

2008 Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

“A PRISON WITHOUT BARS”: REFUGEE AND DEFECTOR TESTIMONIES OF SEVERE VIOLATIONS OF FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF IN NORTH KOREA

Update on Religious Freedom Conditions in North Korea and New Interviews with Former North Korean Security Agents

In December 2005, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom published a report entitled *Thank You Father Kim Il Sung: Eyewitness Accounts of Severe Violations of the Freedom of Thought, Conscience, and Religion in North Korea*. That report, based on extensive interviews with North Korean refugees who fled through China to South Korea from 1999 – 2003, provided a much needed window on religious freedom conditions inside North Korea and the consequences for refugees who are forced to return. The North Koreans interviewed for that report provided compelling eyewitness accounts of public executions of religious believers, torture and imprisonment of refugees repatriated from China, the state’s manipulation of religious institutions to gain international prestige and foreign currency, and recent developments inside North Korea, including the revival of Shamanistic practice and fortune-telling.

Those initial interviews also provided compelling details about the rites, requirements, and rituals of the quasi-religious personality cult surrounding Kim Il Sung and his family. Veneration of the Kim family is part of an all-encompassing ideological system known as *KimIlSungism*. All North Koreans are required to attend weekly meetings and to keep pictures of the Kim family in their homes, and there are specific penalties for those who refuse to follow the required rituals. From those interviews it was learned that even the infamous “Yodok” prison camp has a special shrine where inmates, despite living in appalling conditions, are required to keep a special pair of socks for entry. *KimIlSungism* is not merely a method of social control, but the ideological basis of the Kim family’s political legitimacy.

Thank You Father Kim Il Sung presented valuable information about religious freedom conditions in North Korea for the widest possible audience of policymakers, diplomats, journalists, religious leaders, and researchers on religious freedom and related human rights in North Korea. The findings from that report were conveyed to senior U.S. Administration officials, Members of Congress, relevant UN agencies including the UN Special Rapporteur on North Korea, and a variety of think tanks in Washington, New York, Rome, and Seoul. That report has been translated into Korean and is available on the Commission’s Web site at http://www.uscirf.gov/images/stories/pdf/nkwitnesses_wgraphics.pdf.

Updating *Thank You Father Kim Il Sung*

Over the past year, a team of researchers contracted by the Commission conducted 32 additional interviews with North Korean refugees who fled to China from 2003 – 2007 and six interviews with former North Korean security agents who defected to South Korea over the past eight years. The purpose of these supplementary interviews was to determine if religious

freedom conditions had changed to any degree, if repressive government policies uncovered in the first report remained in force, and if repatriated refugees continue to face harsh treatment at the border.¹ The new refugee interviews are the basis of a report published by the Commission in April 2008 entitled, “*A Prison Without Bars*”: *Refugee and Defector Testimonies of Severe Violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief in North Korea*.

Forcibly Repatriated Refugees

Recent refugee testimony provides further evidence that North Koreans face a well-founded fear of persecution if repatriated from China and require protection as refugees under the international Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The forcible repatriation of refugees from China remains an issue of special concern, particularly because refugees are singled out for harsher punishment if they are suspected of having had close and ongoing contact with South Koreans or religious groups. Refugee testimony confirms that repatriated North Koreans are asked repeatedly about their religious affiliations and associations in China. They suffer harsh interrogation, torture, and prolonged detention, particularly if it is discovered that they have either converted to Christianity while in China or had contact with South Koreans—both of which are considered to be political offenses.

As David Hawk, the lead researcher for the first Commission report, and others have argued, the harsh treatment of repatriated refugees, particularly for their religious beliefs or associations, may constitute a crime against humanity according to international human rights treaties.ⁱⁱ Clearly, the plight of North Korean asylum-seekers requires continued vigilance and action from the international community.

The Supremacy of KimIlSungism

The new refugee interviews provide substantial details about the strength and scope of *KimIlSungism*. Absolute reverence for the Kim family continues to be indoctrinated into every North Korean, through schools, media, and the workplace. Enthusiastic veneration can advance careers and ensure access to daily necessities, while disinterest, “complaints,” or “wrong thoughts” can lead to the imprisonment of up to three generations of one’s family in the notorious political prison labor camps (*kwanliso*). The penalties for challenging *KimIlSungism* are well known, but refugee testimony did provide some information about individual private rebellions, lax enforcement of some rituals, and widespread dissatisfaction with the personality cult’s requirements.

New and Surviving Religious Practices

Additional insight into surviving religious activity in North Korea is also gained from the recent interviews. Despite decades of repression, anti-religious propaganda, and the promulgation of *KimIlSungism*, remnants of Buddhism, Christianity, and traditional folk beliefs such as Shamanism persist. For example, there was a notable amount of eyewitness testimony about Buddhist temples that are preserved as “heritage” or “tourist” attractions by so-called “monks” paid by the Korean Workers’ Party. However, despite testimony about surviving Buddhist religious venues, only two refugees interviewed for the Commission’s new report

witnessed any religious practice at these venues—and what they witnessed was practiced clandestinely.

The persistence—and even popularity—of Shamanistic practice, particularly by exorcists and fortune-tellers, continues to be an intriguing finding of the Commission’s research. Most refugees interviewed had visited, or knew of a family member who had visited, an exorcist or fortune-teller. Despite ongoing bans on these practices, they are apparently tolerated in rural areas—and indeed, practitioners are even frequented by high ranking officials and military officers.

The current group of refugees also provides additional information about clandestine Protestant activity, including details about surviving religious practices and “new” religious activity fueled by cross-border contacts with China. The refugees testified to the existence of secret meetings and missionary activity occurring in the border regions. Although there is not enough data from these interviews to determine the size and scope of clandestine Protestant activity, it is nevertheless clearly perceived as a threat by North Korean security officials.

Interviews with Former North Korean Security Agents

One important new facet of the new report is the inclusion of former North Korean Security Agents among those interviewed, providing particularly unusual and valuable insight into police tactics and efforts to curtail clandestine religious activities. The Commission interviewed former National Security Agency (NSA or *Bowibu*) and Public Security Agency (PSA, or *Anjeobu*) officers. Their testimony confirms that refugees face extensive interrogation about their religious contacts and affiliations once they are repatriated from China. Their statements also acknowledge the torture and mistreatment of repatriated refugees, particularly those who confessed to contact with South Korean humanitarian organizations or who were suspected of being religious believers.

The former North Korean security agents testify to increased police activity aimed at halting religious activities in the border regions with China. The agents told of infiltrating Korean-Chinese churches in China, posing as “pastors,” or setting up mock prayer meetings to gather information and entrap new converts in North Korea. The former agents believed Protestantism to be an ideological competitor to the “one and only ideology—*KimIlSungism*.” They also understood Protestantism as a security threat, suspecting that its growth was a product of “South Korean and American intelligence” agencies. The testimony presented in the new report suggests that the repression and mistreatment of repatriated refugees, and anyone suspected of conducting clandestine religious activity in North Korea, will continue.

Conclusion

Clearly, religious freedom and other human rights conditions in North Korea remain among the world’s worst, as the testimony of this more recent group of interviewees confirms. Moreover, the regime headed by Kim Jong Il maintains an unyielding dominance over virtually every aspect of life there, aided by the state-imposed veneration of the Kim family and enforced

through an extensive government network of control that intrudes upon virtually every aspect of life in North Korea.

The Commission on International Religious Freedom has worked actively since its inception to draw the world's attention to ways that the internationally guaranteed right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief is consistently—and severely—violated by the North Korean government. The Commission has devoted considerable resources to helping voices that are heard all too rarely—the voices of North Koreans—to reach policymakers far beyond the DPRK's borders. The reality of life for the people of North Korea can perhaps best be summarized by the words of one former government official, “The only reason the North Korean system...still exists is because of the strict surveillance system... North Korea is a prison without bars.”

“A Prison Without Bars”: *Refugee and Defector Testimonies of Severe Violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief in North Korea* can be found on the Commission's Web site at http://www.uscirtf.gov/images/A_Prison_Without_Bars/prisonwithoutbars.pdf.

ⁱ Researchers were also asked to 1) interview a more geographically diverse sample of refugees to confirm previous findings; 2) ask additional questions about the practice of Buddhism in North Korea; and 3) seek more information about conditions for refugees repatriated from China.

ⁱⁱ Hawk, David, *Concentrations of Inhumanity: An Analysis of the Phenomena of Repression Associated With North Korea's Kwan-li-so Political Penal Labor Camps*, Freedom House: 2007; and Christian Solidarity Worldwide, *North Korea: A Case to Answer, A Call to Act*, CRS: 2007.