



# NORTH KOREA

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## Key Findings

The government of North Korea tightly controls all religious activity and perpetuates an extreme cult of personality venerating the Kim family as a pseudo-religion. Individuals engaged in clandestine religious activity are arrested, tortured, imprisoned, and sometimes executed. Thousands of religious believers and their families are imprisoned in penal labor camps, including refugees repatriated from China. Based on these systematic, ongoing, egregious violations, USCIRF again recommends that North Korea be designated a “country of particular concern,” or CPC. The State Department has designated North Korea a CPC since 2001.

## Background

The Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea (DPRK or North Korea) remains one of the world’s most repressive regimes, with a deplorable human rights record. The DPRK has long operated an all-encompassing personality cult requiring absolute obedience to the Kim family. Improvements in human rights or religious freedom are unlikely as long as the personality cult continues. Information from North Korea is difficult to gather and verify, though North Korea asylum-seekers and organizations providing humanitarian assistance to North Koreans continue to report severe religious freedom abuses. In March 2013, the UN Human Rights Council established the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea to “investigate the systematic, widespread and grave violations of human rights . . . with a view to ensuring full accountability, in particular for violations which may amount to crimes against humanity.” The findings released in February 2014 found “an almost complete denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as well as of the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, information and association.”

All unapproved religious activity is prohibited. Approved activity, primarily in Pyongyang or at

important Buddhist sites, is small in scope, tightly controlled, and managed for either tourism or international consumption. North Korea maintains a *songbun* system, which classifies families according to their loyalty to the Kim family; religious believers have the lowest *songbun* rating. Spreading Christianity is a political crime. Many religious believers are incarcerated in infamous penal labor camps (*kwan-li-so*). It is

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estimated that there are 150,000 to 200,000 prisoners currently in these camps, with as many as 15,000 incarcerated for religious activity. Religious prisoners reportedly are treated worse than other inmates and subject to constant abuse to force them to renounce their faith.

The government reportedly interrogates North Korean asylum-seekers repatriated from China about their religious belief and affiliations, and mistreats, imprisons, and sometimes executes those suspected of distributing religious literature or having connections with South Korean religious groups. Defectors from police and intelligence agencies have reported that security officials train border guards about the dangers of religion and infiltrate Protestant churches in China to catch worshippers.

## Religious Freedom Conditions 2013–2014

### Government Control of Buddhism

The state-controlled press reports that Buddhist ceremonies are carried out in various locations, although

this is impossible to verify independently. According to former North Korean refugees, Buddhist temples and shrines are maintained as cultural heritage sites and do not function as places of worship or pilgrimage.

### **Government Control and Repression of Christianity**

Pyongyang contains one Catholic church, two Protestant churches, and a Russian Orthodox church. The government claims that there are 500 officially-approved “house churches” in the country. South Korean academics report that participants in these gatherings are those whose families were Christians before 1950 and as such, may gather for worship without leaders or religious materials.

The Database Center for North Korean Human Rights (NKHR) reports that anyone caught possessing religious materials, holding unapproved religious gatherings, or being in contact with overseas religious groups is subject to severe punishments. Recently-published refugee testimony indicates that the wife of a Chinese military officer was publicly executed in 2009 for possessing a Bible; 23 Christians were arrested in 2010 for belonging to an underground church in Kuwol-dong, Pyongsong City, South Pyongan Province; and a family of three was taken to a political prison camp in 2011 for conducting worship services in Sambong-gu, Onseong-gun, North

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Hamgyeong Province. According to South Korea press reports, as many as 80 people were executed in the past year for watching South Korean entertainment videos or possessing Bibles. In April 2013, U.S. citizen Kenneth Bae was sentenced to 15 years of imprisonment for national security crimes based on his work for the evangelical organization Youth With A Mission.

### **North Korean Refugees in China**

Reports continue to surface that individuals forcibly repatriated from China are systematically interrogated

about any contacts with churches and missionaries from South Korea or the United States, and those suspected of becoming Christian, distributing religious materials, or having ongoing contact with foreign groups are harshly treated. The government reportedly offers rewards to its citizens for providing information leading to arrests for cross-border missionary activities or the distribution of religious literature.

### **Recommendations for U.S. Policy**

Despite the difficulty of achieving improvements in human rights and religious freedom in North Korea, U.S. officials should continue to raise these issues in their limited engagement with the North Korean government and seek to make progress where possible, including in areas such as prisoner releases. In addition to recommending that the U.S. government continue to designate North Korea as a CPC, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Coordinate efforts with regional allies, particularly Japan and South Korea, to raise human rights and humanitarian concerns and press for improvements, including closure of the infamous penal labor camps;
- Encourage Chinese support for addressing the most egregious human rights violations in North Korea, and raise regularly with the government of China the need to uphold its international obligations to protect North Korean asylum seekers in China, including by allowing the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and international humanitarian organizations to assist them and ensuring that any repatriations to North Korea do not violate the 1951 Refugee Convention, its 1967 Protocol, or the Convention Against Torture; and
- Implement fully the provisions of the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2012, and use authorized funds to increase access to information and news media inside North Korea, increase the capacity of NGOs to promote democracy and human rights, protect and resettle refugees, and monitor deliveries of humanitarian aid.