

THE DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC of NORTH KOREA

Despite the December 2011 death of autocratic leader Kim Jong Il and the succession of his son Kim Jong Un, 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 and religious freedom record. There continue to be reports of severe religious freedom abuses occurring during the past year including: discrimination and harassment of both authorized and unauthorized religious activity; the arrest, torture, and possible execution of those conducting clandestine religious activity; and the mistreatment and imprisonment of asylum-seekers repatriated from China, particularly those suspected of engaging in religious activities, having religious affiliations, or possessing religious literature. USCIRF recommends in 2012 that North Korea be designated a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The State Department has designated North Korea as a CPC since 2001.

Background

The North Korean government controls nearly every aspect of its citizens’ daily lives, including religious activity. All unapproved religious activity is prohibited and the small number approved is tightly controlled. Anyone discovered engaging in clandestine religious activity can be arrested, arbitrarily detained, disappeared, tortured, and publicly executed. Many religious believers are incarcerated in infamous penal labor camps (*kwan-li-so*). Although the exact number is difficult to verify, about 150,000 to 200,000 prisoners currently languish in these prisoner 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. North Korean refugees seeking asylum in China are vulnerable, particularly if they are forcibly repatriated. The North Korean government reportedly interrogates repatriated asylum-seekers about their religious belief and affiliations, and mistreats, imprisons, and sometimes executes those suspected of distributing religious literature or having ongoing connections with South Korean religious groups. Despite overt repression, clandestine religious activity is increasing, as are the regime’s attempts to halt its spread which it views as threatening national security. Police and security offices have begun training police and soldiers about the dangers of religion and infiltrated Protestant churches in China, sometimes setting up fake prayer meetings to catch worshippers. 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.

Religious Freedom Conditions

The Government-Imposed Cult of Personality: The government forcibly propagates a nationalist ideology based upon the cult of personality surrounding both Kim Il Sung and his son, Kim Jong Il. The government views any functioning religious belief or clandestine practice as a challenge to its authority. Dramatic improvements in human rights or religious freedom are unlikely if the personality cult continues under Kim Jong Un. Any activity perceived to challenge Kim Jong Un’s legitimacy, including clandestine religious activity, will continue to be viewed as a security threat.

Government Control of Religious Activity: In 1988, the North Korean government created “religious federations” for Buddhists, Chondokysts, Protestants, and Catholics. Former refugees and defectors testify that the federations are led by political operatives who conceal from international attention the government’s repression of religious activity, make sure foreign visitors to religious venues do not interact with North Koreans, maintain religious venues as both cultural relics and tourist attractions, and direct assistance programs from foreign donors.

Government Control of Buddhism: The state-controlled press has reported on several occasions that Buddhist ceremonies had been 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 by *gwalliwon* (caretaker monks) who do not perform religious functions. The preservation of Buddhist temples, including the government’s refurbishment of an existing site at Anbul, South Hamgyeong Province and the rebuilding of the Shingye Temple, is mainly a testament to North Korea’s Buddhist culture; these sites are not currently functioning places of worship or pilgrimage.

Government Control and Repression of Christianity: Pyongyang contains one Catholic church, two Protestant churches, and a Russian Orthodox church. North Korean refugees assert that these churches are heavily monitored and the sites exist primarily as showpieces for foreign visitors. The government claims that there are 500 officially approved “house churches” in the country. South Korean academics credibly 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. Most

house churches are in urban areas and the families who attend often are segregated in separate housing units. In May 2010, twenty three Christians reportedly were arrested for belonging to an underground church in Kuwol-dong, Pyongsong City, South Pyongan Province. Three reportedly were executed, and the others sent to the Yoduk political prison camp. South Korean NGOs claim that in June 2009, Ri Hyon Ok was publicly executed for distributing Bibles in the city of Ryongchon, and her family, including her parents, husband, and three children, were sent to a political prison camp the day after her execution. According to the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, 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.

North Korean Refugees in China: The harshest treatment reportedly is reserved for refugees suspected of becoming Christian, distributing illegal religious materials, or having ongoing contact with South Korean humanitarian or religious organizations working in China. The government reportedly offers rewards to its citizens for providing information that leads to the arrest of individuals suspected of involvement in cross-border missionary activities or distributing Bibles or other religious literature. Former government security agents now abroad have reported intensified police action aimed at halting religious activity at the border.

Recommendations for U.S. Policy

The U.S. has no diplomatic relations with North Korea and raises human rights concerns in various multilateral fora and through other governments with diplomatic missions in the DPRK. USCIRF has concluded that negotiations with North Korea should be rooted in a broader policy framework that raises human rights, religious freedom, refugees, and humanitarian concerns as part of all diplomatic discussions, including on nuclear non-proliferation at regional “Six-party talks.” The Obama Administration should coordinate the efforts of regional allies to raise concerns about religious freedom, refugees, abductions, transparent distribution of food aid, and the closure of the infamous labor-penal camps and clearly signal that future political, diplomatic, or economic inducements will require improvements in human security as well as nuclear security issues. In addition to recommending the continued designation of North Korea as a CPC, the U.S. government should:

- Work with regional allies in all negotiations with North Korea including the Six-Party Talks to reach agreements on pressing human rights and human security concerns, including the monitoring of humanitarian aid, the resettlement of refugees, family reunifications, abductions, the 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 to protect North Korean refugees and stop their repatriation from China, by: routinely raising with Beijing the need to uphold its international obligations to protect asylum seekers by allowing the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to confer on them temporary asylum and permit their safe transport to countries of final asylum; providing UNHCR with unrestricted access to interview North Korean nationals in China; allow international humanitarian organizations greater access to North Koreans in China to address growing social problems, abuses, and exploitation; and ensuring that the return of any refugees relating to any bilateral agreement with North Korea does not violate China’s obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol or under Article 3 of the Convention Against Torture;
- Implement fully the provisions of the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2008, and ensure that all funds authorized under the Act are requested and used to fulfill the purposes of the Act, including assistance to expand public diplomacy by increasing access to information and new media, increase the capacity of NGOs working to promote democracy and human rights, protect and resettle refugees, monitor humanitarian aid and progress on human rights, and support NGOs conducting democracy and human rights training in the North Korean diaspora; and
- Target appropriated foreign assistance to build a cadre of experts and potential leaders among North Korean refugee populations, through the creation of scholarship, leadership, educational, and other programs in the United States.

Please see USCIRF’s 2012 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on the Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea.