

North Korea: Freedom of religion or belief

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Introduction

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), or North Korea, is the world's most closed, isolated and repressive state, with one of the worst records for human rights. It is ruled by the only dictatorship in the world which is both a dynasty and portrays itself as a deity.

There is no freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, and any North Korean who expresses an opinion or a belief which differs from the regime's propaganda faces severe punishment. It is estimated that over 200,000 people are detained in prison camps, where they endure dire living conditions and brutal torture. Many of these are Christians.

Defectors who are returned to North Korea are charged with 'treachery against the nation', sent to prison camps and face abuse, violence and even death. Despite this, the Chinese government has retained its policy of repatriating all North Korean defectors.

UN Commission of Inquiry

The gravity and extent of human rights abuses were exposed in the groundbreaking United Nations Commission of Inquiry (COI) report on human rights in North Korea, published in February 2014 after a year-long investigation. The Commission concluded that the gravity, scale and nature of the violations of human rights in North Korea 'reveal a State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world'.

In addition to its total denial of respect for a wide range of other human rights, freedom of religion or belief in North Korea is non-existent, and the country is cited as one of the worst in the world for the persecution of Christians. With the exception of four official state-controlled churches in Pyongyang, Christians face the risk of detention in the prison camps, severe torture and, in some cases, execution for practising their religious beliefs. North Koreans suspected of having contact with South Korean or other foreign missionaries in China, and those caught in possession of a Bible, have been known to be executed.

The COI report details widespread crimes against humanity, and noted that 'there is an almost complete denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion'. It concluded that the regime 'considers the spread of Christianity a particularly severe threat' and as a result, 'Christians are prohibited from practising their religion and are persecuted'. Severe punishments are inflicted on people 'caught practising Christianity'. Documented incidents include Christians being hung on a cross over a fire, crushed under a steamroller, herded off bridges and trampled underfoot.

The COI report calls for accountability for the widespread and grave violations of human rights, states that these violations amount to crimes against humanity, and calls for a referral

to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for prosecution for these crimes.

Since the publication of the COI report, the human rights situation in North Korea has risen up the UN's agenda. The Human Rights Council and General Assembly passed resolutions in 2014 endorsing the report and its recommendations. In December 2014 the Security Council considered for the first time the human rights situation separately from the nuclear non-proliferation question, and human rights in North Korea are now discussed in this way every year.

However, with the exception of the establishment of the UN Field Office in Seoul, few of the COI's recommendations have been implemented; further work must be done to see these recommendations implemented. Action to end the crimes against humanity in North Korea is long overdue.

CSW everyone
free to believe

Recommendations

- Call on the North Korean government to ensure that all human rights are upheld and defended by the government, including the right to freedom of religion or belief.
- Urge the North Korean government to release all persons currently detained in prison camps immediately and unconditionally, and to provide for their physical, mental and societal rehabilitation where needed.
- Encourage the government to stop charging defectors from the nation with 'treachery' or requesting that defectors into China be returned to North Korea.
- Call on the North Korean government to end the violent, targeted persecution of Christians across the nation.
- Ensure that the human rights situation in North Korea continues to be discussed annually in the UN and separately from the question of nuclear non-proliferation.
- Encourage both the North Korean government and the international community to implement all the COI's recommendations.
- Ensure that the International Criminal Court investigates allegations of crimes against humanity thoroughly, in particular following up on investigations by the UN Commission of Inquiry and the UN Field Office, and prosecutes for these crimes if sufficient evidence is found.

As Christians, we stand with everyone facing injustice because of their religion or belief.