

Policy Forum 04-34A: Annual Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom



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Annual Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

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Annual Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

by United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

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I. Introduction

This is an excerpt from the annual report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom dealing with religion in the DPRK. The Nautilus Institute will be running another essay, from a very different perspective on this issue, on Thursday (September 23rd, 2004). The report states "there is no evidence that religious freedom conditions have improved in the past year. The Commission continues to recommend that North Korea be designated a "country of particular concern," or CPC, which the State Department has done since 2001."

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Essay by United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

"Annual Report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom"
by United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

North Korea is a humanitarian disaster of unimaginable proportions. As devastating as the physical toll has been, the deprivation of the human spirit must be even greater. The people of the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (DPRK) are among the least free on earth, barely surviving under a totalitarian regime that denies basic human dignity and lets them starve while pursuing military might and weapons of mass destruction. By all accounts there are no personal freedoms of any kind in North Korea and no protection for human rights.

Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief remains essentially non-existent in North Korea, where the government severely represses public and private religious activities and has a policy of actively discriminating against religious believers. Despite the regime's tight grip on information about conditions inside the country, there is a growing body of consistent reports from refugees that officials have arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and sometimes executed North Koreans who were found to have ties with overseas Christian Evangelical groups operating outside the country, as well as those who engaged in such unauthorized religious activities as public religious expression and persuasion. There is no evidence that religious freedom conditions have improved in the past year. The Commission continues to recommend that North Korea be designated a "country of particular concern," or CPC, which the State Department has done since 2001.

The North Korean government has formed several religious organizations that it controls for the purpose of severely restricting religious activities in the country, although the government contends that they constitute proof of religious freedom in the country. For example, the Korean Buddhist Federation prohibits Buddhist monks from worshiping at North Korean temples. Most of the remaining temples that have escaped government destruction since the Korean War are portrayed by the government as cultural relics rather than religious sites. Similarly, the Korean Christian Federation restricts Christian activities. Following the reported wholesale destruction of over 1,500 churches during Kim Il Sung's reign (1948-1994), two Protestant churches and one Roman Catholic church, without a priest, opened in Pyongyang in 1988. The absence of a Catholic priest means that mass and most sacraments cannot be celebrated. Construction of a Russian Orthodox Church was completed in 2003.

According to South Korean pastors operating exchanges with the Korea Christian Federation, although some fraction of North Koreans who attend services at the Catholic and Protestant churches in Pyongyang are genuine in their faith, the majority reportedly attend services to monitor and report to the government on church activities. In January 2004, a former member of the North

Korean National Security Agency testified before the Commission that these churches are directly controlled and operated by the National Security Agency. Researchers report that there is little evidence that the Catholic and Protestant churches meet for Sunday services when there are not foreigners in the city requesting to attend. While the North Korean government reports that some 500 house churches operate with government approval outside of Pyongyang for religious believers in rural areas, independent observers have questioned the existence of such facilities or gatherings. They cite consistent denials of repeated requests to visit such gatherings.

Some evidence suggests that underground churches operate in secret under the extremely repressive conditions in North Korea. The Commission has received information that underground Christians meet in small groups and operate in complete secrecy inside North Korea. Researchers in South Korea have also reported on the existence of underground Christians, although there are no good estimates of the numbers of believers in these groups or in what areas of the country they might operate.

Persons found carrying Bibles in public or distributing religious literature, or engaging in unauthorized religious activities such as public religious expression and persuasion, are arrested and imprisoned. There continue to be reports of torture and execution of religious believers. Although the practice of imprisoning religious believers is reportedly widespread, the State Department has been unable to document fully the number of religious detainees or prisoners. According to a South Korean press report cited in the State Department's 2003 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom, an estimated 6,000 Christians are incarcerated in "Prison No. 15" located in the northern part of the country. According to a study from the U.S. Committee on Human Rights in North Korea, several North Korean refugees have reported that Christians are serving long-term sentences in political prisoner camps on account of their religious beliefs or activities. The Commission was informed at a hearing held in January 2002 that such prisoners are reportedly treated worse than other inmates. For example, religious prisoners, especially Christians, are reportedly given the most dangerous tasks while in prison, where they are subject to constant abuse from prison officials in an effort to force them to renounce their faith. When they refuse, these religious prisoners are reportedly often beaten and sometimes tortured to death.

The North Korean government forcefully propagates an ideology, known as "Juche," based on the personality cult of the regime's current leader, Kim Jong Il, and his late father, Kim Il Sung. Korean law reportedly mandates that pictures of Kim Jong Il and his father be placed in every home and venerated. Institutes have also been opened in several locations around the country for the study and veneration of Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung

Officials have stratified North Korean society on the basis of family background and perceived loyalty to the regime into 51 specific categories. Religious adherents are by definition relegated to a lower category, receiving fewer privileges and opportunities, such as education and employment, than others. An extensive report recently released by Amnesty International details evidence that persons in lower categories have in some cases been forcibly relocated to remote and desolate areas of the country and then systematically denied access to food aid and therefore left to starve.

Thousands of North Koreans have fled to China in recent years. Refugees who are either forcibly repatriated or those who are detained after having voluntarily returned to the DPRK are accused of treason. All must undergo interrogation, and those found to have had contacts with South Koreans or Christian missionaries are subject to severe punishment, including the death penalty.

In June 2003, the Commission submitted testimony for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, recommending that the U.S. government launch a major international initiative to expose and raise awareness of human rights abuses in North Korea,

including expanded U.S. government reporting, congressional engagement, and multilateral diplomacy. The Commission also participated in a June 2003 press conference held by Senator Sam Brownback, who announced his plans to introduce legislation on North Korea. That legislation, the North Korean Freedom Act of 2003 (H.R. 3573 and S. 1903), includes a number of the Commission's policy recommendations, such as an increase in broadcasting into North Korea, and would express the sense of Congress that any negotiations with the North Korean government by the United States should include human rights issues, including religious freedom.

In January 2004, the Commission held a hearing in Los Angeles entitled "North Korea: Human Rights Ground Zero," focusing on conditions of human rights, including religious freedom, the plight of North Korean refugees, and implications of these conditions for U.S. policy. Commissioners heard testimony from David Hawk of the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea; Roger Winter from the U.S. Agency for International Development; Suzanne Scholte of the Defense Forum Foundation; a North Korean refugee; and a South Korean pastor who works as a missionary inside North Korea.

In March, 2004, the Commission wrote a letter to the U.S. delegation to the 60th session of the UN Commission on Human Rights recommending that the delegation support a resolution on the egregious violations of human rights in North Korea and advocate appointment of a Special Rapporteur on human rights in North Korea to monitor and report on these abuses. In April 2004, a resolution was introduced by the European Union with the support of the United States that included a call for a Special Rapporteur. This resolution passed on April 15, 2004.

In addition to recommending that North Korea be designated a CPC, the Commission has recommended that the U.S. government should:

work with the international community to urge the North Korean government to permit monitoring of human rights conditions by UN human rights mechanisms, and to lift restrictions on the freedom of movement by foreign diplomats, independent journalists, and others.

In addition, the U.S. Congress should fund an objective and comprehensive study of human rights conditions in North Korea by a non-governmental source, establish a congressional caucus to focus on human rights in North Korea, and expand its funding for (a) organizations advocating the protection of human rights in North Korea and (b) activities that raise the awareness of human rights conditions in that country. III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent. Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development

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