



NORTH KOREA

Key Findings

North Korea consistently ranks among the world's most repressive regimes, in part because of its deplorable human rights record. The North Korean regime believes that its own absolute ideology sustains all of North Korean society – politically, economically, and morally – and that alternative beliefs, including religion, pose a threat. Thus, the government restricts basic freedoms and often treats most harshly individuals believed to engage in religious activities, including through arrests, torture, imprisonment, and sometimes execution. Family members of religious believers often are considered guilty by association, suffering the same inhumane fate as their loved ones, typically in prison or at one of North Korea's infamous labor camps. Based on the North Korean government's systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom, USCIRF again recommends in 2016 that North Korea be designated a "country of particular concern," or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The State Department has designated North Korea a CPC since 2001, most recently in July 2014.

Background

For decades, North Korea has indoctrinated its people, including young children, to venerate the ruling Kim family. This forced loyalty leaves no room for the expression of individualized thought, nor does it allow for freedom of religion or belief. The North Korean people must believe in the cult around their "supreme leaders" at the expense of all other forms of belief. Though the constitution grants freedom of religious belief, no such freedom exists in practice. Those who follow a religion or other system of belief do so in secret. The most recent estimate puts North Korea's total population at nearly 25 million. According to UN figures, less than two percent are Christian, or somewhere between 200,000 and 400,000 people. Figures for religious followers of other

faiths are outdated or difficult to confirm. The country also has strong historical traditions of Buddhism and Confucianism, as well as a local religious movement known as Chondoism (also spelled Cheondoism) and the Russian Orthodox Church.

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The regime consistently uses the launch of missiles and rockets, or the threatened use of these and other armaments, to provoke the international community. While some of these threats are directed at South Korea, many are targeted at the United States, which the regime accuses of leading a global plot to discredit it and orchestrate regime change. Not only is North Korea attempting to amass its own nuclear arsenal, but also the country serves as a conduit between other countries with nuclear ambitions. The country put its weapons cache on display during an elaborate celebration and military parade in October 2015 honoring the 70th anniversary of the Korean Workers' Party.

Since the 2014 report of the UN Human Rights Council's Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (COI), the United Nations has kept the country and its myriad abuses at the fore. Pursuant to a resolution passed by the UN General Assembly, the Security Council moved in December 2014 to formally add the issue of North Korean human rights to its agenda. In April 2015, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights held a briefing on North Korea's human rights abuses; North Korean representatives attempted to hijack the meeting by interrupting statements delivered by North Korean defectors. In June, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein launched a new

UN Human Rights Office in Seoul, South Korea, based on COI recommendations, dedicated to monitoring human rights conditions in North Korea.

Religious Freedom Conditions 2015–2016

Government Control and Repression of Christianity

The North Korean government reserves its most severe persecution for Christians, although in practice the regime is adverse to all organized religion. Based on information collected by the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, individuals face persecution for propagating religion, possessing religious items, carrying out religious activities (including praying and singing hymns), and having contact with religious persons. Christians believed to have committed any of these acts are typically jailed, or worse. In prison, Christians reportedly endure harsher treatment than other prisoners. It is estimated that tens of thousands of Christians in North Korea are currently in prison camps facing hard labor or execution. Given the high cost to themselves and their families if caught, many North Koreans likely self-suppress their own consciences, creating a multiplier effect of the government's repressive policies.

visiting North Korea as part of humanitarian efforts are at particular risk, especially if they are Korean nationals. For example, in early 2015, North Korean authorities detained Hyeon Soo Lim, a pastor who had made many humanitarian trips to the country over nearly two decades. Reverend Lim was born in South Korea but is a Canadian citizen. A North Korean court sentenced Reverend Lim to life in prison and hard labor on vague charges of insulting the country's leadership. In March 2015, North Korean authorities detained two South Korean pastors, Kim Kuk Gi and Choe Chun Gil, on charges of espionage, purportedly carried out in part through the use of underground churches; in June, a North Korean court sentenced the two men to life with hard labor.

In the absence of widely available Internet or media that is not controlled by the government, radios have become a means to provide North Koreans limited access to religion. In some parts of the country, radio stations from South Korea or China are able to transmit signals inside North Korea, sometimes with religious programming.

Despite the irrefutable evidence to the contrary, the regime insists it does not violate religious freedom. In

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Except at the handful of state-controlled houses of worship, which are widely believed to exist for the benefit of foreigners, religious believers typically practice their faith individually and secretly, sometimes even keeping their faith private from members of their own family. The state-run Korean Catholic Association has no ties to the Vatican, and the single Catholic church in the country does not have a priest. However, according to reports, officials agreed to allow South Korean priests to visit North Korea to perform services beginning in 2016, a change from the practice of *ad hoc* services performed by visiting clergy.

North Korea regularly detains foreigners on spurious charges as a means to extract diplomatic concessions from their countries of citizenship. Clergy

July 2015, Alejandro Cao de Benos, a Spaniard working for the North Korean government as Special Delegate for North Korea's Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, called accusations that Christians are persecuted in the country "absolutely false."

North Korean Refugees in China

China remains North Korea's strongest supporter and its largest trading partner. Despite its displeasure at North Korea's unannounced testing of an alleged hydrogen bomb on January 6, 2016, China thus far has declined to respond punitively or take any action. This partly stems from China's longstanding concerns about an influx of North Korean refugees should its neighbor

become unstable. As a deterrent, the Chinese government maintains tight security along the border with North Korea and forcibly returns individuals crossing into China. This violates China's obligations under the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees and its 1969 Protocol. Reports suggest both China and North Korea recently have installed additional fencing on their respective sides of the border. Both China and North Korea also have responded swiftly to individuals caught crossing the border, such as when the Chinese military shot and killed a North Korean refugee in June 2015 in Yanbian Province. Accounts from North Korean defectors indicate that individuals caught trying to defect or forcibly repatriated from China are severely punished, particularly those believed to have interacted with missionaries or engaged in religious activities.

sanctions. In February, Congress approved and President Barack Obama signed into law the North Korea Sanctions Enforcement Act, which imposes both mandatory and discretionary sanctions against individuals conducting certain kinds of business with North Korea, including any person who "knowingly engages in, is responsible for, or facilitates serious human rights abuses by the Government of North Korea," and directs the Secretary to report on North Korean prison camps and "on persons responsible for serious human rights abuses or censorship in North Korea."

In February 2015, at the request of the UN Security Council, a panel of experts presented a report evaluating the Security Council's actions against North Korea's nuclear efforts that also noted a correlation between the country's nuclear threats in anticipation of and in response to the UN General Assembly's annual human

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U.S. Policy

The United States does not have diplomatic relations with North Korea and has no official presence within the country. North Korea's pursuit of a nuclear weapons program has defined relations between the United States and North Korea for decades. U.S. officials have stated publicly that the United States is open to engagement and substantive dialogue with North Korea, both bilaterally and through the Six-Party process, on the issue of denuclearization.

Throughout 2015, Secretary of State John Kerry similarly called for increased international pressure on North Korea. This continued into 2016 following the North Korea's claims that it had detonated a hydrogen bomb on January 6, 2016. Secretary Kerry met and spoke with counterparts from several countries, including the foreign ministers of China, Japan, and South Korea. U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power made similar entreaties at the UN Security Council, which unanimously approved new

rights resolutions. At an April 2015 panel discussion on human rights in North Korea, Ambassador Power noted that the country's abuses are not just a matter of human rights, but also of international peace and security. In December, during the U.S. presidency of the UN Security Council, the United States and eight other countries convened a meeting to discuss human rights in North Korea.

North Korea continues to target individuals with close ties to the United States; the regime routinely detains them and compels confessions designed to embarrass and undercut the United States. In April 2015, North Korea deported U.S. citizen Sandra Suh, the founder of a humanitarian aid organization, for allegedly spreading propaganda. Also in April, North Korean officials arrested New York University Student Joo Won-moon, a South Korean with U.S. permanent resident status; North Korean authorities alleged he illegally crossed into the country from China. In a May media interview while still detained, Joo Won-moon said he intended to be arrested as a means to foster

better relations between North and South Korea; it is unclear if this was his genuine motive. He was released to South Korean authorities in October. More recently, in January 2016, North Korea arrested University of Virginia student Otto Frederick Warmbier allegedly for committing a “hostile act.” Warmbier was visiting North Korea with a tour group and was detained at the airport as the group was leaving the country. In February 2016, Warmbier publicly confessed to the charges and admitted his actions were coordinated with someone from an Ohio church; however, according to a pastor at the church, the alleged individual is unknown and Warmbier is not a member of the church.

In lieu of prescribing sanctions specific to the CPC designation, the State Department consistently has applied “double-hatted” sanctions against North Korea, in this case via the Jackson-Vanik amendment under the Trade Act of 1974. New U.S. sanctions against the North Korean government and the Korean Workers’ Party went into effect January 2, 2015 following the hack of Sony Pictures Entertainment. In November 2015, the Treasury Department added four individuals and one company to the list of “specially designated nationals” for their involvement with and connection to North Korea’s weapons proliferation; among the individuals named was Kim Sok Chol, North Korea’s Ambassador to Burma.

Recommendations

Human rights violations committed by North Korea should be addressed alongside the nuclear issue, as appropriate. The United States should continue to engage stakeholders – such as South Korea, Japan, and the United Nations – to maximize the effectiveness of efforts on both the human rights and nuclear fronts. In addition to recommending the U.S. government continue to designate North Korea a CPC, USCIRF recommends the U.S. government should:

- Impose targeted sanctions on specific North Korean officials, or individuals or companies working directly with them, for human rights violations, as part of sanctions imposed via executive order or congressional action or at the United Nations;
- Call for a follow-up UN inquiry within five years to track the findings of the 2014 report by the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic

People’s Republic of Korea and assess any new developments, and suggest a regularization of such analysis similar to and in coordination with the Universal Periodic Review process;

- Include, whenever possible, both the Special Envoy for North Korean Human Rights Issues and the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom in bilateral discussions with North Korea in order to incorporate human rights and religious freedom into the dialogue, and likewise incorporate human rights and religious freedom concerns into discussions with multilateral partners regarding denuclearization, as appropriate;
- Coordinate efforts with regional allies, particularly Japan and South Korea, to raise human rights and humanitarian concerns and specific concerns regarding freedom of religion or belief, and press for improvements, including closure of the infamous penal labor camps;
- Explore innovative ways to expand existing radio programming transmitted into North Korea and along the border, as well as the dissemination of other forms of information technology, such as mobile phones, thumb drives, and DVDs, and improved Internet access so that North Koreans have greater access to independent sources of information;
- 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 and international humanitarian organizations to assist them and by ending repatriations, which are in violation of the 1951 Refugee Convention and Protocol and/or the United Nations Convention Against Torture; and
- Implement fully the provisions of the North Korean Human Rights Act, and use authorized funds to promote increased access to information and news media inside North Korea and to promote greater capacity of NGOs to promote democracy and human rights, protect and resettle refugees, and monitor deliveries of humanitarian aid.