while in China. They were taken away by police agents who later told the remaining women that the two converts had been executed and that they should consider themselves warned. Of course, there is no way to confirm that these executions had taken place. However, the North Koreans escapees believe that this happens. And, three persons I interviewed were sent to the kwan-li-so orkyo-hwa-so long term, hard labor prison camps following their post repatriation interrogations. Essentially, if the repatriated person is judged to have gone to China in response to the famine crisis, the punishment is a six month or less sentence to short-term hard labor at the provincial detention centers or what they call labor training centers or camps. However, if contact with South Korean Christians is suspected or admitted, the punishment is transfer to the infamous long term hard labor camps, or, it is suspected, execution. But, it should be noted, both the shorter term and the longer term detention labor facilities are characterized by very high numbers of deaths in detention from combination of below-subsistence level food rations, forced labor and the concomitant diseases. And all of this is done to people who have, most fundamentally, only exercised the "right to leave" that is posited in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and set forth in the International Covenants on Human Rights to which North Korea is a States Party, and the presumably worse 'non-crime' of having met and/or received assistance from a faith-based church group. ¹Page 147. (The 2003 KINU White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea contains very useful ten page summary on "Freedom of Thought and Religion" in the DPRK. KINU is a quasi-independent research unit of the ROK Ministry of National Unification.)²Kang Chul Hwan is the co-author of an excellent prison memoir, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*, Basic Books, NY 2001.