



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

U.S. Policy and Freedom of Religion or Belief in North Korea

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Abraham Cooper, USCIRF Vice Chair

Good morning and thank you for attending the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's hearing today on *U.S. Policy and Freedom of Religion or Belief in North Korea*. I would also like to thank our distinguished witnesses for joining us and offering your expertise today.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF, is an independent, bipartisan U.S. government advisory body created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, or IRFA. The Commission uses international standards to monitor freedom of religion or belief abroad and makes policy recommendations to the U.S. government. Today, October 27, is International Religious Freedom Day in the United States, commemorating the enactment of IRFA exactly 24 years ago. It is especially fitting that we are holding this hearing

on the anniversary date considering the new research that has come to light on the North Korean government's religious freedom abuses despite the difficulty to obtain new information from North Korea. Conditions were bleak 24 years ago, and we are concerned for further deterioration today.

North Korea is one of the worst religious freedom violators in the world. A monumental 2014 report by the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea found that "there is an almost complete denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion" in the country. Recent reporting suggests that systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom have continued to occur and may even amount to genocide and crimes against humanity.

Based on interviews with victims, witnesses, and perpetrators, USCIRF has released two reports on North Korea which clearly demonstrate that the government continues to treat religion as an existential threat and perpetrate horrific religious freedom violations against its own people. The North Korean regime forces its citizens to unconditionally obey a state ideology called "Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism" [Kim Mill-Sung-ism Kim Jong-ill-ism].

This state ideology forbids North Koreans to adopt and practice religion from birth, and it is enforced across state and society, spanning every aspect of a North

Korean's life. We are fortunate to have the authors of our most recent report here with us today who can expound on these points and give us a clear picture of the repression facing people of faith in the country.

China's complicity has exacerbated the religious freedom conditions in North Korea, as the Chinese government maintains a policy of forcible repatriation of North Korean refugees, placing them at risk of severe persecution upon return, especially for those with any connection to Christianity.

USCIRF has consistently recommended North Korea's designation as a Country of Particular Concern, or CPC, since 2001. The State Department has followed this recommendation since 2001 and reimposed ongoing sanctions on North Korea. Given these grave concerns, the U.S. government must work to find creative ways and use all the tools at its disposal to address these atrocities inside North Korea.

With that, I will now turn it over to my colleague Commissioner Fred Davie for his remarks and to introduce our witnesses.