

POLICY BRIEF



North Korea

Abysmal human rights violations and persecution of Christians

North Korea is one of the most isolated, closed countries in the world, with one of the worst human rights records. Ruled by the Kim family since its establishment in 1948, North Korea has been defined as a “State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world” and a “totalitarian State [...] that [...] seeks to dominate every aspect of its citizens’ lives and terrorizes them from within.”¹ The country is ruled by a single party and one leader, currently Kim Jong Un, and has two aspects as its basis, one called “Juche” (“self-reliance”, meaning that man is the master of his destiny) and the other “Kimilsungism”, about the worship of the Kim leaders, all-powerful entities guiding North Korea and helping it flourish.²

Freedom of religion or belief, freedom of assembly and freedom of expression are non-existent in North Korea. No ideology or religion is allowed to exist apart from Juche and Kimilsungism. Christianity is considered as a serious threat to state’s loyalty and to the power of the leader, and it is therefore ferociously oppressed. Apart from state-sponsored churches existing in Pyongyang – claimed to be a mere show for external visitors – any manifestation of religious beliefs is prohibited. Due to the country’s isolation and lack of access, it is difficult to verify figures, but Open Doors estimates that there are between 300,000 and 500,000 Christians in North Korea. It is almost impossible for Christians to gather for worship, and if some dare to, it has to be done in utmost secrecy.³

¹ “Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea”, 7 February 2014, para. 80. Available at: documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G14/108/66/PDF/G1410866.pdf?OpenElement.

² “North Korea: Country Dossier”, World Watch Research, February 2020, pp. 8. Available at: opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/North-Korea-WWL-2020-Country-Dossier-February-update.pdf.

³ *Ibid.*

Severe violations of basic rights and crimes against humanity against Christians

Being a Christian in North Korea is considered a political crime. If the North Korean Government discovers that someone is a Christian, they may be deported to a political prison camp (*kwanliso*), and there incarcerated, forced to do hard labor, or be arbitrarily executed.⁴ In the past, the entire family of the accused would be sent to a prison camp by “guilt of association”, and such cases still occur. The North Korean Government continues to deny the existence of political prison camps despite the undeniable evidence collected by international stakeholders.⁵ The North Korean Government has detained foreign nationals in North Korea under charges of espionage, committing harmful activities against the nation and its leader and illegal religious activities. Sharing one’s faith or bringing religious literature in the country, besides one Bible for personal use, may lead to detention and forced labor. For example, according to Open Doors’ sources, three Christian missionaries from South Korea have been detained as political prisoners.

North Korea is committing “unspeakable atrocities” against prisoners, amounting to crimes against humanity

The UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (Col) found in 2014 that in political prison camps prisoners are “gradually eliminated through deliberate starvation, forced labor, executions, torture, rape,” and that North Korea is committing “unspeakable atrocities” against prisoners, amounting to crimes against humanity.⁶

Other severe violations of fundamental rights inflicted on Christians originate from the so-called “Songbun” classification system. Established in the early years after the institution of North Korea, the system categorizes all North Korean citizens in three classes – the core, the wavering and the hostile class – under which there are 51 sub-categories. Those labeled as “hostile” include Christians, persons believed to have collaborated with the Japanese during the period of colonization, and those whose relatives have defected to South Korea.⁷ Ordinary North Koreans’ freedom of movement inside

the country is severely restricted, and the Government imposes an absolute ban on travel abroad. For those citizens classified as hostile, restrictions are even more extensive and severe: Open Doors reports that Christians have been forcefully deported and banished to remote regions, with no possibility of leaving, and forced to do hard labor such as mining and lumber cutting. Even North Koreans who are descendants from Christian families, but do not hold that faith themselves, may encounter the similar fate.⁸ North Korea has a ration system that has been reported to be discriminatory on the basis of Songbun: individuals segregated to remote areas, for example, receive either smaller rations, or no rations at all in times of food shortage.⁹

Freedom of religion or belief, freedom of assembly and freedom of expression are non-existent in North Korea

North Koreans who take the risk of fleeing the country, despite the strict border controls, and who are forcibly repatriated are considered criminals and face torture, arbitrary detention, imprisonment and deliberate starvation. Once repatriated, individuals go through a thorough investigation. If the Government finds that they have been in contact with Christian churches and missionaries or they have converted to Christianity, they may be sent to political prison camps, imprisoned in ordinary detention centers or even summarily executed.¹⁰

Human trafficking, sexual violence and rape

North Korean women and girls are uniquely vulnerable to sex trafficking and sex trade. Victims are usually trafficked from North Korea on false offers of employment, and later sold as brides or sex slaves into China and other south east Asian countries. Victims are trafficked to the border and then transported to safe houses, brothels or buyers. Sexual violence and rape are common during these journeys, and if the victims are not sold immediately, they are confined in safe houses and subjected to rape and gangrape.¹¹ Some of these trafficked women and girls come into

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ “Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea”, *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, para. 56-63 and 76-77.

⁷ “North Korea: Country Dossier”, *Ibid.* See also “The price is rights: The violation of the right to an adequate standard of living in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea”, *UN Office of the Human Rights Commissioner*, May 2019. Available at: [ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/KP/ThePriceRights_EN.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/KP/ThePriceRights_EN.pdf).

⁸ See “White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea”, *Korean Institute for National Unification*, September 2019, pp. 121-137. Information is also based on Open Doors’ research and interviews with North Korean defectors.

⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 64. See also “Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea”, *Ibid.*, Para. 46-55.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Para. 42.

¹¹ “Sex slaves: the prostitution, cybersex & forced marriage of North Korean women and girls in China”, *North Korea Future Initiative*, 2019, pp. 28-29. Available at: [static1.squarespace.com/static/5dc1aed040fe330ac04da331t/5e20241750880c2dddc45bfc/1579164720911/Sex+Slaves+-+Korea+Future+Initiative](https://www.squarespace.com/static/5dc1aed040fe330ac04da331t/5e20241750880c2dddc45bfc/1579164720911/Sex+Slaves+-+Korea+Future+Initiative).

contact with churches and missionaries and convert to Christianity. Women and girls who are caught and forcibly repatriated to North Korea are initially held in a pre-trial detention center run by the Ministry of State Security, where their identity is determined before they are searched and interrogated.

“For the ‘crime’ of being trafficked and sold, the Government of North Korea incarcerated me in a camp where I was forced to endure acts that will haunt me for the rest of my life.”¹²

Searches can be very invasive and humiliating, and interrogations involve beatings.¹³ If pregnant, prison officers force victims to get an abortion, or if the pregnancy is too advanced they kill the baby once it's delivered.



People bowing down before a bronze statue of former leader, Kim Il-Sung, North Korea.

If the Ministry of State Security finds out that the victims had any contacts with Christians or converted to Christianity while in China, victims are considered political prisoners and sent to a political prison camp. Christian women and girls or women and girls who have been in contact with Christians during their time away are therefore condemned to an even worse fate.¹⁴

Increase in food insecurity

North Korea is in the midst of a food crisis which is set to worsen. Accounts from North Korean defectors suggest that due to the ongoing dire situation, incidents of cannibalism have occurred in some areas.¹⁵ During Covid-19 pandemic, the government's tight control over the market and reduction in its daily operating hours became a barrier to trade and distribution of food.¹⁶ Additionally, the 'New Grain Distribution' measure, a policy banning the private sale of rice in the market and directly controlling the production and distribution of grain through grain stores,¹⁷ created supply and demand problems.¹⁸ As a result, only a very few people, such as key officials and their families, workers and families of major institutions and enterprises, and military personnel can receive food at government-set prices, which are virtually free, while the rest must purchase at a higher price.¹⁹ North Korea's food insecurity is fundamentally a problem of accessibility and distribution.²⁰ Food distribution is concentrated only in certain regions like Pyongyang and to a particular affluent social strata.²¹ Consequently, a very large section of vulnerable people including those who have Christian backgrounds constitute the hostile class and mostly live in underprivileged areas are unable to obtain food, potentially leading to a situation wherein significant numbers of death could occur due to starvation.

¹² Testimony of a survivor who now lives in the UK. In: "Sex slaves: the prostitution, cybersex & forced marriage of North Korean women and girls in China", *Ibid.*, pp. 10.
¹³ "Human rights violations against women detained in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea", *United Nations' Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*, July 2020. Available at: [ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/KP/HR_Violations_against_Women_DPRK_EN.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/KP/HR_Violations_against_Women_DPRK_EN.pdf).
¹⁴ Inquiry on Crimes Against Humanity in North Korean Political Prisons: A report by the War Crimes Committee of the International Bar Association (IBA), 2017, pp. 78.
¹⁵ [bbc.com/korean/news-65857970](https://www.bbc.com/korean/news-65857970)
¹⁶ dailynk.com/20230123-2
¹⁷ yna.co.kr/view/AKR20230207148800504?site=mapping_hyberlink
¹⁸ yna.co.kr/view/AKR20230216080400504
¹⁹ Farmers receive a lump sum distribution of grain in kind through post-harvest settlement distribution. Available at: Trends in the NK's Food Crisis and Our Prayers, NK Mission Research Institute, Open Doors Korea, September 2023, pp. 7.
²⁰ Lee Ji-seon, 'Unknown Food Crisis': North Korea's food crisis from the perspective of international food security, Institute for National Security Strategy INSS, Issue Brief No. 440, June 2023, pp.7.
²¹ *Ibid.*, pp.5.

Recommendations:

1 The international community, and the United States in particular, when engaging with North Korea in any capacity, should always prioritize and address human rights violations – freedom of religion or belief included – committed by the North Korean Government;

2 To end severe violations of fundamental rights and crimes against humanity, and to ensure the respect of freedom of religion or belief, the North Korean Government should:

- Urgently **acknowledge the existence of political prison camps**, provide international humanitarian organizations with immediate access to the camps and their surviving victims, **dismantle all political prison camps** and release all political prisoners; **cease considering Christianity as a political crime;**
- **Cease using the Songbun classification system to discriminate against and persecute individuals categorized as “hostile”**, such as Christians, and ensure their basic rights are respected; immediately stop tracking, arbitrarily arresting, using torture and other inhumane or degrading treatment, and arbitrarily executing Christians;
- **Eliminate domestic travel restrictions associated with the Songbun classification system;** eliminate restrictions for individuals classified as “wavering” or “hostile” from travel inside the country and abroad, and cease relocating, confining, detaining and forcing them to do labor in remote areas on the basis of their Songbun classification;
- **Ensure that the right to leave and enter North Korea is guaranteed for all citizens**, in law and in practice; immediately implement policies to ensure that those who return or are repatriated to North Korea are guaranteed their fundamental rights and are not subjected to imprisonment or other forms of punishment; stop investigating returned or repatriated citizens to establish whether they converted to Christianity during their time away;

3 To protect North Korean women and girls from illegal sex trafficking, sexual violence, rape and other severe violations of their human rights and dignity:

- The North Korean Government must ensure that victims of human trafficking repatriated to North Korea are **not subjected to imprisonment or other**

forms of punishment, and that they are given access to adequate protection mechanisms and medical, psychological and social support;

- The North Korean Government should **immediately cease considering conversion to Christianity or contact with churches as grounds for deportation** of repatriated victims of sexual trafficking to a political prison camp;
- The North Korean Government must take immediate measures to **end forced abortions, violence intended to provoke miscarriage, and infanticides** in detention facilities, including through specific legislation prohibiting such practices; conduct prompt and impartial investigations into allegations of such acts and ensure the prosecution of those responsible;

4 The North Korean Government should allow the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in the country for an official visit and investigation of the human rights situation in North Korea.

5 To ensure that North Koreans have accessibility to adequate food:

- The International Community should:
 - › Immediately utilize the UN Security Council’s exemption mechanism to deliver humanitarian assistance to North Korea while ensuring that the distribution of food and medical aid is transparent and not for military use;
 - › Consider reviewing the civilian impact of existing economic sanctions.
- The North Korean Government should implement a fair food distribution system which identifies and prioritizes people whose economic needs and vulnerabilities are the greatest.