

North Korea: We cannot look away

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All illustrations by Emily Paik

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Foreword

This report, compiled by CSW, commemorates the 10th anniversary of the Commission of Inquiry (COI) that investigated human rights violations in North Korea. The COI report found clear and irrefutable evidence of State involvement in crimes against humanity. This updated summary highlights developments over the last 10 years and stands as a critical and timely reminder to the international community that the humanitarian crisis in North Korea is ongoing, and we cannot look away.

Central to the report’s findings is that ten years on, egregious denial of fundamental human rights, including the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion remains and if anything, the situation has deteriorated. Moreover, North Korea remains one of the most repressive and controlling states on earth for religious groups. Crimes against humanity persist and the state acts with total impunity while Kim’s regime is insouciant towards its obligations under international law.

I once met a North Korean Christian refugee who shared his harrowing testimony. He told me how he had seen his wife and children shot dead by Kim Jong-Il’s militia after they were forcibly returned to North Korea from China. If anything, the situation has worsened under Kim Jong-Un. The forced refolement of North Korean refugees to North Korea by China, in direct contravention of the 1951 Refugee Convention, has made China complicit

in the crimes against humanity identified by the UN Commission of Inquiry.

Forcibly returned refugees face some of the most inhumane treatment under the regime and CSW highlights the plight of North Korean refugees as one of the most dangerous and harrowing journeys to freedom in the world today. Their experience exemplifies the dire human cost of the dictatorship and reminds us to face the reality of the world’s most oppressive and hermetic state.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to CSW for their dedication to shining a light on the situation in North Korea. May this report serve as a catalyst for renewed efforts to address the humanitarian crisis and provide support to those survivors who have endured unimaginable hardship.

Together, let us reaffirm our commitment to upholding human rights and dignity, striving towards a future where the people of North Korea can live free from fear and oppression and the perpetrators and enablers of Kim’s regime are held accountable.

Lord David Alton of Liverpool
London

Introduction

The Democratic People’s Republic of North Korea (DPRK) is a closed, isolated and repressive country. The violations of human rights perpetrated there, including the right to freedom of religion or belief, are among the worst in the world.

Individuals caught or suspected of religion or belief affiliation face harsh punishment, including detention in the DPRK’s brutal political prison camp system, torture, forced labour, and even execution. North Koreans who manage to escape the country are vulnerable to harassment, trafficking, and forced repatriation by China. North Koreans who manage to flee to Laos also face similar challenges, making Thailand their only viable option.

In 2014, the United Nations (UN) Commission of Inquiry (COI) on Human Rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) published what is widely considered to be the most comprehensive report into human rights violations in the DPRK. The report’s findings and recommendations were extensive and comprehensive. It concluded that the ‘gravity, scale and nature’ of the violations of human rights in the DPRK

‘reveal a State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world’.¹

Ten years on from the report, this report looks at freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) inside the country and considers internal and external changes which have impacted human rights, including FoRB, in the DPRK over the past decade. Changes in the DPRK’s economic situation, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, an accelerating North Korean arms programme, the introduction of new domestic legislation, and changes in information flows into and out of the country are all key factors. The aim of this report is to generate further discussion and innovative thinking among researchers, policymakers, civil society and funders on how to address human rights violations in the DPRK post-COI.

In 2015 a United Nations Field Office was established in Seoul in as part of the process of implementing the COI’s recommendations. The international community must ensure the implementation of the COI’s recommendations in their entirety. Action to address the North Korean regime’s routine and brutal violations of human rights is long overdue.

¹ Human Rights Council, ‘Report of the detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’, 7 February 2014, A/HRC/25/CRP.1, para 1211 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G14/108/71/PDF/G1410871.pdf?OpenElement>





CSW and the DPRK

CSW is a human rights organisation that advocates for freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). CSW’s team of country specialists works on over 20 countries across the world to promote and protect FoRB for all as stated under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948.

The human rights situation in the DPRK has been an important focus of CSW’s work for over 24 years. This work has brought together international organisations to commit to engagement with one another and with the DPRK to address the human rights situation there. CSW engages with the United Nations, briefs decision-makers with verified and accurate reports, raises questions in the Parliament of the United Kingdom and the European Parliament, and provides written submissions for human rights mechanisms including the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), to ensure that the DPRK remains on the international agenda. CSW works closely with the **UK Parliament’s All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on North Korea**, and accompanied the Co-Chair and

Vice-Chair of the APPG (Lord Alton of Liverpool and Baroness Cox of Queensbury) to the DPRK in 2010 to engage with senior leaders in the regime concerning human rights.

In 2007, CSW published **A Case to Answer, A Call to Act**, a landmark report setting out the *prima facie* case for violations amounting to crimes against humanity in the DPRK.² The report called for an urgent response to address these violations and urged the UN to establish a COI.

In September 2011 CSW helped to create the **International Coalition to Stop Crimes against Humanity in North Korea (ICNK)**. The coalition brought together over 40 human rights organisations from across the world, calling together for the establishment of a COI on the human rights situation in the DPRK.

CSW’s 2007 report and the work of the ICNK contributed to the 2013 establishment and mandating of the COI. Both CSW and ICNK are cited in the COI’s 2014 report.

Recommendations

To the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea

- Release all persons currently detained in prison camps immediately and unconditionally.
- Stop charging defectors with ‘treachery’ or requesting that defectors into China and other countries be returned to the DPRK.
- Uphold, in law and practice, freedom of religion or belief as stipulated in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).
- End the violent, targeted persecution of Christians across the nation.
- Implement the recommendations of the COI report in their entirety.
- Invite the United States (US) Special Envoy for North Korea Human Rights, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the US Ambassador for International Religious Freedom, the European Union (EU) Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in the DPRK, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, and other UN Special Procedures and investigative mechanisms, to visit the country with unhindered access.
- Clarify the fate and whereabouts of missionaries Kim Jeong-wook, Kim Kook-kie and Choi-Chun-gil and allow them to contact their families, lawyers and consular officials.
- Immediately return all abductees, detainees and unrepatriated Prisoners of War, including missionaries Kim Jeong-wook, Kim Kook-ki and Choi Chun-gil.
- Clarify the fate and whereabouts of repatriated North Korean refugee Kim Cheol-ok and allow her to contact her family.

To the United Nations (UN) and Member States

- At every possible opportunity, in public and in private, urge the North Korean government to respect, protect and promote the right to freedom of religion or belief for all people in the DPRK, and to implement the recommendations provided above.
- Consider sanctions against policymakers responsible for human rights abuses in the DPRK.

- Ensure that the human rights situation in the DPRK continues to be discussed annually at the UN, including at the UN General Assembly and UN Human Rights Council, and separately from the question of nuclear non-proliferation.
- Support the implementation of all the recommendations of the UN COI report published in February 2014 and provide technical assistance where possible to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) field office in Seoul.
- Call on the UN Security Council to resume regular meetings about the situation of human rights in the DPRK as part of its official agenda.
- Urge the UN Security Council to refer the DPRK to the International Criminal Court, in line with the COI’s recommendations.
- Urge all governments engaging with the DPRK to raise human rights concerns in bilateral dialogues.
- Urge all relevant UN mechanisms, including the Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include the right to freedom of religion or belief in their reporting on the DPRK.
- Initiate and support General Assembly resolutions that address the human rights situation in the DPRK.
- Provide support for human rights organisations seeking to respond to and end violations in the DPRK, particularly in their work to document violations and to make such documentation available as evidence to be used in legal proceedings.
- Provide asylum and sanctuary for refugees in conformity with international obligations, particularly by: taking active steps to prevent North Korean agents from carrying out abductions; desisting from repatriating North Koreans who have fled, and allowing access to asylum procedures and facilitation of resettlement.
- During bilateral meetings with China, raise concerns about the repatriation of North Korean refugees, and call on China to cease doing so in line with its obligations under the Refugee Convention to which it is a party.
- Provide treatment and assistance for victims of serious violations who have left the DPRK, in particular for physical injuries and mental trauma suffered as a result of abuses or make financial provision for such support.

² CSW, ‘A Case to Answer, A Call to Act’, 20 June 2007, <https://docs-eu.livesiteadmin.com/c8880e0f-f6ed-4585-8f09-4e4b6d11e698/north-korea-a-case-to-answer-a-call-to-act.pdf>

- Take action to raise awareness of, and provoke response to, the situation of human rights in the DPRK, by providing a platform for survivors and refugees from the DPRK to share insights into the factual and political situation, issuing reports, appointing envoys and raising the issue directly with the Government of the DPRK.
- Refrain from vague wording referring to ‘neighbouring states’ when speaking about the perpetrators of the forcible repatriation of North Korean refugees, and instead name China (and/or other culpable states) directly.
- Submit questions and recommendations to the DPRK concerning detained missionaries Kim Jeong-wook, Kim Kook-ki and Choi Chun-gil in the fourth cycle Universal Periodic Review.
- Submit questions and recommendations to the DPRK concerning repatriated North Korean refugee Kim Cheol-ok in the fourth cycle UPR.
- Consider all unexplored judicial avenues for DPRK accountability, including possible proceedings at the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ).
- Clarify and strengthen the OHCHR DPRK Accountability Project’s mandate by requesting it to collect, consolidate, analyse and preserve information and evidence of the most serious crimes and violations of international law in the DPRK, and to support relevant judicial and other proceedings.

To the UN Security Council

- Resume regular meetings about human rights in the DPRK as part of the Security Council’s official agenda.
- Hold regular briefings about the human rights situation in the DPRK with the participation of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and other relevant experts, including the Special Rapporteur for human rights in the DPRK.
- Ensure that human rights are central in any dialogue or negotiations, whether bilateral or multilateral, between the DPRK and any Member State.
- Call for the adoption of a Security Council resolution addressing human rights in the DPRK.
- Support the referral of the human rights situation in the DPRK to the International Criminal Court (ICC), based on the COI’s finding that crimes against humanity are being perpetrated.
- Establish a human rights contact group on the DPRK, as per recommendation 1225(h) of the COI report.

- Give public support to the work of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK.
- Invite the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK and/or the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to provide a comprehensive and thorough briefing on the situation in the DPRK with regard to serious human rights violations and international crimes.

To the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (SR DPRK)

- Continue to vigorously pursue their mandate on the protection of human rights in the DPRK.
- Urge the international community to take all necessary steps at all levels to address the human rights situation in the DPRK.
- Call for support and engage in processes aimed at holding those responsible for serious violations in the DPRK to account, and ensure justice for victims.

To the People’s Republic of China (PRC)

- Acknowledge and implement the recommendations of the COI report.
- Respect the principle of non-refoulement and extend asylum and other means of durable protection to persons fleeing the DPRK.
- Ensure adequate protection for foreign nationals in northern Chinese provinces who are helping North Koreans.

To the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (LPDR) and The Socialist Republic of Vietnam

- Respect the principle of non-refoulement and extend asylum and other means of durable protection to persons fleeing the DPRK.

To Civil Society

- Advocate for the rights of victims of human rights abuses in the DPRK and urge relevant states to take steps to ensure an effective end to the violations committed by the DPRK.
- Provide assistance, treatment, and rehabilitation services for survivors of international crimes committed by North Korean state agents.
- Actively pursue ways to break the information barrier into the DPRK, including through television and radio broadcasts.

To the Government of the United States of America (USA)

- The State Department should continue to closely monitor FoRB in the DPRK and maintain the country as a Country of Particular Concern.
- The Ambassador for International Religious Freedom, the US Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), and the Special Envoy for North Korea Human Rights should request invitations to visit the DPRK with unhindered access to all parts of the country.
- Extend targeted sanctions to target North Korean individuals responsible for human rights abuses in the DPRK.
- Urge China and the Lao PDR to respect the principle of non-refoulement and extend asylum and other means of durable protection to persons fleeing the DPRK.

Provide medium – and long-term funding to civil society organisations working on human rights and the promotion of democracy in North Korea, particularly those seeking to document FoRB violations and to make such documentation available as evidence to be used in legal proceedings.

To the European Union (EU) and Member States

- In engagements with China and relevant ASEAN partners, urge that they respect the principle of non-refoulement and extend asylum and other means of durable protection to persons fleeing the DPRK.
- Provide medium and long-term funding to civil society organisations working on human rights and the promotion of democracy in North Korea, particularly those seeking to document violations and to make such documentation available as evidence to be used in legal proceedings.
- Consider the extension of targeted sanctions against policymakers and officials responsible for human rights abuses in the DPRK.
- The Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the EU should request an invitation to visit the DPRK with unhindered access to all parts of the country
- Urge China and the Lao PDR to respect the principle of non-refoulement and extend asylum and other means of durable protection to persons fleeing the DPRK.



To the Government of the United Kingdom (UK)

- In line with the UK’s commitment to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), continue to raise FoRB cases in the DPRK as a matter of urgency with the North Korean government.
- Provide support for the All-Party Parliamentary Group on North Korea responding to violations in the DPRK.
- Consider sanctions against policymakers responsible for human rights abuses in the DPRK.
- Urge China and the Lao PDR to respect the principle of non-refoulement and extend asylum and other means of durable protection to persons fleeing the DPRK.
- Provide medium – and long-term funding to civil society organisations working on human rights and the promotion of democracy in North Korea, particularly those seeking to document FoRB violations and to make such documentation available as evidence to be used in legal proceedings.

Methodology

The availability of up-to-date information on the conditions for religious adherents in the DPRK, and on the status of freedom of religion or belief, is limited. The country's isolation and the regime's refusal to allow free access to the country remain the principal impediment. The dramatically reduced numbers of North Koreans escaping the country since 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic – from thousands each year throughout the 2010s, down to 63 in 2021 and 67 in 2022 – have further exacerbated this challenge.³

On-the-ground research inside the DPRK is not possible due to the risks, especially to North Koreans. As a result, this report is based on two key groups of secondary sources:

1. Information from governmental organisations, international and national civil society organisations, academic papers, and media articles, and
2. information shared by 23 interviewees (6 North Korean defectors, and 17 DPRK experts), in interviews conducted between September and November 2023.

Although the sample size is limited, when examining this qualitative data alongside reports, books and media articles, overall trends become clear. From these trends we can draw conclusions about changes that have taken place over the past decade.

Many of the North Korean experts interviewed by CSW have more than ten years' experience documenting and advocating for human rights in the DPRK. Most are based in Seoul, and regularly interview and collaborate with North Korean refugees living in South Korea.

CSW is greatly indebted to all the people interviewed for this report, and to the numerous research institutions and human rights organisations whose excellent research was an invaluable contribution.

Domestic Legal Framework

This chapter explores four aspects of the DPRK's domestic legal framework: its government structure, state ideology, constitutional commitments, and national laws and policies regarding FoRB.

Government structure

The DPRK is a communist one-party state. It is ruled by the only dictatorship in the world which is both a dynasty and portrays itself as a deity.

Kim Jong Un has been Supreme Leader of the DPRK since 2011, when he succeeded his father, Kim Jong Il. Kim Jong Un presides over all major branches of North Korean governance, holding the titles of General Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea, Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and President of the State Affairs. He is held up by state media as 'the great leader of our Party and revolution and the banner of all glories and victories of our state and people'.⁴

The three branches of government – legislative, executive, and judiciary – are all controlled by the Korean Workers' Party (KWP). All three branches are functional and administrative instruments for Kim Jong Un, with no independence or autonomy. There is no separation of powers in the government of the DPRK. All power under the organs of state is consolidated in the person of Kim Jong Un, who personifies the deified dynastic line of Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung, and the supreme agencies of the KWP.

State ideology of the DPRK

Juche

The communist state of the DPRK is rooted in *Juche* (roughly translated as 'self-reliance') ideology, a word first used in an official capacity in 1955 by Kim Il Sung and upheld and expanded upon by his successors Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un. Sometimes referred to as Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, *Juche* is central to the DPRK's politics, economics, military, culture, and society. In practice, it has resulted in totalitarian rule, whereby the flow of information is forbidden and total fealty to the Kim dynasty is required. Some observers have suggested that the ideology has been espoused with renewed strength since 2011 under the rule of Kim Jong Un.⁵



'Juche ideology [is] not theory, it's a religion.' (North Korean Defector)

At its core, *Juche* holds that the DPRK 'must remain separate and distinct from the world, dependent solely on its own strength and the guidance of a near-godlike leader'.⁶ The cult of personality, founded in *Juche* ideology, that surrounds the Kim family has been compared to a form of compulsory state religion. There is a zero-tolerance policy for any other religion or belief systems, which are seen as a challenge to the absolute loyalty demanded by the supreme leader. From childhood schooling and into adulthood, North Koreans are taught about and warned against the dangers of religion.

The Ten Principles for the Establishment of the One-Ideology System

In 1974, Kim Il Sung introduced the **Ten Principles for the Establishment of the One-Ideology System**, which further entrenched *Juche* ideology in the everyday life

of North Korean citizens. Under the Ten Principles, the Kim dynasty's decisions are accorded the force of law. Failure to adhere to the Ten Principles is equivalent to breaking the law.⁷ The Ten Principles are the foremost authority in the DPRK, shaping domestic legislation and holding more power than all other laws and the nation's constitution.

'[In the DPRK] the higher law is Ten Principles of the Kim family, that's much stronger than the institutional law. The fourth principle was, 'Kim Il-Sung is as a God' (North Korean Defector).

The last known revisions to the Ten Principles were made in 2013, when the name 'General Kim Jong Il' was added to that of his father, 'Kim Il Sung'. Most sources believe this addition to be an effort by Kim Jong Un to further legitimise his succession and consolidate his rule.

³ NK News, 'Only 67 North Korean defectors reach South in 2022, second fewest ever', 10 January 2023 <https://www.nknews.org/2023/01/only-67-north-korean-defectors-reach-south-in-2022-second-fewest-ever/>

⁴ Asia Pacific Regional Committee for Peaceful Reunification of Korea (APRCPRK), 'Report on 6th Enlarged Plenary Meeting of 8th WPK Central Committee', 1 January 2023 <https://www.aprcprk.org/read/2023/01/01/144/report-on-6th-enlarged-plenary-meeting-of-8th-wpk-central-committee>

⁵ AP News, 'Juche rules North Korean propaganda, but what does it mean?', 30 September 2019 <https://apnews.com/article/d63d00ce9de042dc88b9df2c40be53ee>

⁶ Vox, 'Juche, the state ideology that makes North Koreans revere Kim Jong Un, explained', 18 June 2018 <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/6/18/17441296/north-korea-propaganda-ideology-juche>

⁷ CSW, 'A Case to Answer – A Call to Act', *ibid*, p. 16.

Some sources report that citizens are expected to memorize the Ten Principles and are then required to evaluate themselves, in regular meetings, on the extent to which they have been living up to the principles.⁸ However, other sources suggest that such systematic teaching of the Ten Principles may be primarily reserved for KWP members, rather than ordinary citizens.⁹

Principles 2 and 3 respectively state that North Korean citizens must ‘Venerate the Great respected comrades Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il as the Great Leaders of the Party and of the People, as the Eternal Suns of Juche’ and ‘Make the authority of the respected comrades Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il and of the Party the absolute one.’¹⁰ These demands for absolute veneration of the Kim dynasty effectively restrict FoRB, by forbidding worship of or obedience to anyone or anything outside the supreme leader.

Such demands for absolute loyalty are reiterated in Principles 4 and 5, which demand that citizens ‘Believe wholly in the revolutionary ideas of the Great Leader respected comrade Kim Il Sung, consider his teaching to be your credo’ and ‘Defend the principle of the teachings of the Great Leader respected comrade Kim Il Sung, following unconditionally.’

Songbun

In 1957 the KWP established the *songbun* system, a socio-political class-based caste system. Under *songbun*, every citizen is assigned to one of three classes: the ‘loyal’ or ‘core’ (*haeksim*), ‘wavering’ (*dongyo*) and ‘hostile’ (*choktae*) class. These three classes were further divided into 51 sub-classifications in the 1960s. The system is a hereditary one, and dictates

numerous aspects of citizens’ lives including education, employment opportunities, medical care, and even access to food. Those assigned to the hostile class are consigned to a lifetime of discrimination and are more vulnerable to human rights abuses.

‘[In the DPRK there are] social-political classification systems, and this fills out significant chunk of the whole society structuralised as we know it [...] particularly the enemy class of over 30 percent of total population, where they get discriminated [against] hugely, and which myself was in the group of discrimination in North Korea.’ (North Korean Defector)

Known or suspected religion or belief adherents are assigned to the *choktae* class and universally classified as enemies of the state. Individual religious groups, including those who follow indigenous Korean shamanism, Cheondoists (practitioners of 20th century Korean pantheistic religion), Buddhists, Roman Catholics and Protestant Christians, each fall under their own specific sub-category. Protestant Christians, *songbun* category 37, are known to experience particularly severe persecution.¹¹



Constitutional commitments

The **Socialist Constitution of the DPRK** was adopted in 1972, with its most recent revisions made by the Supreme People’s Assembly in 2019. The constitution guarantees many of the basic human rights identified by the UN. However, the extent of this accommodation and the interpretation of the document’s articles is insufficient to protect the rights of its citizens in practice. Human rights are viewed as a gift from the leader to the people, rather than as intrinsic freedoms belonging to every person. Article 8 states that ‘The State shall defend the interests of the workers, peasants, soldiers, intellectuals and all other working people who have been freed from exploitation and oppression and become the masters of the State and society, and respect and protect human rights.’¹²

A commitment to the civil and political rights of citizens is reiterated in Article 64, which states ‘The State shall effectively guarantee the genuine democratic rights and freedoms as well as the material and cultural well-being of all its citizens. In the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the rights and freedoms of citizens shall be amplified with the consolidation and development of the socialist system.’ Article 65 further states that ‘Citizens enjoy equal rights in all spheres of State and public activity’. *Right to freedom of speech* Article 67 states that ‘Citizens are guaranteed freedom of speech, the press, assembly, demonstration and association’.

Right to freedom of religion or belief

Article 68 of the constitution pertains to the right to FoRB. It states ‘Citizens have freedom of religious belief. This right is granted through the approval of the construction of religious buildings and the holding of religious ceremonies. Religion must not be used as a pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the State or social order.’

While elements of this article offer some positive protections, it fails to comply with international standards as set out in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966 (ICCPR). FoRB is qualified by the need for the approval of the state before constructing religious buildings or holding religious ceremonies. The flawed protections made in the Article provide primarily for the *forum externum* rather than the *forum internum* dimensions of FoRB.¹³ The clause forbidding religion ‘used as a pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the State or social order’ renders FoRB, which should be absolute and equal for all citizens, conditional, and therefore open to restriction, violation, and abuse.

Right to work

Article 70 guarantees the right to work: ‘Citizens have the right to work. All able-bodied citizens may choose occupations in accordance with their wishes and skills and are provided with stable jobs and working conditions. Citizens work according to their abilities and are paid in accordance with the quantity and quality of their work’.

Right to education

Article 73 states that ‘Citizens have the right to education. This right is ensured by an advanced educational system and by the educational measures enacted by the State for the benefit of the people.’

Right to freedom of movement

Article 75 states that ‘Citizens have freedom of residence and travel.’

Right to non-discrimination

Apart from Article 77, which states that ‘Women are accorded equal social status and rights with men’, no clear provisions are made in the constitution of the DPRK for the right to non-discrimination. This leaves the citizens of the DPRK constitutionally unprotected from discrimination based on myriad grounds, including their religion or belief.

Constitutional pre-eminence of the DPRK’s state ideology

In practice, none of the above protections are upheld. The safeguarding of the socialist revolutionary ideology is pre-eminently protected throughout the 2019 constitution. Articles 43, 81 and 85 respectively outline that ‘The State shall embody the principles of socialist pedagogy so as to raise the rising generation to be genuine patriots who will fight for society and collective, for the country and the people, to be pillars of socialism’; ‘Citizens shall firmly safeguard the political and ideological unity and solidarity of the people’; and ‘Citizens shall constantly increase their revolutionary vigilance and devotedly fight for the security of the State’. No room is left for ideologies and beliefs which fall outside of *Juche*. Vague terms, such as those compelling citizens to ‘firmly safeguard [...] political and ideological unity’ or ‘devotedly fight for the security of the State’ are ambiguous and create space for the abuse of human rights, including freedom of speech, freedom of opinion and expression, and FoRB.

8 Daily NK, ‘What Are the ‘Ten Principles’?’, 9 August 2013 <https://www.dailynk.com/english/what-are-the-ten-principles/>
9 Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea 2022, April 2023, p.234 <https://repo.kinu.or.kr/bitstream/2015.oak/14302/1/White%20Paper%20on%20Human%20Rights%20in%20North%20Korea%202022.pdf>
10 NK News, ‘The party’s 10 principles, then and now’, 11 December 2014 <https://www.nknews.org/2014/12/the-partys-10-principles-then-and-now/>
11 Collins, Robert (2012), ‘Marked for Life: Songbun – North Korea’s Classification System’, p. 81 www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK_Songbun_Web.pdf

12 NCNK, ‘Socialist Constitution of The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’, 11 April 2019 <https://www.ncnk.org/sites/default/files/DPRK%20constitution%20%282019%29.pdf>
13 The unconditional protection of the forum internum reflects the principle that forcing human beings to feign a faith that is not authentic or to denounce their deeply held convictions would gravely undermine their self-respect and human rights. See United Nations Human Rights Council, ‘Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, Mission to Viet Nam (21 to 31 July 2014)’, 30 January 2015, A/HRC/28/66/Add.2 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G15/014/16/PDF/G1501416.pdf?OpenElement>

National laws and policies

Anti-reactionary thought law

In December 2020, the **Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Law**, more commonly known and hereon referred to as the ‘**anti-reactionary thought’ law**, was adopted. The full text of the law was not made public outside the DPRK until March 2023, when Daily NK, a Seoul-based news outlet, obtained and published the full 41 articles in Korean and in an unofficial English translation.¹⁴ The ‘anti-revolutionary thought’ law tightens restrictions on both the entry of external information and on the outflow of internal information. It places a blanket ban on ‘foreign published materials’, thought to include the Bible, stating that anyone importing or distributing materials not approved by the state will face public trials.¹⁵

‘Recently, one of our researchers spoke to somebody who had actually crossed the border during the pandemic, so was able to also speak about how the anti-reactionary thought and culture law has been implemented, and they spoke a lot about how they have really been targeting the younger generation. So, a lot more lectures, a lot more sudden house searches, a lot more questioning of what young people are consuming [...] This is based on a very small sample size of course, but it was interesting because they were actually from not the border region but a more southern part of North Korea where you don’t hear as much about the crackdowns. But we can really see that the anti-reactionary thought and culture law, which was enacted in 2020, is being spread across the country.’ (DPRK Expert)

Articles 1 to 7 of the law outline its purpose, definition, and basic principles. The law is purportedly designed to strengthen the nation’s ‘sense of ideology, revolution, and social class by launching a powerful battle to obstruct the inflow and distribution of reactionary ideology and culture and anti-socialist ideology and culture.’¹⁶ Article 6 asserts that ‘the State shall strongly protect our ideology, our spirit, and our culture by launching a powerful mass battle to wipe out all activities to bring in, view, and distribute reactionary ideology and culture.’ Article 7 explicitly states that punishments for breaking this law include the death penalty.

Articles 8 to 14 outline the means by which the North Korean government will ‘obstruct’ the inflow of ‘reactionary ideology and culture’, including through stringent border controls and the monitoring of the internet, television and radio signals.

Article 27 of the law stipulates sentences of ‘five to 10 years of reform through labour’ for anyone who ‘views, listens to, or possesses South Korean movies, video recordings, compilations, books, songs, drawings, or photographs, or who brings in and distributes South Korean songs, drawings, photographs, or designs’, and sentences of 10 years or more in undefined cases where ‘the severity of the crime is deemed high’. Correctional labour is generally understood to mean forced hard labour inside one of the DPRK’s *kwanliso* (political prison camps). Malnutrition, poor living conditions, brutal treatment, torture, and execution at the hands of prison guards are common, making prospects for prisoners in these camps bleak.

Article 28 calls for ‘reform through labour for up to five years’ or even ‘reform through labour for life or the death penalty’ for any citizen engaging with materials from ‘hostile countries.’ Materials obtained by Daily NK in January 2021 indicated that the Bible was specifically mentioned in Article 28 as one such illegal material.¹⁷ The full version of the law published in 2023 does not contain such a reference. Nonetheless, the Bible and other religious texts are widely known to be forbidden in the DPRK, and sentences of life imprisonment or even execution as punishment for their possession have been known to be administered.

Article 29 outlines similar punishments, up to ‘reform through labour for life’ and the death sentence, for the viewing, possession, or distribution of ‘superstitious materials.’ This would include materials linked to Shamanism.

Article 34 criminalises even the knowledge of ‘any activities to bring in, view, and distribute culture of South Korea or hostile countries and adult videos’ without reporting to the authorities, with a punishment of ‘short-term disciplinary labour.’

In line with the DPRK’s principle of guilt by association, innocent family members can also be punished for the ‘guilt’ of an associated individual. Article 37 stipulates fines of KPW 100,000 to 200,000 (equivalent to £100 to £200 pound sterling) for parents whose children break the law.

In August 2021, the then UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the DPRK (SR DPRK) Tomás Ojea Quintana, alongside the special rapporteurs on extrajudicial killings and freedom of expression, sent a letter to Pyongyang requesting explanation for executions purportedly linked to the ‘anti-reactionary thought’ law. No response was received.¹⁸

During the Eighth Session of the 14th Supreme People’s Assembly, held on 17 and 18 January 2023, the Law on Protecting the Cultured Pyongyang Dialect was enacted. The law builds upon the stipulations of the ‘anti-reactionary thought’ law, including strengthening controls on ‘foreign cultural threats’ in order to ‘strongly protect [the] ideology, system and culture’ of the DPRK.¹⁹

Criminal law

The **Criminal Law of the DPRK** was adopted in 1990, with the most recent revisions made by the Supreme People’s Assembly in 2015.²⁰

The law outlines the treatment of offenders, including listing the types of penalties in Article 27 as: death, limited-term or life-time term of reform through labour, short-term labour, deprivation of the right to vote, confiscation of property, fines, and removal or suspension of qualifications.

Engagement with and distribution of unauthorised materials, including information from abroad, is prohibited under the DPRK’s criminal code, with penalties of up to 10 years of labour reform. Although the law makes no distinction between content subject matter in policy, it has been noted that in practice punishments vary based on the perceived threat of different media, with the highest penalties administered for ‘anything that is anti-regime, religious, explores or attacks the Kim family, and all pornography’.²¹

Article 256 holds the most obvious relevance to the prosecution of individuals or groups exercising FoRB. It states that ‘A person who engages in acts of superstition after receiving money or goods shall be sentenced to a term of short-term labour of less than one year.’ In ambiguously undefined instances of ‘grave consequences’, or ‘in grave cases’, this punishment can be increased up to ‘a term of reform through labour of more than three years and less than seven years.’

Article 62 states that ‘A person who has spread incitement or propaganda with a purpose against the nation shall be sentenced to a term of reform through labour of less than five years. In particularly grave cases, he or she shall be sentenced to a term of reform through labour of more than five years and less than 10 years.’ Article 211 further states that ‘A person who creates societal confusion by fabricating or disseminating false rumours that can create distrust about the State shall be sentenced to a term of short-term labour of less than one year.’ These articles could reasonably be understood to include any citizen spreading ideologies or beliefs outside of the state sanctioned ideology of *Juche*, and therefore restrict FoRB.

The possession, use, or dissemination of religious content is punishable under Article 183 of the law, which stipulates that ‘A person who imports without authorization, creates, disseminates or illegally stores materials which reflect degenerate, erotic and vulgar content such as drawings, photographs, books, songs or films shall be sentenced to a term of short-term labour of less than one year.’ For cases where the alleged ‘crime’ has occurred several times or on a large scale, the sentence is extended up to ‘a term of reform through labour of more than five years and less than 10 years.’

14 Daily NK, ‘Daily NK acquires full text of the anti-reactionary thought law’, 23 March 2023 <https://www.dailynk.com/english/daily-nk-acquires-full-text-of-the-anti-reactionary-thought-law/>
15 Daily NK, ‘A deep dive into N. Korea’s new “anti-reactionary thought” law’, 15 December 2020 <https://www.dailynk.com/english/deep-dive-north-korea-new-anti-reactionary-thought-law/>
16 Daily NK, ‘Reactionary Ideology and Culture Rejection Act of The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’, 19 August 2022, p.5 https://www.dailynk.com/english/wp-content/plugins/pdfs-viewer-shortcode/pdfs/web/viewer.php?file=https://www.dailynk.com/english/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/PDF-%EB%B0%98%EB%8F%99%EC%82%AC%EC%83%81%EB%AC%B8%ED%99%94%EB%B0%B0%EA%B2%A9%EB%B2%95_%EC%98%81%ED%95%9C%EB%B3%B8.pdf&attachment_id=54374&dButton=true&pButton=true&oButton=false&sButton=true&zoom=auto&pagemode=none&_wpnonce=a5d976c776
17 Daily NK, ‘Exclusive: Daily NK obtains materials explaining specifics of new “anti-reactionary thought”’, 19 January 2021 <https://www.dailynk.com/english/exclusive-daily-nk-obtains-materials-explaining-specifics-new-anti-reactionary-thought-law/>

18 UPI, ‘U.N. presses North Korea for details on executions under thought-crime law’, 27 August 2021 https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2021/08/27/north-korea-executions-un-letter/3641630054110/
19 NK News, ‘North Korea cracks down on speech with new law to counter foreign influence’, 19 January 2023 <https://www.nknews.org/2023/01/north-korea-cracks-down-on-speech-with-new-law-to-counter-foreign-influence/>
20 Law and North Korea, Criminal Law of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (2015), 1 September 2020 <https://www.lawandnorthkorea.com/laws/criminal-law-2015?rq=criminal>
21 Martyn Williams, ‘Digital Trenches: North Korea’s Information Counter-Offensive’, 2019, p. 8 https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Williams_Digital_Trenches_Web_FINAL.pdf

This is reiterated in Article 185, which outlines the same punishment for ‘A person who has listened to enemy broadcasts or collected, stored or disseminated hostile goods.’

Article 222 outlines punishments for ‘A person who illegally communicates internationally’, which could include contact with individuals linked to religious organisations or activities based abroad.

Although many of these articles outline limited term sentences, usually of one to 10 years, evidence suggests that this is largely not adhered to. Many individuals who are sent to the DPRK’s forced labour camps – so called ‘absolute control zones’ – are sent there for life, particularly those arrested for their religion or belief. Even for those who are consigned to a finite term, conditions in the camps are such that many do not survive to see the end of their sentence.

Administrative punishment law

The **Administrative Punishment Law of the DPRK** was adopted in 2004, with its most recent revisions made by the Supreme People’s Assembly in 2011.²²

The law stipulates punishments for ‘unlawful acts that have not yet become a crime’, with punishments such as warnings, unpaid labour, labour education, demotion or dismissal listed in Article 14.

The possession, use, or dissemination of religious content is punishable under Articles 152 and 153, which stipulate that ‘A person who has imported, manufactured, stored, disseminated, watched, or heard degenerate and vulgar things such as records, video recordings, drawings, photographs, books, and electronic multimedia’ or ‘A person who has listened to enemy broadcasts or collected, stored, or disseminated hostile goods without a purpose against the State’ shall be punished with ‘less than three months of labour education’ or, in grave circumstances, with ‘more than 3 months of labour education.’

Superstitious practices, understood primarily to apply to Shamanism, are punishable under Article 219, which states ‘A person who has done acts of superstition or has spread falsehoods or rumours that can create societal confusion and distrust about the State shall have a punishment of a penalty or less than three months of labour education imposed. In grave circumstances, a punishment of more than three months of labour education shall be imposed.’

The wearing of religious clothing is punishable under Article 222 of the law, which stipulates that ‘A person who has not arranged their attire and appearance to conform



to the socialist way of life shall have a punishment of a penalty imposed. In grave circumstances, a punishment of more than three months of labour education shall be imposed.’

Although Article 165 does outline punishment ‘In cases where a legal worker has committed acts of human rights abuses’, this punishment is limited in most cases to just ‘a warning or serious warning, or less than three months of unpaid labour or labour education’, and evidence suggests this is article is not widely enforced.

People’s security enforcement law

The **People’s Security Enforcement Law of the DPRK** was adopted in 1992, with its most recent revisions made by the Supreme People’s Assembly in 2005.²³

Article 21 states that ‘People’s safety institutions shall enforce the law against acts of superstition such as fortune telling, fabricating or distorting the truth, or spreading heresy.’

Article 6 stipulates that ‘The State shall not abuse human rights or abuse its authority in people’s safety enforcement’, a policy which is not held up in practice.

Domestic laws pertaining to children and education

The DPRK has adopted a number of laws pertaining to children and education, including the **Education Law of the DPRK** (adopted in 1999, last revised 2015)²⁴, the **Childcare and Education Law of the DPRK** (adopted in 1976, last revised 2013)²⁵, and the **Children’s Rights Protection Law of the DPRK** (adopted in 2010, last revised 2014).²⁶

Pre-eminent across these laws is the education of children and young people in state ideology. Article 3 of the **Education Law** states that ‘The State shall thoroughly embody the basic theory of socialist pedagogy in education work’, defined as ‘Growing dependable experts with sound ideological consciousness’. Article 29 further stipulates that ‘Education institutions shall give sound ideology, morals and deep knowledge to students and shall prioritise political ideological education’. Similar sentiments are expressed in Articles 29 and 43 of the **Childcare and Education Law**: ‘Educating and enculturating rising generations into revolutionaries from an early age is significant work that forms the security of the prosperous

development of the nation and the resplendent future of the revolution’ and ‘Orphanages and kindergarten teachers shall strongly arm themselves with Juche ideology to resolutely adopt a revolutionary outlook on the world’.

Article 16 of the **Children’s Rights Protection Law** restricts freedom of expression for young people, including the right to express one’s religion or belief, by prohibiting ‘Acts of expressing opinions that harm social order, public morals, or the honour or rights and interests of other people’. Article 3 states that ‘Children in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea shall all be guaranteed the same rights regardless of things such as their *songbun* at birth, gender, the office of their parent or guardian, property ownership, or bodily defects’. In practice, there are numerous reports of children being discriminated against or punished based on their *songbun*, including instances where a child has been assigned to the ‘hostile’ class because one or both parents have been imprisoned, executed or have defected, including on grounds of religion or belief.

Conclusion

Both the constitutional commitments and domestic legislation of the DPRK are insufficient to protect the rights of its citizens, including FoRB. Articles prohibiting ‘superstitious’ practices, the harming of the state and its ideology, and the dissemination of unauthorised texts provide a spectrum of pretexts for violations of FoRB.

Even in instances where human rights, including FoRB, are protected under its own laws – at least in part, the DPRK fails to uphold those guarantees in practice. All religion or belief systems are seen as incompatible with and as a challenge to the state’s *Juche* ideology and the Ten Principles, which demand total loyalty and obedience from citizens. To be a follower of *Juche* ‘is to deny the existence of religions and beliefs and to participate in their extermination within the DPRK’.²⁷ *Juche* and the Ten Principles’ mandatory enforcement in all spheres of North Korean life is thus a violation of its citizens’ FoRB.

22 Law and North Korea, ‘Administrative Punishment Law of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (2011)’, 10 January 2021 <https://www.lawandnorthkorea.com/laws/administrative-punishment-law-2011>
23 Law and North Korea, ‘People’s Security Enforcement Law of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (2005)’, 13 September 2021 <https://www.lawandnorthkorea.com/laws/peoples-security-enforcement-law>

24 Law and North Korea, ‘Education Law of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (2015)’, 28 July 2020 <https://www.lawandnorthkorea.com/laws/education-law-2015>
25 Law and North Korea, ‘Childcare and Education Law of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (2013)’, 3 April 2022 <https://www.lawandnorthkorea.com/laws/childcare-and-education-law>
26 Law and North Korea, ‘Children’s Rights Protection Law of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (2014)’, 27 September 2020 <https://www.lawandnorthkorea.com/laws/childrens-rights-protection-law-2014>
27 The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), ‘Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism and the right to Freedom of Religion, Thought, and Conscience in North Korea’, 29 July 2022, p. 10 <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2022-07/2022%20North%20Korea%20Report.pdf>

International Legal Framework

This chapter explores three aspects of the DPRK’s international legal framework: its international commitments (namely the international treaties to which the DPRK is a party), commentaries from UN mechanisms, and the UN COI on Human Rights in the DPRK.

International commitments

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The UDHR sets out the fundamental and universal rights to which all people are entitled. Article 1 of the UDHR affirms that ‘all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights’, in direct contradiction of the position, espoused by the Kim dynasty, that human rights are a gift to be bestowed by leaders upon their citizens.²⁸ The principle of non-discrimination is unequivocal: Article 2 states that everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in the UDHR, ‘without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.’²⁹ Article 18 recognises the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion: ‘Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.’³⁰

Articles 3, 4, and 5 respectively protect the right to ‘life, liberty and security of person’, and prohibit ‘slavery or servitude’ and ‘torture [or] cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment’. Article 12 states that no one shall be ‘subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence’. Articles 13 and 14 protect the right to leave a country, and the right to seek asylum from persecution in other countries. Article 19 upholds freedom of opinion and expression, including the right to ‘to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.’

All the rights listed above – as well as numerous other rights including those pertaining to education, work, and democracy – are systematically violated in the DPRK.

International treaties

The DPRK has ratified the following international treaties: the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)**, the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)**, the **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)**, the **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)**, the **Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children child prostitution and child pornography (CRC-OP-SC)** and the **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)**.³¹ These treaties outline a number of human rights guarantees, including protections for FoRB in the ICCPR and the CRC.

The ICCPR builds on the definition of FoRB outlined in the UDHR. The ICCPR rejects any form of coercion which would impair the ability of an individual to have or adopt a religion or belief, sets strict parameters within which states can limit the manifestation of religion or belief, and recognises the rights of parents and legal guardians to educate their children in conformity with their own convictions.³² The ICCPR and the ICSECR, both of which the DPRK has ratified, reiterate the principle of non-discrimination: that the rights recognised therein are to be exercised without discrimination of any kind, including religious discrimination.

Article 14 of the CRC protects FoRB: ‘States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion’ and ‘Freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.’³³

UN commentaries

The Universal Human Rights Index (UHRI) is a database of all human rights recommendations issued by the three key pillars of the UN human rights monitoring system (the Treaty Bodies, the Special Procedures and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR)).³⁴ A search for all documents relating to both the ‘Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’ and ‘freedom of thought, conscience and religion’ produced references from five documents, spanning two mechanisms – the UPR, and the Committee on the Rights of the Child.³⁵

Universal Periodic Review

All three of the DPRK’s UPR cycles have included recommendations from member states pertaining to FoRB. In its third and most recent UPR cycle in 2019, 12 observations or recommendations were made relating to FoRB, including supporting Ireland’s recommendation to ‘Allow Christians as well as persons belonging to any other religious community or group to exercise their religion independently and publicly, without fear of punishment, reprisal or surveillance’, and Greece’s recommendation to ‘Respect the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion by taking effective measures to prevent and eliminate all forms of persecution on the grounds of religion or belief and by promoting religious tolerance and dialogue in society.’³⁶

In its third review cycle a total of 262 recommendations were made by the UPR working group, 63 of which the DPRK refused to accept has noted that ‘[the] 63 recommendations that Pyongyang refused to support are mostly related to the civic and political rights, all of which could threaten the regime’s survival.’³⁷ In its remarks at the third UPR meeting Pyongyang representatives asserted that ‘freedom of religion is fully protected, and only those who exploit religion as a means to subvert the regime are subject to punishment.’³⁸

Committee on the Rights of the Child

Two documents from the Committee on the Rights of the Child also contained observations or recommendations pertaining to FoRB in the DPRK. In its 2017 report, the Committee expressed concern ‘about the extensive politicization of teaching materials and the curriculum, with a strong focus on ideological indoctrination’, and recommended ‘that the State party respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion by taking effective measures to prevent and eliminate all forms of persecution on the grounds of religion or belief and by promoting religious tolerance and dialogue in society.’³⁹

The UN Commission of Inquiry

On 21 March 2013, the UN Human Rights Council created the **COI on Human Rights in the DPRK**, mandated to ‘investigate the systematic, widespread and grave violations of human rights in the DPRK’.⁴⁰ The commission’s members were Justice Michael Donald Kirby (Australia), Marzuki Darusman (Indonesia) and Sonja Biserko (Serbia).

Justice Kirby wrote in 2013 to Kim Jong Un requesting permission for the COI to visit the DPRK but received no response. A request was also made to Chinese government officials, because of their policy of repatriation of the DPRK refugees (in contravention of their obligations under international refugee law). This request was declined.

As part of its detailed research and information gathering process, the COI held public hearings in Seoul, Tokyo, London, and Washington DC, where witnesses testified to experiences of human rights abuses, and experts in the field testified to the nature of the regime. Several hundred private and confidential interviews were also conducted.

On 7 February 2014, the 372-page **Report of the detailed findings of the COI on human rights in the DPRK** was published.

Findings of the COI report

The landmark COI report concluded that:

*Systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been, and are being, committed by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, its institutions and officials. In many instances, the violations of human rights found by the Commission constitute crimes against humanity. These are not mere excesses of the state. They are essential components of a political system that has moved far from the ideals on which it claims to be founded. The gravity, scale and nature of these violations reveal a state that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world.*⁴¹

Much of the report recounts observations on the nature of the North Korean regime. In Articles 165-171, the report records the indoctrination of children and young people by the state, which ‘supresses the emergence and development of free thought and conscience’. Articles 197-221 recount the extreme crackdown on foreign influence – including on television, printed materials, international phone calls and internet access – perpetrated by the North Korean state against its citizens.

Articles 222-239 outline the extensive surveillance network and systematic violence operated to suppress freedoms and control the general population in the DPRK.

28 United Nations General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948, Article 1 www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights
29 United Nations General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, *ibid.*, Article 2
30 United Nations General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, *ibid.*, Article 18
31 OHCHR, ‘UN Treaty Body Database’ https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=47&Lang=EN
32 United Nations General Assembly, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 16 December 1966, Article 18 www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx
33 United Nations General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of the Child, 20 November 1989, Article 14 www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx
34 Universal Human Rights Index <https://uhri.ohchr.org/en/> This database contains over 170,000 observations and recommendations from 12 Treaty Bodies, 44 Special Procedures and all Universal Periodic Reviews
35 Database search conducted 2 June 2023

36 United Nations General Assembly, ‘Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’, 25 June 2019, A/HRC/42/10, para 126.136 and 126.137 <https://uhri.ohchr.org/Document/File/6458ae54-1c03-4362-9697-d5c504f5d28d/B06B6F58-3091-40D6-9FA2-89387C638EBC>
37 Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU), ‘Assessment of the 3rd Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the DPRK and the Ways to Improve Human Rights in North Korea’, 22 May 2019, p.5 <https://www.kinu.or.kr/pyxis-api/1/digital-files/9a227828-a123-41c7-b12c-607ed7740133>
38 Korea Institute for National Unification, *ibid.*, p.8
39 Committee on the Rights of the Child, ‘Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’, 23 October 2017, CRC/C/PRK/CO/5, para 21 and 47 <https://uhri.ohchr.org/Document/File/1ab2cb0d-babd-4d1d-937e-49f3dcb77370/D3C35267-A796-4386-AFEE-12117697089A>
40 United Nations General Assembly, ‘Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council 22/13. Situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’, 9 April 2013, A/HRC/RES/22/13, para 5 https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a_hrc_res_22_13.pdf
41 Human Rights Council, ‘Report of the detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’, para 1211, *ibid.*

‘From my point of view, the COI has been a very significant milestone. It has [...] given us the foundation to speak.’ (North Korean Defector)

The report details numerous accounts of human rights abuses in the DPRK, including several observations specifically pertaining to FoRB. Articles 240-264 focus on ‘Denial of freedom of religion and of religious expression’ specifically. Article 240 concludes that the protections for FoRB articulated in the ICCPR and CRC, to which the DPRK are a party, ‘are not afforded to DPRK citizens who are consequently unable to practise the religion of their choosing.’ Articles 241 and 242 reiterate the intolerance for any belief system other than the state ideology, and thus the non-acceptance of FoRB for North Korean citizens. The report indicates in Articles 252 and 253 that churches and temples that do exist are not ‘true’ places of worship open to those who want to practise their religion freely, but instead are for ‘propaganda and political purposes’ or exist as ‘heritage and cultural sites.’

The COI’s findings indicated that Christians in the DPRK experience the most targeted religious persecution. Christianity has been described by North Korean leadership as ‘a drug, narcotics, a sin, and a tool of Western and capitalist invasion’, and the report concludes that ‘although the practice of Christianity is not explicitly criminalized, effectively the authorities consider it a political crime.’ The primary reasons cited for this position are that Christians are perceived as a threat to the prevailing state ideology, particularly the veneration of the Kim family, as having dangerously close ties to South Korea and the United States, and that Christians are held responsible for the fall of the Eastern European communist bloc. Evidence presented by witnesses to the COI indicated that individuals repatriated by China found to have had contact with churches and missionaries faced particularly harsh punishment.

Article 259 concludes that ‘Based on witness testimonies, the Commission finds that there is almost complete denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion as well as of the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, information, and association.’

No evidence exists to suggest that the situation for religion or belief adherents in the DPRK, as detailed above, has undergone significant changes in the 10 years since the COI report was written.

COI report recommendations

‘The UN Commission of Inquiry established a set of standards, a set of findings and recommendations, which are pretty much holy scripture to human rights defenders all over the world, so, you know, in that sense it was successful.’ (DPRK Expert)

In its conclusion, the report lays out several recommendations to the DPRK, China and other states, and the international community and the UN.

To the DPRK, the report’s primary recommendations are to allow full access to humanitarian organisations, create space for free media and information flows, ensure gender equality and the right to food, accept a field-based presence from the OHCHR, and abolish the death penalty, the principle of guilt by association, the political prison camp network, and the discriminatory *songbun* system. Article 1220 (g) refers to FoRB specifically, urging the DPRK to ‘Allow Christians and other religious believers to exercise their religion independently and publicly without fear of punishment, reprisal or surveillance.’

The report recommends that China and other states, including Lao PDR, Vietnam and Cambodia respect the principle of non-refoulement and cease forcibly repatriating any individual to the DPRK, and that they allow the UN High Commissioner for Refugees full access.

The COI recommended that the UN Security Council refer the situation to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and adopt targeted sanctions against perpetrators of crimes against humanity, and that the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council extend the country-specific human rights monitoring and reporting mechanisms on the DPRK.

Article 1225 (f) explicitly warns against drifting into complacency or apathy towards the DPRK’s human rights situation:

The Human Rights Council should ensure that the conclusions and recommendations of the Commission do not pass from the active attention of the international community. Where so much suffering has occurred, and is still occurring, action is the shared responsibility of the entire international community.

The DPRK’s response to the COI

‘What we see a lot is that North Korea is very conscious of the image that it portrays to the international community, and we’ve seen that a lot more post the COI as well.’ (DPRK Expert)

The response of the DPRK to the COI report has been described by former US Special Envoy for North Korea Human Rights Robert R. King as ‘a combination of official outrage and denunciation, a vigorous public relations effort to present North Korea in positive terms, and a few quiet steps to deal with some issues raised in the report.’⁴²

On 13 September 2014, Pyongyang’s official media agency, the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), released the **Report of the North Korean Association for Human Rights Studies**, a 141-page state response to the COI report, published in English, and likely intended primarily for international rather than domestic audiences.

The report defends the North Korean regime and attacks the COI as ‘a marionette of the U.S. and its satellite forces [...] based on “testimonies” of human scum who betrayed their homeland and people’.⁴³ The COI report is described as ‘dedicated to bringing harm to the image of the DPRK and creating international pressure on the DPRK so as to dismantle the socialist system and satisfy the US interests.’

Section 5 of the report specifically addresses and attempts to defend FoRB in the DPRK. The report asserts that, ‘In the DPRK everybody is fully provided with the rights to choose and follow their own religion and thought according to their own free will’ and ‘The DPRK Government has never forced or influenced people either to believe or not to believe any kind of religion, and moreover, she has never opposed, tormented, oppressed or restricted religion or religious people’. The report claims that every North Korean citizen has ‘chosen to follow the Juche Idea’. It asserts that this decision to follow *Juche* is the ‘faith and will’ of the people, made without force or coercion.

The only domestic limits to FoRB hinted at by the DPRK in their written response to the COI comes at the end of Section 5, which states that ‘Freedom of religion is allowed and provided by the State law within the limit necessary for securing social order, health, social security, morality and other human rights. Especially,



the Government prevents the religion from being used to draw in foreign forces or harm the state and social order.’

Several groups have noted that small steps have been taken by the DPRK since the COI report to improve the appearance of its human rights record. On 10 November 2014, the DPRK ratified the **Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children child prostitution and child pornography, and on 6 December 2016, they ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**. In May 2017 Catalina Devandas Aguilar, the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, became the first UN independent expert to be permitted to visit the DPRK. Human rights activists have pointed out that such formalities in policy do not necessarily indicate a change in practice. Furthermore, although the North Korean government’s partial willingness to work with UN mechanisms on the issue

42 Center for Strategic and International Studies, ‘Fifth Anniversary of the Landmark Report of the UN Commission of Inquiry on North Korean Human Rights’, 21 February 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/fifth-anniversary-landmark-report-un-commission-inquiry-north-korean-human-rights>
43 The National Committee on North Korea (NCNK), ‘Report of the DPRK Association for Human Rights Studies’, 13 September 2014, p. 103 https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/Report_of_the_DPRK_Association_for_Human_Rights_Studies.pdf

of the rights of persons with disabilities is encouraging, it has been highlighted that ‘disability rights are likely to be seen as less threatening to the government than, for example, rights relating to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly’, where even such minimal cooperation with UN procedures is unlikely.⁴⁴

CSW’s 2018 report *Movies, Markets and Mass Surveillance* shared anecdotal evidence that physical beatings for repatriated North Koreans had become less severe, or had even been prohibited, following the publishing of the COI report in 2014.⁴⁵ These findings were supported by conversations with two interviewees during research for this report, including the following account:

‘I had the opportunity to meet with a lot of insiders who had actually worked in [the Ministry of State Security and the Ministry of Social Security], and they gave me some testimonies that they have heard specific directives about human rights: not to abuse people, not to hit people, not to torture people. [...] So, I think there are some improvements that we see inside North Korea because of all these blaming and shaming tactics that is applied in the international community – so I think that is an improvement.’ (DPRK Expert)

The international community’s response to the COI

On 18 December 2014, following the publication of the COI report, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a **resolution on the situation of human rights in the DPRK**.⁴⁶ The resolution reaffirmed the duty of member states to promote and protect human rights, and condemned the systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations documented by the COI report. The resolution included a statement encouraging the UN Security Council to refer the situation in the DPRK to the ICC. The UN General Assembly (UNGA) have passed

resolutions on the human rights situation in the DPRK every year since 2001.

In December 2014 the UN Security Council formally added the human rights situation in the DPRK to its agenda. After the fourth meeting on the human rights situation in the DPRK on 11 December 2017, the topic was dropped from the agenda without explanation. The situation of human rights in North Korea was not discussed again in any UN Security Council meetings, separately from the question of nuclear non-proliferation, until 17 August 2023.^{47 48}

In June 2015, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein opened a UN Human Rights Office in Seoul, in line with a recommendation made by the COI report. The office is mandated to strengthen monitoring and documentation, enhance engagement and capacity-building, and maintain visibility of the human rights situation in the DPRK.⁴⁹

On 20 March 2017, the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) adopted a resolution for legal strategies for eventual prosecutions of violations by the DPRK and authorised the creation of a central repository for evidence.⁵⁰ Despite the resolution’s authorisation, no prosecutions have taken place.

Beyond the UN, the COI report has helped to foster an improved understanding of the situation in the DPRK and added new momentum to human rights-related initiatives. In 2016, following years of campaigning by Lord Alton of Liverpool (Chair of the UK APPG on North Korea), CSW and other organisations, the BBC announced the launch of a Korean language service on the Korean Peninsula, a step towards breaking the North Korean regime’s information blockade.⁵¹ Some sources have suggested that the increased interest and support generated by the COI may have also helped to increase funding for human rights-related projects in the DPRK.

The COI undoubtedly fostered a renewed vigour and improved understanding of the situation in the years following the report’s publication. In 2021 the SR DPRK mandate holder Tomás Ojea Quintana encouraged the international community to resist and reject ‘creeping apathy’ towards the situation of human rights in the DPRK. 10 years on from the COI report, his call is more important than ever.

Contextual Changes
in the Past Ten Years

This chapter explores four key changes in the context of the North Korean human rights situation in the ten years since the COI report: the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic changes, changes in information flows, and increased weaponisation.

The COVID-19 pandemic

In December 2019, the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was first recognised in Wuhan, China. Although it is likely the virus crossed the nation’s borders much earlier, the DPRK first publicly acknowledged an outbreak of COVID-19 in the country over two years later, in May 2022. Because of Pyongyang’s longstanding policy of intense secrecy, the true impact of the virus in the country is hard to ascertain. Nonetheless, it is clear that the pandemic has had huge economic and social consequences for the DPRK, with serious implications for the humanitarian and human rights situations.

Border Closures

‘The Covid-19 pandemic was perhaps the best way in which the Kim Jong Un regime was able to contain and isolate themselves even more from the international community.’ (DPRK Expert)

In January 2020, the DPRK became one of the first countries in the world to seal its foreign borders, as well as to enforce travel restrictions between cities and regions, and impose restrictions on imports.⁵² Many of the laws and regulations implemented at that time remain in place, making it difficult for individuals to move around within the country without the approval of local security officials or neighbourhood watch unit (*inminban*) leaders. Tighter and more harshly enforced controls at the borders – including new fences, watchtowers, guard posts and shoot-to-kill orders⁵³ – have also made it even more challenging for individuals to attempt to escape the dire humanitarian and human rights situation by fleeing the country. In 2021 and 2022, only 63 and 67 North Korean defectors arrived in the Republic of Korea respectively, compared to thousands that arrived each year throughout the 2010s.⁵⁴

‘During Covid things became a lot harder, it was nearly impossible for people to escape from North Korea to China, and those in China it was very hard for them to reach elsewhere.’ (DPRK Expert)

Although the trend of increasing border security and a corresponding decrease in the number of individuals escaping the DPRK was accelerated by the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to note that it began before January 2020, particularly under the leadership of Kim Jong Un.

‘If you look at the Ministry of Unification data on North Koreans who have resettled in South Korea, you’ll notice that once Kim Jong Un comes into power the number drops dramatically. So, this lack of mobility, and this strengthening of central government power, and increase of human rights violations, is not one that started just with Covid – it’s one that accelerated during Covid [...] Covid was an opportunity to really seal off the border and test whether North Korea would be able to survive on this kind of self-reliance ideology.’ (DPRK Expert)

‘The Kim Jong Un period has been marked by an increased emphasis and investment into border security. So, trying to stop the physical movement of people smuggling, escapees [...] the pandemic period has accelerated previous trends there, it’s been an inflection point.’ (DPRK Expert)

44 CSW, ‘Movies, Markets and Mass Surveillance’, 31 January 2018, p. 32 <https://docs-eu.livesiteadmin.com/dc3e323f-351c-4172-800e-4e02848abf80/2017-11-north-korea-report.pdf>
45 CSW, ‘Movies, Markets and Mass Surveillance’, *ibid.*, p. 23.
46 United Nations General Assembly, ‘Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 18 December 2014’, 21 January 2015, A/RES/69/188, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N14/708/89/PDF/N1470889.pdf?OpenElement>
47 Security Council Report, ‘UN Documents for DPRK (North Korea): Security Council Meeting Records’, accessed 13 February 2023 https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un_documents_type/security-council-meeting-records/?ctype=DPRK%20%28North%20Korea%29&cbtype=dprk-north-korea
48 United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, ‘Democratic People’s Republic of Korea Increasingly Repressing Its Citizen’s Human Rights, Freedoms, High Commissioner Warns Security Council’, 17 August 2023 <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15387.doc.htm>
49 United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, Seoul, <https://seoul.ohchr.org/en/node/92>
50 United Nations General Assembly, ‘Situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’, 20 March 2017, A/HRC/34/L.23 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/LTD/G17/069/64/PDF/G1706964.pdf?OpenElement>
51 CSW, ‘CSW welcomes BBC Korean language service’, 18 November 2016, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2016/11/18/news/3350/article.htm>

52 United Nations General Assembly, Situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Note by the Secretary-General, 8 October 2021, A/76/392, para 1 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/279/99/PDF/N2127999.pdf?OpenElement>
53 Human Rights Watch, ‘North Korea: Covid-19 Used as Pretext to Seal Border’, 17 November 2022 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/17/north-korea-Covid-19-used-pretext-seal-border>
54 NK News, ‘Only 67 North Korean defectors reach South in 2022, second fewest ever’, 10 January 2023 <https://www.nknews.org/2023/01/only-67-north-korean-defectors-reach-south-in-2022-second-fewest-ever/>

This fall in the number of escapees, and a corresponding stagnation in the flow of information out of the country, has resulted in a growing scarcity of up-to-date, first-hand information concerning the in-country human rights situation. At the same time, it has also become even more challenging for international organisations and diplomats to operate inside the DPRK.⁵⁵

‘This continuation of control and of restricting people [from] both escaping the country and having enough information inside – the pandemic really played well into that for them, expelling embassies and other UN systems and so on so that nobody would really even see what is happening inside the country.’ (DPRK Expert)

Exacerbation and escalation of existing humanitarian concerns

Several NGOs and international bodies have expressed grave concerns that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated and escalated pre-existing human rights and humanitarian issues in the DPRK.

‘The very weak and fragile medical system [was] strained to the limit by the pandemic. The shortage of medications only worsened; vaccinations offered by the South Koreans were refused by the DPRK. Closed borders with China for the better part of three and a half years further threatened the food security of the citizenry.’ (DPRK Expert)

Even before the enforcement of COVID-19 restrictions, concerns about chronic food insecurity and widespread famine in the DPRK were high. In 2019, a report by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World

Food Programme (WFP) estimated that 40 percent of the population (10.1 million people) were food insecure and in urgent need of food assistance.⁵⁶ In their 2023 annual report, the Food Security Information Network acknowledged ongoing data gaps in the case of the DPRK, but nonetheless highlighted that ‘throughout 2022 border closures and prolonged quarantine measures on imports as a result of COVID-19 resulted in critical shortages of basic goods’, and suggested that ‘there are indications that the [fragile food and nutrition] situation is worsening’.⁵⁷ Throughout 2021, 2022 and 2023, news outlets such as Daily NK and Radio Free Asia continued to share reports of widespread starvation, often directly or indirectly linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. In her debut report in October 2022, SR DPRK mandate holder Elizabeth Salmón expressed serious concern ‘about people’s access to food in the wake of COVID-19 restrictions’.⁵⁸

Chronic malnutrition, limited access to medicines, and an underdeveloped health care system makes North Korean citizens especially vulnerable to the physical effects of the virus. Despite this, the DPRK was extremely slow to begin vaccinating its citizens. Pyongyang rejected or ignored several offers of medical aid, including 8.12 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines in December 2021 under the COVAX initiative.⁵⁹ It was only in September 2022 that the DPRK announced that they would begin administering vaccines, over a year-and-a-half after vaccination programmes were implemented in other countries and four months after the government admitted the virus’s presence in the DPRK.⁶⁰

North Korean state media has capitalised on the pandemic for propaganda purposes, criticising the ‘failure’ of Western countries and extolling the ‘success’ of the DPRK. On 22 May 2022, Rodong Sinmun, the DPRK’s official state newspaper, wrote ‘we stably suppressed and controlled the spread of the virus in a short period [...] clearly proving a thousand times that our Party’s epidemic policy is right’.⁶¹

The COVID-19 pandemic’s economic impact

‘A lot of countries kind of made a trade-off during the pandemic that was [going to] hit the economy [...] but I think this is a totally different level.’ (DPRK Expert)



The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the DPRK economically on both a local and a national scale. Reduced trade, restrictions on freedom of movement, and limits or bans imposed upon informal markets severely impacted the income and livelihoods of many families. Many North Korean citizens, particularly those living close to the northern border, are reliant on market activities as their primary source of income and faced extreme economic hardship because of the pandemic. In the wake of the pandemic, there have been reports of deaths by starvation, families resorting to begging, and an increased number of street children (*kotjebi*). The SR DPRK has drawn attention to the gendered impact of the pandemic in the DPRK, expressing particular concern for the financial pressure placed on women, who are especially reliant on informal markets for income and ‘are still required to feed their families and look after sick family members, including, potentially, those with COVID-19, while also providing contributions to the State’.⁶²

The collapse of informal markets has also had a wider impact on the North Korean economy. The shrinking space for cross-border smuggling, market trade, and other private economic activities aggravated the DPRK’s already difficult economic situation.⁶³ This dwindling of small private economic activity, coupled with reduced international trade (particularly with China, the DPRK’s

biggest trading partner), limited humanitarian support, and continued international sanctions, has created serious challenges for the nation’s economic stability.

Other economic changes

The economic situation in the DPRK has long been profoundly unstable and of deep concern to the international community. The DPRK’s economy was founded on a system of state provision, with a public distribution system for food and material goods, and a state-assigned job system dictating employment. In the 1990s, however, the shortcomings and inefficiencies of this system led to the collapse of the North Korean economy, resulting in widespread and extreme poverty (most famously and devastatingly the ‘Arduous March’ famine of the mid-1990s), and the necessary emergence of ‘illegal’ informal sector jobs and private markets. Reports suggest that the number of homeless people and street children (*kotjebi*) continues to rise. In their 2019 report, ‘The Price is Rights’, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights concluded that ‘the data, analysis and witness accounts used for [the] report provide reasonable grounds to believe that the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is violating people’s right to an adequate standard of living’.⁶⁴

55 U.S. Department of State, ‘Democratic People’s Republic of Korea 2022 Human Rights Report’, 20 March 2023, p. 33 https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/415610_KOREA-DEM-REP-2022-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf
56 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and World Food Programme (WFP), ‘FAO/WFP joint rapid food security assessment: Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’, May 2019, p. 4 <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000104948/download/>
57 Food Security Information Network, ‘2023 Global Report on Food Crises’, 2 May 2023, p. 59 <https://www.fsinplatform.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/GRFC2023-hires.pdf>
58 United Nations General Assembly, ‘Situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Note by the Secretary-General’, A/77/522, 13 October 2022, para 5 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/628/57/PDF/N2262857.pdf?OpenElement>
59 Human Rights Watch, ‘World Report 2023: North Korea’, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/north-korea>
60 United Nations General Assembly, 13 October 2022, ibid. para 4 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/628/57/PDF/N2262857.pdf?OpenElement>
61 NK News, ‘North Korea claims victory over COVID as it boasts of decreasing ‘fever’ cases’, 22 May 2022 <https://www.nknews.org/2022/05/north-korea-claims-victory-over-covid-as-it-boasts-of-decreasing-fever-cases/>

62 United Nations General Assembly, 13 October 2022, ibid. para 6 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/628/57/PDF/N2262857.pdf?OpenElement>
63 Hong Jea Hwan, ‘Coronavirus Shock and North Korean Economy’, ibid., p. 5
64 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), ‘The price is rights: The violation of the right to an adequate standard of living in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’, 1 May 2019, p. 27 https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/KP/ThePriceRights_EN.pdf

Private market activity (Jangmadang)

Private market activity in the DPRK has become increasingly widespread and established since the 1990s. With the state failing to provide adequate supplies through the public distribution system and providing wages insufficient on which to live, through the state-assigned employment system, citizens are forced to rely on private activities – primarily informal markets known as *jangmadang* – for survival. The *jangmadang* system has become the primary means of income and economic survival for many families in the DPRK.⁶⁵

The effects of the rapid development of the informal sector in the DPRK have been mixed. For some households, markets have provided opportunities for an improved standard of living and greater material comfort. Some experts have also attributed to the *jangmadang* a small shift in the relationship between the state and North Korean citizens, with rule-breaking ‘rewarded in a way which has significantly undermined the soft power of the regime inside the country.’⁶⁶ The *jangmadang* also function as hubs for sharing foreign media, ‘facilitating the spread of outside information and fostering a culture of entrepreneurial self-reliance.’⁶⁷

At the same time, the emergence of informal markets in the DPRK has exacerbated existing socioeconomic inequalities, particularly between urban and rural areas, with the former having access to more sophisticated market networks and a greater variety of goods than the latter. Many experts refer to the *jangmadang* as ‘an insecure legal grey area’, neither fully legislated and permitted by the state nor fully prohibited.⁶⁸ Operations in such a legal grey area have strengthened the roots of widespread corruption and exploitation, leaving many individuals engaged in ‘unauthorised’ market activity vulnerable to arrest, prosecution, and punishment if they fail to (or, in many cases, are unable to) bribe security officials.

Most individuals engaging in private market activity, and, consequently, often the primary earners and breadwinners of their households, are women. Although this has opened new opportunities for some women, it also makes them increasingly vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation, with reports that ‘local officials and market managers ask for bribes or sexual favours in return for allowing women to trade in the market.’⁶⁹



‘Since the days of the great famine in the 90s, women have assumed responsibility for the survival of their families. So, they’re the main agents at the markets, they’re the ones who get arrested and punished for alleged wrongdoing. They’re also the ones who cross into China.’ (DPRK Expert)

Though market activity has grown in the past decade, government restrictions introduced since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic – including limits on movement within the country and attempts to crackdown on market activity – have somewhat impeded this increase (see ‘The Covid-19 pandemic’s economic impact’). In their July 2022 report, the UN Secretary General expressed ‘particular concerns about individuals and their families who have come to rely on private market activity for survival’ but have had their activities stymied since 2020 by strict COVID-19 measures.⁷⁰ Such families are likely to have a seriously diminished household income, and consequently will have inadequate access to food and other essential goods.

‘The people who have survived after the great famine in the 1990s and the early 2000s are the ones who were able to survive without the North Korean government. They’re the ones that knew that the public distribution system has collapsed, they can make their own way [...] through trading with China, going into China back and forth. But the North Korean government, with their [COVID-19] border closures, has forced the North Koreans to be dependent on the government, the main system, again – which we all know is not functioning.’ (DPRK Expert)

International sanctions

In October 2006, in response to the DPRK’s first nuclear test, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1718, imposing sanctions on the country around the supply of heavy weaponry, missile material, and select luxury goods. In the years since, several international bodies and sovereign states – including the UN, European Union (EU), United States (US), Japan, South Korea, and Australia – have imposed further sanctions on the DPRK, including in areas of arms manufacture, luxury goods, food and agricultural products, international banking, ports and vessels, travel, and asset freezes. (In policy, these sanction regimes contain exceptions for humanitarian assistance.

Over the past decade, these sanctions have become particularly strict, most notably with a volley of expanded and tightened UN sanctions in 2017 (resolutions 2371, 2375 and 2397 passed in August, September and December 2017 respectively).⁷¹ In 2022 the EU, US and other allies expanded their sanctions further in response to the DPRK’s intensified missile testing. A draft resolution for tightening UN sanctions was vetoed by China and the Russian Federation.⁷²

Despite the allowances for humanitarian assistance, concerns have been raised by several experts – including consistent reference in reports from SR DPRK mandate holders – around the adverse humanitarian impacts of sanctions regimes, with reports that the citizens of the DPRK are bearing the brunt of the impact. Tightened sanctions in the past decade have been noted with particular concern, including a statement in 2020 from the UN Secretary General that ‘the increased implementation of sanctions has started to seriously affect the entire economy of the country, which is having adverse consequences on the exercise of the economic and social rights of the people’.⁷³ The current and former SR DPRK mandate-holders have repeatedly urged UN member states and the Security Council in their report recommendations to reassess the implication of sanctions on the humanitarian and human rights situation in the DPRK, particularly the right to food.

65 NK Hidden Gulag, *ibid.*
66 CSW, ‘Movies, Markets and Mass Surveillance’, *ibid.*, p. 5
67 NK Hidden Gulag, ‘Jangmadang marketization in North Korea’, 10 April 2021 <https://www.nkhiddengulag.org/blog/jangmadang-marketization-in-north-korea>
68 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), ‘The price is rights: The violation of the right to an adequate standard of living in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’, p. 16, *ibid.*
69 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), ‘Situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’, 1 May 2020, A/HRC/43/58, para 35 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G20/108/74/PDF/G2010874.pdf?OpenElement>

70 United Nations General Assembly, ‘Situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea: Report of the Secretary-General’, 29 July 2022, A/77/247, para 29 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/597/60/PDF/N2259760.pdf?OpenElement>
71 Hong Jea Hwan, ‘Coronavirus Shock and North Korean Economy’, 12 August 2020, p.2 <https://www.kinu.or.kr/pyxis-api/1/digital-files/271a3667-e0ca-4741-91fd-63d6388ca0ec>
72 United Nations, ‘General Assembly Holds Landmark Debate on Security Council’s Veto of Draft Text Aimed at Tightening Sanctions against Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’, 8 June 2022 <https://press.un.org/en/2022/ga12423.doc.htm>
73 United Nations General Assembly, Situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Note by the Secretary-General, 14 October 2020, A/75/388, para 5 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N20/266/19/PDF/N2026619.pdf?OpenElement>

Corruption

Corruption is widespread across the DPRK, including in the judicial system, detention facilities, and workplaces. In CSW’s 2018 report *Movies, Markets and Mass Surveillance*, almost half of the over 100 respondents⁷⁴ surveyed by CSW indicated that they believed that bribery had increased in the DPRK between 2007 and 2017.⁷⁵ More recent reports from NGOs and international bodies suggest that this trajectory of increasingly rampant and endemic corruption has continued in the years since.⁷⁶

The impact of increasingly entrenched patterns of corruption on the human rights situation is mixed. On the one hand, bribery is crucial for the smuggling of foreign media into the country, which is a vital means of circumventing the DPRK’s total crackdown on information flows. Bribery can also be used as a means of avoiding penalties which constitute human rights abuses or to secure a higher standard of living. Preferential treatment in detention, exemption from military service, the securement or avoidance of certain jobs and the avoidance of penalties including arbitrary detention, torture and forced labour can reportedly all be secured by bribery in the DPRK.⁷⁷ At the same time, however, such bribery creates an increasingly polarised and unequal society, where the freedom to exercise human rights, universal and inalienable under international human rights law, is contingent on an individual’s economic status and ability to pay bribes to state officials.⁷⁸

Changes in information flows

Freedom of information does not exist in the DPRK. All media within the country is strictly controlled by the state and information from outside North Korea is severely suppressed. Despite this, several sources suggest that the consumption of information from outside the country has increased in recent years. The overall situation seems to be similar to that outlined by the SR DPRK in 2017: North Korean authorities have ‘increased restrictions on access to information from outside the country’ yet, at the same time, ‘more people are reportedly able

to access information from abroad and to communicate with those abroad despite the stringent restrictions.’⁷⁹

One of the most far-reaching mediums for getting outside information into the country is radio. One report on information dynamics and digitisation by Kretchun, Lee and Tuohy suggests that ‘for those in North Korea seeking to learn more about the outside, or get news about their own country that is not reported in the domestic media, foreign radio is likely their best and often their only option’.⁸⁰ The US State Department puts considerable funding into initiatives aimed at breaking through the DPRK’s information blockade, including offering up to \$1.5million in grants in December 2022 ‘for projects that increase North Koreans’ access to outside information’.⁸¹ Voice of America (VOA), the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Radio Free Asia (RFA) and Global Korean Network all transmit broadcasts into the DPRK.

Increased consumption of foreign media

While overall numbers remain low in comparison to other countries, several recent reports and studies suggest that access to information from outside the country has increased in the DPRK in the past decade. (This increase should still be understood to be relative in a context of widespread and severe limitations on foreign media consumptions.) Nonetheless, access to information not propagated by the state appears to have expanded somewhat across North Korea.

Various reasons for this have been proposed, including developments in technology. USBs and micro-SD cards are easier to smuggle and conceal, and therefore safer, than their predecessors the DVD and VHS. Increased digitisation has occurred alongside expanded access to Chinese mobile phones, which have unrestricted internet access and are able to place calls across the border. Changes in attitudes among North Koreans, including an increased desire for outside information and a greater readiness actively to engage with foreign materials despite personal risk, may also be a contributing factor. A growing culture of bribery adds a layer of security as a method to mitigate the likelihood of punishment.

Outside information can have a transformative effect inside the country, including raising awareness among North Korean citizens of the existence and meaning of fundamental human rights. In CSW’s 2018 report *Movies, Markets and Mass Surveillance*, survey respondents were more than twice as likely to believe that North Koreans’ view of South Korea and the US has become more favourable over the past ten years (44%), rather than less so (19%), and interviewees were ‘in no doubt about the impact of foreign information on people’s views and opinions, particularly their view of South Korea’.⁸²

Increased crackdown on foreign media

‘The North Koreans’ needs and interests and wants are very much aligned with wanting to know more, wanting to access what is going on, but the North Korean government more than ever is cracking down on that.’ (DPRK Expert)

Despite the increased consumption of foreign information outlined above, it would be wrong to conclude that restrictions enforced by the North Korean state have been relaxed. On the contrary, evidence suggests that in recent years, the government has become even more active in its attempts to suppress information flows from outside the country.

‘North Korea is really tackling the information that is being sent into the country. What they are targeting is mostly South Korean content, and things that they would refer to as non-socialist or anti-socialist activities.’ (DPRK Expert)

The DPRK maintains tight border controls and security officials carry out frequent physical searches of individuals and their homes. The government also employs technology to control peoples’ access to information, such as powerful jamming equipment for radio, television, and mobile phone signals; stringent limitations on internet access; and digital software such as ‘Traceviewer’ and ‘Red Flag’, which take intermittent mobile phone screenshots that cannot be deleted from the user’s device. The *inminban* also carefully monitor radio and television usage.

Since January 2020, the COVID-19 border closures have made access to information even more difficult. Expanded or upgraded border security facilities, including new fences, increased guard-towers and security personnel, and more extensive surveillance cameras, have made it even harder for information contained on USBs or micro-SD cards, for example, to be brought into the country. Heightened restrictions on freedom of movement within the DPRK also make it less likely that physical media entering the country will permeate beyond the border regions. The implementation of the ‘anti-reactionary thought’ law in December 2020 reflects the DPRK’s continued and intensified attempts to crackdown on the inflow of information to the country. The law prohibits materials from ‘hostile’ nations – particularly South Korea and the US. This includes books, videos, and songs. The law provides for punishments as extreme as the death penalty for individuals found to be engaging with foreign information.

‘North Korea uses [a] multi-pronged approach to try and crackdown on foreign information, foreign media, because of the threat that it is to their authority and control, ultimately’ (DPRK Expert)

Widespread propaganda

Alongside the harsh crackdown on external media, the DPRK maintains an extensive system of internal state propaganda. The DPRK’s primary media outlets are Rodong Sinmun (newspaper), the Korean Central Broadcasting Station (radio), Korean Central TV (television station) and Korean Central News Agency (news agency and online web page). Each of these is carefully managed and censored to spread KWP propaganda and further entrench *Juche* ideology.

A small part of official media output encompasses foreign news, but this coverage is carefully managed by the state. The Committee for Human Rights North Korea’s (HRNK) analysis of foreign news on KCTV showed it to be ‘angled heavily towards natural disasters, conflict, and human suffering’.⁸³ North Korean citizens’, who do not have access to genuine outside information, whether through USB drives, radio broadcasts, or mobile phone communications across the border, understanding of the world outside is likely to be deeply distorted, influenced by the DPRK’s carefully controlled media apparatus.

⁷⁴ Respondents included North Koreans living in South Korea or Europe; the UN office in Seoul, South Korea; organisations run by North Korean escapees; South Korean officials and experts; academics; international journalists; and South Korean international human rights organisations and faith-based organisations.

⁷⁵ CSW, ‘Movies, Markets and Mass Surveillance’, *ibid.*, p.7

⁷⁶ For example: U.S. Department of State, ‘Democratic People’s Republic of Korea 2022 Human Rights Report’, 20 March 2023, p.2 https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/415610_KOREA-DEM-REP-2022-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf; United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), ‘Situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’, 18 September 2017, A/72/394, para 39-41 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N17/290/81/PDF/N1729081.pdf?OpenElement>; United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), ‘The price is rights: The violation of the right to an adequate standard of living in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’, 1 May 2019, p. 19 https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/KP/ThePriceIsRights_EN.pdf; Transparency International, ‘Corruption perceptions index 2022’ <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/prk>

⁷⁷ United Nations General Assembly, Situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Report of the Secretary-General, 28 July 2021, A/76/242, para 24 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N21/208/98/PDF/N2120898.pdf?OpenElement>

⁷⁸ United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), ‘The price is rights: The violation of the right to an adequate standard of living in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’, *ibid.*, p. 2

⁷⁹ United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), ‘Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’, 22 February 2017, A/HRC/34/66, para 24 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G17/041/43/PDF/G1704143.pdf?OpenElement>

⁸⁰ Nat Kretchun, Catherine Lee, Seamus Tuohy, ‘Compromising connectivity: information dynamics between the state and society in a digitizing North Korea’, 2017, p. 10 <https://seamustuohy.com/files/Compromising-Connectivity-Final-Report.pdf>

⁸¹ NK News, ‘US allots \$1.5 million for projects to send outside information into North Korea’, 14 December 2022 <https://www.nknews.org/2022/12/us-allots-1-5-million-for-projects-to-send-outside-information-into-north-korea/>

⁸² CSW, ‘Movies, Markets and Mass Surveillance’, *ibid.*, p.13

⁸³ Martyn Williams, ‘Digital Trenches: North Korea’s Information Counter-Offensive’, *ibid.*, p. 25.

‘In order to control [their citizens] the regime [...] need[s] to control the outside information. North Koreans think South Korea is the worst country – we beg help from the US, and we still have the worst economy in the world. And North Koreans think they are one of the best countries in the world.’ (DPRK Expert)

Conditions for missionaries working in China

‘Things have worsened noticeably since Xi Jinping took power 10 years ago. [...] A lot of South Korean missionaries have been booted out systematically in the last 8 years or so.’ (DPRK Expert).

The conditions for religious groups and missionaries working to assist North Korean refugees in China has deteriorated in recent years, due to China’s increasing crackdown on religious activity and the effects of their zero-COVID policy since January 2020. Many missionary groups have been forced to leave the country because of the risks related to their work. Others have been expelled, including one interviewee’s own missionary group, which was expelled from China to South Korea in 2016. Five interviewees of both religious and non-religious affiliations shared that many of their primary contacts on the ground in China working on the DPRK issue were missionaries. The shift has had a significant impact on their work and the amount of information they receive on the situation for North Koreans in the DPRK and in China.

‘I think the worst thing that happened was really the pandemic and the zero Covid policy that really destroyed the network and destroyed kind of access to the network in China.’ (DPRK Expert)

‘A lot of our contacts on the ground were missionaries [...] many of them were either expelled or they left themselves voluntarily, in fear of the risk that they thought they would face.’ (North Korea Expert)

International security and military weapons expansion

Despite persistent sanctions and international pressure, the DPRK’s prioritisation of military defence and weaponisation has grown steadily in the decade since the publication of the COI report. The CNS North Korea Missile Database records 20 successful missile tests from 2004 to 2013, compared with 123 successful tests from 2014-2022.⁸⁴ Forty-two successful tests were carried in 2022 alone, more than any other year in the country’s history.

Humanitarian situation – spending on weapons before food

The DPRK’s economic prioritisation to further develop its weapons arsenal has come with profound humanitarian costs for its citizens. One South Korean think tank estimates the total cost of the DPRK’s missile launches in 2022 to be in excess of \$560million, and the estimated food shortfall to be \$417 million. If money had been redirected from the nation’s missile programme to foodstuffs and agriculture, chronic food insecurity might have been averted.⁸⁵ In addition to the diversion of monetary resources to military expansion, the DPRK has also diverted huge human resources. The DPRK ranks fourth in the world in military size, with 1.2million troops. A huge percentage of its population is therefore being kept out of the workplace.⁸⁶

‘In North Korea there is mandatory military service. I spent all my twenties in North Korean military. Actually, in Pyongyang, I served the military service, but even in Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea, the solider of North Korea is really vulnerable [...] they are always hungry and tragic accident[s] [happen] frequently’ (North Korean Defector).

⁸⁴ The Nuclear Threat Initiative, ‘The CNS North Korea Missile Test Database’, <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/cns-north-korea-missile-test-database/>
⁸⁵ Korea JoongAng Daily, ‘North Korea spends money it needs for food on missiles’, 12 December 2022 <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2022/12/12/national/northKorea/Korea-North-Korea-food-insecurity/20221212190148616.html>
⁸⁶ The Korea Post, ‘North Korea ranks 4th in the world in military size with 1.2 million troops’, 11 January 2023 <https://www.koreapost.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=31106#:~:text=North%20Korea%20ranks%204th%20in,million%20troops%20%2D%20The%20Korea%20Post&text=North%20Korea%20ranked%20fourth%20in,actual%20combat%20power%20are%20separate.>



International attention for security
above human rights

Several publications, including The Wall Street Journal⁸⁷ and Stanford University Press,⁸⁸ as well as groups like the HRNK,⁸⁹ have drawn attention to the international community’s prioritisation of nuclear security issues over the North Korean human rights crisis. This focus on weaponisation at the exclusion of human rights is reflected across international media coverage and in government policy, both bilaterally and multilaterally.

In reality, the two are inextricably linked, making the need to bring human rights back onto the agenda all the more urgent. Currently, such an approach is, for the most part, absent. In the ten years since the publication of the COI report, as the perceived military threat posed by the DPRK has increased, the attention given to the human

rights situation has been overshadowed and superseded by international security concerns.

In March 2023, at a UN HRC side-event to mark the 10-year anniversary of the resolution to establish the COI, Justice Michael Kirby asserted that the way ahead for the DPRK must include the global intersectionality between peace and security objectives and human rights; one cannot exist without the other. Peace and security will not be achieved on the Korean Peninsula until there is proper respect for human rights and democracy. Such an approach is possible and politically adroit: the HRNK points to the example of US government exchanges with other countries in the past, highlighting that ‘[US] administrations found effective bilateral and multilateral means of promoting human rights goals with the Soviet Union even though they were negotiating nuclear weapons agreements with its leaders at the same time.’⁹⁰



The DPRK and FoRB

‘There is no freedom of religion. The situation is absolutely abysmal.’ (DPRK Expert)

‘We don’t have any religion. Only one religion is Kim Il Sung.’ (North Korean Defector)

‘Juche ideology [is] not theory, it’s a religion.’ (North Korean Defector)

‘The situation is miserable. The violation of human rights inside North Korea is egregious, and I’m afraid it’s getting worse. [...] The situation for freedom of religion is the same.’ (DPRK Expert)

There is no freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief in the DPRK, and any citizen who expresses an opinion or a belief which differs from the regime’s propaganda faces severe punishment. Many of the individuals interviewed by CSW suggested that the human rights situation in the DPRK, including the right to FoRB, has deteriorated in the past ten years.

Christianity

Individuals in the DPRK who are caught or suspected of practicing Christianity are known to face severe punishment, including torture, detention in the DPRK’s political prison camp system, and even execution. The exact nature of the punishment will vary depending on the nature of the crime and the *songbun* of the individual involved. Most interviewees believed that the persecution of Christians in the DPRK has stayed at the same level, or has worsened, in the past decade under Kim Jong Un.

‘At the very beginning [Kim Jong Un] was very unsure of himself and had not really established himself and so with Christians being viewed as disloyal, certainly he was deeply concerned, I think even as his father and grandfather were, that if Christianity took root in a meaningful way that it had a great capacity for explosive growth. So, I think he just turned the screws down as hard as he could, and I think more or less that’s still going on. He’s maintaining that zero tolerance for anything relating to freedom of faith.’ (DPRK Expert)

‘The few cases that we do have about people who have practiced religion or come in contact, or even been in the process of smuggling religious materials, mostly Bibles, they would have the most harshest punishment of political prison camps and also the death penalty.’ (DPRK Expert)

Anti-Christian propaganda is systematically taught and propagated by the North Korean regime. Citizens are taught from a young age that Christians are ‘spies’ and ‘enemies of the state’. Two North Korean defectors CSW spoke to remembered being told a story in school about a Christian missionary who gave out poisoned apples to children. Another remembered Christian ‘ministers’ being referred to as ‘murderers’ whilst she still lived in the DPRK.

Although all religions and beliefs are repressed under the Kim regime, Christianity is particularly targeted. In part, this is likely due to the extent to which Christian ideology runs counter to *Juche* ideology. It may also be, in part, because of the threat that free expression and assembly pose to the regime’s stability. Any activity that takes place outside of the state’s control – be it political, religious, economic – is deemed impermissible by the Kim regime.

87 The Wall Street Journal, ‘To Disarm North Korea, Focus on Human Rights’, 5 March 2023 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/to-disarm-north-korea-focus-on-human-rights-information-campaign-kpop-prison-camp-kim-jong-un-propaganda-24b22071>
88 Stanford University, ‘How to Solve the North Korean Conundrum: The Role of Human Rights in Policy Toward the DPRK’, 29 October 2021 <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/how-to-solve-north-korean-conundrum-human-rights-policy-dprk>
89 HRNK, ‘Ten Practical and Specific Measures for Advancing Human Rights in United States Policy Toward North Korea’, para 1 <https://www.hrnk.org/publications/policy-recommendations.php>
90 HRNK, ‘Ten Practical and Specific Measures for Advancing Human Rights in United States Policy Toward North Korea’, *ibid*.

‘There is severe discrimination against people of religion, especially against Christians, for two main reasons. Reason number one, Christianity is an ideology that runs counter to the official Kimilsungism, the official ideology of North Korea. Number two, the underground church creates the space for free discussion, where people can freely share ideas, it’s as simple as that. It’s one of the worst religious rights violators in the world. It’s as simple as that. As simple and tragic as that.’ (DPRK Expert)

Four interviewees drew links between the Ten Principles and the Ten Commandments, with the Kim family directly replacing God as the sole object of worship and veneration. One North Korean defector recalled songs in the DPRK which use the melodies of Christian hymns or worship songs but replace the lyrics with words venerating the regime.

‘...The fourth principle was, ‘Kim Il-Sung is as a God’. You have to believe Kim Il Sung is a God. That’s why the North Korean regime strongly suppresses Christianity, especially Christianity, because Christianity only believes in the God, it denies every other. So that’s the North Korean situation.’ (North Korean Defector)

‘There is no such thing as activity that happens outside the coordination of the state. And so, any activity that happens outside or independent, let’s say independent of the coordination of the state, is automatically problematic, it’s not acceptable.’ (DPRK Expert)

‘Kim Jong Un’s regime requires a monopoly on issues of valuation and loyalty. And so, when that monopoly is lost [...] when there’s a means for me to be considered useful that’s independent of the state’s calculus, that is very threatening to the state.’ (DPRK Expert)

Engagement with Christian religious materials

Individuals suspected of exposure to and engagement with religious materials in the DPRK, particularly Bibles, face severe punishment. There are anecdotal reports of citizens who have been in contact with religious texts being forcibly disappeared, imprisoned, and publicly executed. Conversations with interviewees suggest that these risks are largely known and understood by North Korean citizens inside the country.

One expert interviewed by CSW regularly interviews North Korean defectors in South Korea. He said:

‘We even ask, ‘have you practiced or been in contact with religious material?’, and they are quite confused about why we would even ask that question. I think it’s because all North Koreans know that if you do come in contact with religious materials it would lead to the most harshest punishment [...] I think there’s just a general fear of being associated with this type of material, and I think for a lot of North Koreans it perhaps isn’t worth the risk. With the younger generation they may be willing to take that risk with South Korean entertainment and South Korean movies, but with religious materials it’s just something people are trying to keep their distance from – so even if they have seen a Bible, that doesn’t necessarily mean that they’ve engaged or read it or have done anything with the materials that they have seen.’

Another interviewee based in Seoul works for an organisation that creates video content for distribution to North Korean people. The organisation conducts audience tests for this material with people who have recently defected to South Korea. They shared that:

‘...the strongest negative feedback has been for any kind of religious element in that media, even just references, even just talking about it, because it’s just seen as so sensitive that well, ‘if I watch this there’s no way that I’m sharing it with anyone else, I would have to burn it after watching it’ [...] it’s basically seen as the most subversive, the most seditious, you know basically if you’re messing with this stuff and especially if it’s reported that you have shared this with other people then you’re a spy.’

Two North Korean defectors, with whom CSW spoke, remembered instances where families were forcibly disappeared after being caught in the supposed possession of Bibles:

‘Forced disappearance is [a] very common thing in North Korea. You have to expect anything can happen overnight. But one of our classmate’s family was disappeared overnight, and there was a huge gossip and story around the town and community that they had mini-Bibles on their roof.’ (North Korean Defector)

‘My wife’s grandfather was a Christian [...] he brought a Bible to North Korea and read the Bible story with her grandma also. But my wife actually she didn’t know what’s happening, what kind of books are there, but one day her grandpa was got caught by the North Korean police. And then right after her grandma tried to [burn] the Bible story, and after one hour the NIS, North Korean National Security Agency, caught the grandma also. And then my wife’s father also [got] caught by the North Korean police and [sent] to the political prison camps. Only survived my wife and my wife’s younger brother, and my wife’s mother, only survived. The others, the whole family disappeared, except those people.’ (North Korean Defector)

Despite the severity of the consequences, three interviewees suggested that Christian materials within the DPRK may have increased slightly over the past ten years. One interviewee working for a Christian organisation in South Korea particularly linked this increase to the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated lockdowns: *‘the number of requests we receive for Bibles from North Koreans inside North Korea and wherever North Koreans are found doubled every year during the corona virus’.* The interviewee understood this to be because regular house searches by North Korean authorities were suspended under COVID-19 measures, and so North Koreans were more able to store and transport materials, including Bibles, using their homes as ‘waystations’.

The Underground Church

‘Our experience in talking to and partnering with underground North Korean Christians is that they’re not waiting for the current regime to blow over and find a more suitable time to be Christian.’ (DPRK Expert)

Eight interviewees of both religious and non-religious affiliations referred to some kind of ‘underground church’ existing in the DPRK. This church is understood to be primarily located along the western corridor of the DPRK, likely because of its proximity to China. It is understood that groups operate on a very small scale or family level. One interviewee recalled a defector they spoke to sharing that *‘his underground church was his family – the family memorised the Bible, and the friend, until he became of an age that he can protect his family, he wouldn’t share with his classmates and teachers’.* Two interviewees made references to Christians existing at higher levels of society, suggesting that not all Christians in the DPRK are among the rural poor. The North Korean defectors to whom CSW spoke to stated that, while still living inside the DPRK, they weren’t aware of the existence of any such underground church.

Transmission of religious materials and any form of proselytising is understood to be carried out on a very small scale and with extremely high levels of secrecy. One interviewee who has contact with Christians in the DPRK shared that the activities of the underground church primarily consist of reading the Bible and listening to religious broadcasts on the radio. They stated that both activities increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Shamanism

In a 2021 report, Korea Future analysed 277 cases of human rights violations perpetrated against Shamanic adherents between 1987 and 2019 and found that adherents of Shamanism have experienced arbitrary detention, forced labour, denial of fair trial, and torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.⁹¹ The report highlights that these violations against Christian and Shamanic adherents are ‘a part of systematic and targeted attacks directed at religious minorities.’⁹²

91 Korea Future, ‘Persecuting Faith: Documenting Religious Freedom Violations in North Korea’, 27 October 2021, <https://www.koreafuture.org/s/Persecuting-Faith-Documenting-religious-freedom-violations-in-North-Korea-Volume-2.pdf>
92 Korea Future, *ibid.*, p. 5.

Superstitious practices and traditional beliefs

‘North Korean regime blocked the Christians but they give us space for the [superstition], especially fortune teller[s], so even the policemen in North Korean they visit the fortune teller.’ (North Korean Defector)

Superstition and superstitious practices are moderately widespread in the DPRK. Acts of superstition and traditional beliefs – such as lucky days, grave-sweeping, visiting fortune-tellers, and Chuseok ancestor worship – are generally understood to be perceived as less problematic by the regime, but nonetheless such practices have been cracked down upon more heavily in recent years.

‘There is superstition, but it’s also illegal in the DPRK.’ (North Korean Defector)

‘There’s definitely been a lot more heavy crackdown on fortune telling and going to see Mudangs and people who can read your future [...] that’s also considered to be a non-socialist activity that the DPRK government does not want spreading inside the country.’ (DPRK Expert)

One individual who regularly speaks with North Korean refugees in South Korea shared with CSW that, when asked about religious activities, North Korean defectors often talk about fortune telling, Mudangs, and superstitious practices. The interviewee also stated that testimonies concerning crackdowns on superstitious activities are more common than those concerning Christianity. They clarified that although this may be an indication of the prevalence of superstition compared to Christianity, it could also be a reflection of the severity of punishments:

‘I think the fact that we hear perhaps more about the crackdowns on superstitious activities perhaps show[s] that the punishments are less severe because it’s more common to go to just a labour training camp or a prison camp, because the terms are much shorter, so they’ll hear about people who are sent there and come back, whereas for Christianity if it’s a political prison camp or if it’s an execution then of course you don’t hear about what happens afterwards.’ (DPRK Expert)

Repatriation and FoRB

‘In North Korea they gave three questions [upon repatriation]: first question is ‘did you meet South Koreans’, second question ‘did you watch porn’, and third one is ‘did you go to the church.’ (North Korean Defector)

‘Forcibly repatriated refugees are treated harshly, principally I think because what they did is considered to be a betrayal [...] One of the first questions is ‘have you been with Christians?’, and then consequences get more serious as a result of that.’ (DPRK Expert)

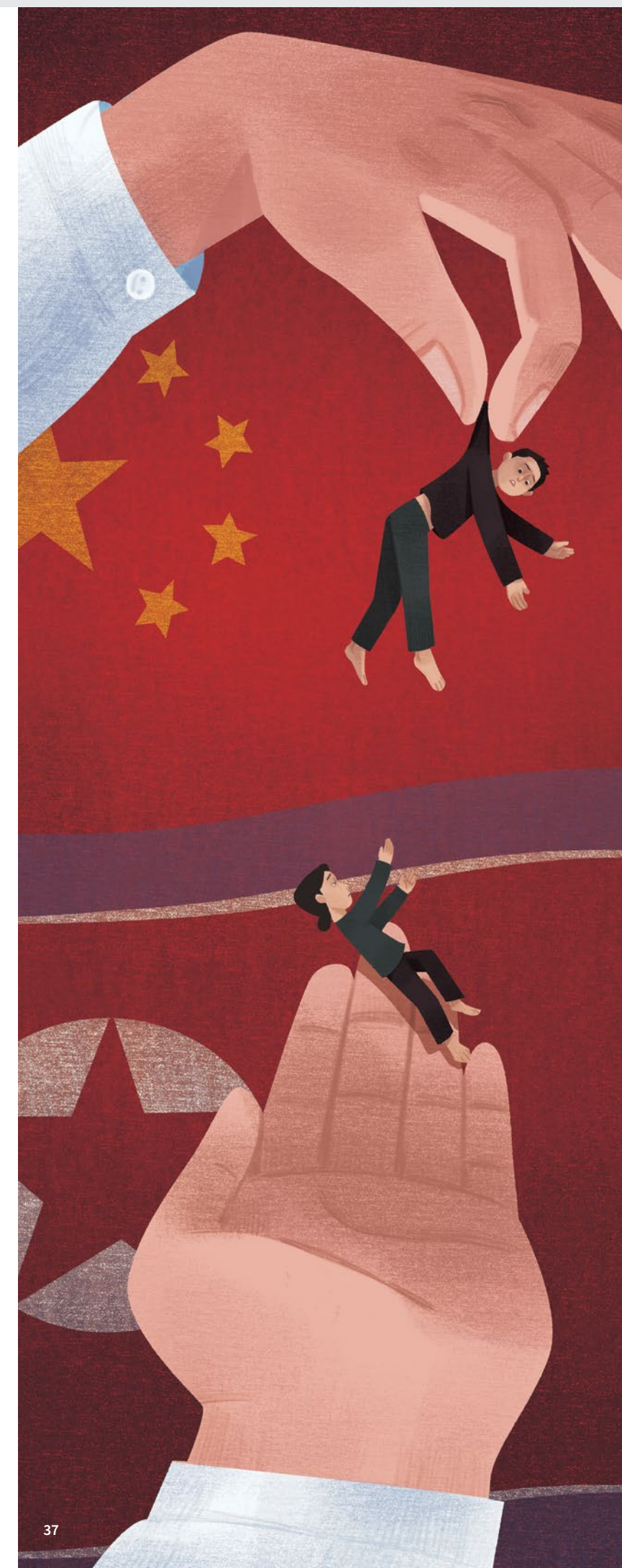
Many interviewees outlined the severe treatment of repatriated North Koreans, particularly if they are found or suspected of having contact with Christians. One of the first questions North Korean officials ask repatriated citizens is whether they had contact with Christians while they were in China. For those who were in China for economic and trade purposes, the punishment tends to be less severe. Those found to have had contact with South Koreans, churches or missionaries are known to face more severe consequences.

‘When North Korean escapees are forcibly returned by China to North Korea, they’re debriefed and interrogated for months in a row. Fundamentally they ask them two questions: “Did you come across any South Koreans?” “Did you come across any Christian missionaries?” These are the two biggest problems. So, if you’re suspected – whether you came across Christian missionaries or not it doesn’t matter – if you’re suspected of having

come across missionaries, you’ll be in trouble. At the very least you’ll be sent to a re-education through labour camp or Kyohwaso for three years, worst case scenario maybe Kwanliso, a political prison camp. You can also be killed.’ (DPRK Expert)

‘Most people are sent to a prison camp [they’re] usually interrogated first, when they’re initially repatriated, and then, depending on the severity of their crimes, sent to a forced labour camp or political prison camp. Generally, if they were just in China for economic purposes, like earning money or something like that, they tend to get a less severe punishment, a few years, something like that, in forced labour maybe. Whereas if they had contact with South Koreans, missionaries, maybe if they already had family who was known to have escaped to South Korea, they tend to get a lot more severe treatment.’ (DPRK Expert)

Seven interviewees emphasised China’s involvement and assistance in the process of repatriation. Reports from North Korean defectors indicate that Chinese authorities and spies inside Chinese prisons share information with North Korean officials about the conditions of the repatriated individual’s arrest and their suspected activities in China. Two North Korean defectors interviewed by CSW shared their experiences of repatriated North Koreans being separated into groups on deportation from China. ‘Political criminals’, including those who had planned to travel to South Korea and those suspected of having contact with Christian missionaries or churches, were put into a specific group designated for a different type of interrogation and treatment. Another expert CSW interviewed had heard anecdotal reports of China using different coloured stamps on documentation given to the DPRK, to indicate which of those being repatriated had had contact with churches.



Because North Koreans suspected of meeting with Christians are separated from other citizens upon repatriation to the DPRK, and because their sentences are likely to be harsher – including indefinite or life-sentences in political prison camps – there are relatively few first-hand testimonies about the treatment of Christians in the DPRK.

‘There is such a restriction of testimonies, unless someone escapes from actually political prison camp itself, [...] because they separate these people, others in that detention are [al] so unable to give testimonies of what has happened to others and I think that that’s the biggest obstacle for us to get enough information of what is happening with actually people who had access to kind of organised, let’s say religious institutions, or might have practiced this religion inside North Korea.’ (DPRK Expert)

One interviewee who had experienced forcible repatriation was taken to a North Korean prison investigation centre on arrival back in the country. They were immediately asked if anyone in the group had been to church, met missionaries, or prayed whilst in China. The North Korean officers checked the fingertips of repatriated children for thickened skin:

‘The police guy was asking these children to open their palms [...] if children had thick layer on the fingerprint, then they actually were suspecting these boys and girls been to a prayer house in China. The children pray very desperately.’ (North Korean Defector)

State-approved places of worship

‘There is church in Pyongyang, and [...] there are some Buddhism temples and some things. These things exist as symbols of religious freedom [...] not really for the religion. So, they say ‘we have a church, we have temples, so people can go to church or where they can believe whatever they want’. But in reality, if you go to church ... you will get punished or disappeared. So, it [does] not mean there are no church or temples, there are, but it’s not for the people, it’s only as a symbol.’ (North Korean Defector)

There are a small number of state-approved places of worship in Pyongyang, including Protestant and Roman Catholic churches. There is little evidence to suggest that citizens who attend gatherings at these buildings are permitted to practise their religion or belief with any level of freedom. Two interviewees suggested the possibility that some attendees may be genuine religious adherents. They shared anecdotal evidence that the services at churches in Pyongyang contain teaching from the Bible.

‘The people who are allowed to go to these state-approved churches are the ones who are heavily vetted, they are known to be loyal to the regime and they are a very selective group, and they can be controlled.’ (DPRK Expert)

‘I’ve also heard that when people have gone to the churches in Pyongyang that theologically the sermons are also actually quite good as well, that they’re actually talking about things that are written in the Bible, and they’re not just using that as a way to talk about like affiliating with Kim Il Sung.’ (DPRK Expert).

However, most interviewees asserted that the state-approved places of worship in Pyongyang are purely symbolic, designed to project a certain image to the international community. In addition to those considered highly loyal to the regime, other attendees are largely foreigners.

‘It’s a fake church in Pyongyang especially. In Pyongyang there is Bongsu church [...] only for foreigners, when South Korean pastors and other western country pastors went visit there. [...] They are fake, totally fake.’ (North Korean Defector).

‘North Korea is very conscious of the image that it portrays to the international community, and we’ve seen that a lot more post the COI as well. And being able to say that ‘no we do have the freedom of religion, look at these churches, look at these religious institutions, look at these exchanges that we have,’ that is one way of being able to perhaps tick those boxes.’ (DPRK Expert)

Key events in 2024

Policy Changes

The start of 2024 has seen several concerning developments in the DPRK. Kim Jong Un’s regime has declared South Korea as the State’s Principal enemy. The North Korean leader declared that the constitution should be amended to educate North Koreans that South Korea is a “primary foe and invariable principal enemy”. While calling for the severing of all inter-Korean communication and the destruction of the reunification monument in Pyongyang, he also called for South Korea to be recognised as a separate independent state, ending more than 50 years of post-Korean War policy. Three DPRK government organisations dedicated to unification and inter-Korean tourism have also been shut down. This is aradical change that has heightened tensions in the peninsula.

Continued Missile Launches

North Korean military continues to test long range missiles capable of hitting the Pacific Coast of the United States. Missile launches haven taken place several times in 2024. The country lacks sophisticated warplanes or submarines, leaving its nuclear weapons as a key military asset. In 2024, the DPRK also conducted a series of tests involving an underwater drone and cruise missiles, which it claimed were being developed to carry nuclear warheads. In November 2023, the DPRK successfully launched its first military reconnaissance satellite into orbit. There is considerable fear in the international community that the DPRK will be able to bolster its satellite and military capabilities through Russian help. The DPRK has been accused of providing stockpiled arms to Russia to aide their illegal war in Ukraine. In return the DPRK has received state of the art military technology from Russia.

Recommendations after 55th sitting of the Human Rights Council

During the 55th session of the HRC , a resolution⁹³ on the situation of human rights in the DPRK was adopted. The resolution requests he High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk to submit a comprehensive report on the human rights situation in the DPRK at the 60th session in September 2025, containing an update on the situation since 2014, when the COI was established, and taking stock of the implementation of the COI’s recommendations. The resolution also includes language urging all Member States ensure North Koreans are not repatriated and “to take action to counter acts of transnational repression by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea” and “to ensure adequate international protection, by refraining from sharing information about the contacts and conduct of refugees, asylum seekers and other citizens of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea with the Government of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea”.

⁹³ UN Human Rights Council, Resolution on the situation of human rights in the Democractic People’s Republic of Korea, adopted on 4 April 2024, A/HRC/55/L.19, <https://seoul.ohchr.org/index.php/en/node/563>

Looking Forward: Areas of Future Work and Focus

Foster a shared direction and momentum among those working for North Korean human rights

‘Since the COI report came out in 2014, I think the general feeling is that we’ve been losing momentum, and there hasn’t been that kind of a strong follow-up afterwards.’ (DPRK Expert)

‘There’s a real scepticism of the work that the [DPRK human rights] community is doing, especially post COI. [...] [I] think that we’ve hit a plateau where we need to grow into this next stage of the movement.’ (DPRK Expert)

‘There is this almost inverse relationship between the situation inside North Korea getting worse and the appetite of member states and the international community to fund this issue more, to do more on this issue.’ (DPRK Expert)

CSW spoke to several civil society organisations (CSOs) working on human rights in the DPRK who expressed a general feeling that momentum and direction has diminished in the ten years since the COI. Before the COI was established, civil society actors had a clear objective for which to campaign, while in the immediate years following the publication of the COI report, there was a well-defined focus on advocacy in support of the implementation of the COI recommendations. One decade on from the COI, there is disappointment that the international community has failed to act on the majority of recommendations, and that the movement needs reinvigoration. A lack of active engagement from governments and insufficient opportunities for funding have hampered efforts towards change.

Several interviewees with whom CSW spoke expressed hope of renewed momentum, most particularly around the 10-year anniversary of the COI. DPRK human rights defenders should make the most of opportunities like this to foster a shared direction and momentum.

‘In the past year or so [...] there have been a lot of efforts [in South Korea] to try and really bring all the [the DPRK human rights] organisations together, to have more of a cohesive joint strategy. We’re all really trying to achieve the same thing so rather than repeating programmes or doing similar things or competing programmes, it’s much better if we can have a joint vision and work together.’ (DPRK Expert)

As of October 2023, for the first time since January 2017, all four of the preeminent posts for North Korean human rights work; the US Special Envoy for North Korea Human Rights, the UN SR DPRK, the Head of the UN OHCHR Seoul Field Office, and the South Korean Ambassador on North Korean Human Rights, are filled.⁹⁴ Civil society organisations should make the most of the increased advocacy opportunities this provides and proactively engage with these posts in a coordinated and strategic way.

Pressure China to stop forcibly repatriating North Koreans

The issue of forced repatriation can only be resolved with China’s cooperation. The UN must stop using vague wording regarding ‘neighbouring states’ when talking about perpetrators of repatriation, and instead should name China directly. The UN and international governments must continue to urge the Chinese government to change its policies in regard to North Korean refugees. China must cease its practice of forcibly repatriating North Korean refugees, instead allowing them safe passage to South Korea or another third country.

‘Forced repatriation [is] causing lots of human rights abuses [...] we have to pressure the Chinese government, because it only can be solved through the Chinese government.’ (North Korean Defector)

‘I have only one suggestion: pressure China, in whatever way possible, including a language that they understand – which is tariffs on Chinese imports, access to capital markets in US and London – until they reverse the forced repatriation of refugees. To me, North Korean human rights will only improve through China.’ (DPRK expert)

Look for ways to support and mobilise North Koreans outside the country

North Koreans outside the country are in a more advantageous position than their compatriots still inside the DPRK to provide ideas about the way forward for the human rights situation in the DPRK. Governments and civil society organisations should invest in scholarships, leadership training, and financial, social, and psychological support for North Korean defectors.

Four interviewees mentioned the role which North Koreans outside the country could play in getting financial resources to North Koreans inside the country, as a superior alternative to international aid. Interviewees expressed concerns that monetary aid given directly to the North Korean government does not reach the people of the DPRK, and that sending money via family members outside the DPRK, many of whom maintain contact with relatives inside the country, would be more effective. This would send an important message to North Korean citizens:

‘Instead of sending the money to the government, give it to North Korean refugees, and let them send it to their families. There’ll be a couple of signals. Number one, it’ll be ‘I’m wealthy. I’m outside of the country and I’m able to send you money.’ Number two, ‘it’s not terrible in the outside world’. And number three ‘if you escape, you can come and get some also’.” (DPRK Expert)

‘[The international community] should use the North Korean defectors [...] It’s [a] more efficient way to help the North Korean people. If they use the North Korean defectors to help the North Korean people, that’s gonna be big problem for the regime, but that’s gonna be good for the people.’ (North Korean Defector).

Make human rights a priority in all actions and discussions concerning the DPRK

‘The focus is always on political and military security issues. Human rights is a fringe issue, and that’s the problem.’ (DPRK Expert)

UN member states and institutions, international governments, civil society, and all other relevant actors should ensure that human rights are prioritised in conversations with and concerning the DPRK. The topic of human rights must not be left behind or relegated to second place in favour of security concerns. It is essential that such actors emphasise the link between international security and human rights concerns in the DPRK, and stress that one cannot be resolved without the other. In particular, the UN Security Council and UNHRC should ensure that the human rights situation in the DPRK continues to be discussed annually at the UN along with the question of nuclear non-proliferation.

⁹⁴ James Heenan was appointed as the head of OHCHR Seoul in September 2022. His predecessor, Signe Poulsen, had left office in July 2020. Ambassador Julie Turner was sworn in as the US Special Envoy for North Korea Human Rights in October 2023. Her predecessor, Robert R. King, had left office in January 2017. Ambassador Lee Shin-hwa was named the South Korean Ambassador on North Korean Human Rights in July 2022. Her predecessor, Lee Jung-hoon, had left office in September 2017.

‘The security concerns are not going to be solved in isolation and as a short term like ‘okay let’s solve the security concerns and then maybe move onto other things’, we have to move forward gradually with a more holistic approach that includes these things, and that’s the path to a more sustainable negotiation and improvement in relations and improvement in security situation and the situation for the North Korean people.’ (DPRK Expert)

The DPRK human rights issue must not be weaponised or instrumentalised by the international community. In CSW’s conversations with interviewees based in South Korea, there were clear concerns regarding the longstanding politicisation of North Korean human rights particularly and the need to rectify this.

‘... [in the DPRK] human rights have been instrumentalised and also ignored when it’s been convenient and then brought back online when it’s convenient.’ (DPRK Expert)

Provide information to North Koreans inside the country

Governments and organisations must invest in projects focused on facilitating the flow of information into the DPRK. A range of mediums should be employed, including radio broadcasts, television broadcasts, USB drives, and micro-SD cards. North Korean escapees are best placed to ensure this content is accessible and appealing to a North Korean audience, and so should play a pivotal role in tailoring style, subject matter, and dissemination.

‘The North Koreans’ needs and interests and wants are very much aligned with wanting to know more, wanting to access what is going on.’ (DPRK Expert)



‘We have to inform North Koreans in North Korea, so we have to give them more information even though it’s illegal. [...] [We have to] let them know about outside of North Korea, so they could have other view[s] and could have other thinking, they could try to have freedom.’ (North Korean Defector)

‘One of my realistic hopes is for increased support from both the South Korean, US, and other governments on information access – I think it’s one of the few things we can do. You know, [the] chance of diplomacy, the chance of meaningful coercion through sanctions or whatever is all very low, the tool which is still alive is trying to increase the North Korean people’s access to information, that’s something [where] there’s still so much value left on the table.’ (DPRK Expert)

Conclusion

It is the objective of this report to encourage discussion among researchers, policymakers, civil society and funders with a view to addressing human rights violations in the DPRK and building a future of justice and freedom for the North Korean people. In 2014, the COI made an explicit call against drifting into complacency or apathy towards the situation of human rights in the DPRK:

*The Human Rights Council should ensure that the conclusions and recommendations of the Commission do not pass from the active attention of the international community. Where so much suffering has occurred, and is still occurring, action is the shared responsibility of the entire international community.*⁹⁵

Ten years on from the publication of the COI report, the UN Human Rights Council and the international community must ask themselves: has this recommendation been upheld? It is incumbent on everyone who seeks to uphold basic rights and freedoms to find new ways address the grave violations of human rights in the DPRK, including the right to FoRB.

‘We are born in North Korea; we don’t have freedom. That is not right.’ (North Korean Defector)

CSW’s research reveals that the situation for human rights in the DPRK remains much the same as when the COI report was published ten years ago. The country is still one of the most closed, isolated, and repressive states in the world. The regime routinely violates the basic human rights of its citizens. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the DPRK’s accelerating weapons testing programme, and China’s continued policy of forcible repatriation has further exacerbated an already dire situation. There is a continued and urgent need for intervention by the international community.

The situation for FoRB remains equally severe, and the violations of FoRB in the DPRK are among the very worst in the world. There is no space for any belief which differs from the regime’s propaganda. Individuals caught or suspected of religious practice face harsh punishment. Christians are subjected to particularly severe treatment, with testimonies of torture, forced labour, sexual assault, and execution.

Despite the gravity of the situation, expressions of hope and ideas for future work are apparent among those working to bring about change in the DPRK. This must be fostered, multiplied, and amplified. It is vital that the international community explores and invests in initiatives to break the DPRK’s information blockade, pushes for the COI’s recommendations to be implemented in their entirety, and makes human rights a priority in all actions and discussions concerning the DPRK. Furthermore, the international community must make consistent efforts to listen to, work with, support and mobilise FoRB defenders and victims of human rights violations in the North Korean diaspora. Only by collaborating with these individuals can there be hope for a future in which everyone in the DPRK is free to exercise their rights and freedoms, including the right to FoRB.

95 Human Rights Council, ‘Report of the detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’, para 1225 (f), ibid.

**‘We are born in North Korea; we don’t
have freedom. That is not right.’**

North Korean Defector

**CSW everyone
free to believe**

CSW is a human rights organisation advocating for freedom of religion or belief, and as Christians we stand with everyone facing injustice because of their religion or belief.

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